



my
IDENTITY...
365 daily devotionals

My Identity in Christ
365 Daily Devotionals

“... and in Him you have been made complete ...”

Colossians 2:10

...in Christ

Youth Ministries Department
General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist® Church

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My Identity in Christ
365 Daily Devotionals

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General Conference Youth Ministries Department
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Meals are ready, shoes are polished, clothes are pressed, the front and backyard are clean, the floor shines, the best meals of the week are prepared, showers have been taken; as the sun is setting, we gather around our mother for worship. It is Sabbath. Sometimes, I would get home late, distracted by an after-school football game; I would then have to face my mother, and the bamboo rod never failed to leave its marks. It was a challenge to sing praises after the ordeal. These are enduring memories of my home.

In many ways, the home I grew up in defined my identity as a Seventh-day Adventist. It was forged in an environment where I saw my mother practice giving God the first place in our family life, in times of joy and adversity. I do not think I missed a single Sabbath service or a Wednesday prayer meeting in my childhood and adolescent years, not even during exams.

I sensed I belonged to a worldwide community that was making a difference for Jesus in the world. Mission stories told us so and in our family worship we prayed for the Mission, the Union, the Division and the General Conference leaders. I had little knowledge of what all that meant, but I knew we were part of a worldwide movement of God with a keen sense of its special calling to preach the everlasting gospel in the context of the three angel's messages of Revelation 14. Jesus was at the centre of this movement of destiny, which had young people at the core of its leadership at the very beginning. A small group of faithful people emerging from a bitter disappointment had grown to establish a worldwide presence, and God had raised a young prophet to assist our church in defining its character, purpose, and mission.

It would be fair to say that there are times when my church, in its passion to impress the world of the soon coming of Jesus, focuses so much on the circumstances of His coming—the pre-advent judgment, the mark of the beast, the fall of Babylon—that sometimes it overlooks the heart of the everlasting gospel. The story of Jesus is central to our faith and lives as Seventh-day Adventist Christians. We share the Sabbath, the prophecies, the sanctuary, and the state of the dead with a hopeless world because these teachings bring Jesus into clearer focus.

This is the time for 'Revival and Reformation'; a revival that begins with the reaffirmation of the good news of Jesus at the heart of our message and a revival of our calling to proclaim the everlasting gospel in the setting of the three angel's messages. This daily devotional is designed to assist us in rediscovering the faith, mission, and way of life that makes us who we are. We will revisit biblical stories, learn more about our church's history, and study our 28 fundamental beliefs.

As Adventists, we are humbled by the privilege and responsibility to have been entrusted with this special calling to share our hope in, and prepare for the soon coming of Jesus. We identify with Paul when he assured his readers that he had resolved to know nothing while he was with them "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

This remains the centre of our faith, our church, and our lives. This is our true identity.

God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth." Genesis 1:26, first part, The Message

"Who are you?"

It's one of the most common questions in life.

"I'm Anna Perez."

Is that an answer? Well, yes and no. Often people who ask this question only want to know what our name is. But as we move through the years that end childhood and begin adulthood, the question grows more urgent.

Who am I? I am a son . . . a daughter . . . a friend . . . a student . . . an artist . . . a maker . . . a scientist . . . a technologist . . . a Christian . . . a Seventh-day Adventist.

This year, we are going on a journey through time and space. In the first quarter, we will peek in on patriarchs and wise women, on kings and priests and servant girls, as we seek to understand Our Source by looking more deeply into the biblical stories of the early people on this earth, those who first learned who God is and how to relate to Him.

During the second quarter we will visit people from the centuries as they pass, and learn about the heritage and roots of our faith and of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

Then we will seek the source and the heart of our most cherished values by studying the 28 Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination throughout the third and fourth quarters.

Along the way, we will attempt to discover some answers to that perennial question, *who am I really?* Or at least we'll learn some questions to ask ourselves and God as we seek to uncover those answers. Sometimes the best answers come through the questions themselves.

As we journey through the centuries, we will journey to the heart of God . . . and to our own truest, deepest selves.

Who am I? I am a beloved child of God. I didn't just happen. God made me because He wanted me.

Creator of the cosmos, show me how to know You, not just to know about You, but to really know *You* at the heart level. Show me how to know that *You* know *me*—the real me, the me that is so hidden that often I don't see it myself. As we walk together through the hills and valleys of this year, show me more and more how to truly be the me You are creating me to be.

*God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God's nature.
He created them male and female. Genesis 1:27, The Message*

There were only two handmade people in history. Genesis says that God “formed” Adam from earth and Eve from his rib. He spoke everything else into existence, but people He chose to build, to model, like a sculptor making a statue. Except that no sculptor ever was able to breathe life into his or her creations!

Imagine God bending over the clay, carefully shaping Adam's nose, creating each finger and toe, deciding how tall he would be and what kind of hair to give him. Imagine Him later putting Adam into a deep sleep, taking a rib from near his heart, and fashioning it into the perfect partner Adam had been longing for, the most beautiful handmade woman the world has ever known.

Then imagine being Eve and opening your eyes for the first time. Hovering over you is the shining face of your Maker, beaming on you with love and joy. You sit up and take a breath. How beautiful everything is!

Then the Maker says, “Here, let Me help you up. There is someone waiting to meet you.”

You take God's hand and stand, not even knowing what a miracle you are, how amazing it is that your heart is powerfully pumping away and your lungs are extracting oxygen from the rich air and spreading it throughout your strong, perfect body.

“Adam,” says God, “here she is—the one made just for you, the partner who *fits* with you like two leaves on the same branch.”

You look. Adam looks. Love at first sight, for the first and last time in the history of the planet. His smile, as bright as the sunshine, reminds you of God's—his Father and yours.

The man says, “Finally! Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh! Name her Woman for she was made from Man” (Gen. 2:23, *The Message*).

“I'll call her Eve,” Adam adds. “She will be the mother of all the living yet to come.”

You take his hand and the two of you walk with your Maker to explore the fabulous garden home He has created just for you. Your life has just begun. It doesn't even occur to you to doubt that it will last forever.

Creator of the human heart, You meant us to be so strong, good, and wise. You meant us to be like You. I am weak, faulty, and sometimes foolish. Your dreams for me are too bright for me to see. But I want to . . . I want to! Help me to open my eyes, to see You walking with me, to dream your dreams after You and know that there, I will find my true self.

And it will last forever, because I am Your growing child.

*God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God's nature. He created them male and female. God blessed them: “Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth.”
Genesis 1:27, 28 The Message*

Adam might be a real shock to look at today. We have no idea what a perfect human would look like, even when we try to imagine it. God created Adam powerful physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. He and Eve walked and talked with God and were designed to be co-managers of the whole planet.

God was the Maker, and of course, Sovereign. He decided how things were to be done and made all the rules. There were only two: Love God. Love everybody else. Do it with all you've got. Everything they did, from keeping the garden to celebrating the Sabbath, was based on that one Great Law of Love.

Angels were messengers, teaching the new humans about the world and their work, telling them stories of heaven and Creation. Perhaps they taught them about managing the animal and plant kingdoms.

Adam and Eve were next in what you might think of as a hierarchy of love. There was no king/subject or boss/employee relationship such as we think of now. Even the animals looked up to and trusted their caretakers. There was no back-biting, no arguing, no laziness or blame or passing the buck.

Adam and Eve worked together in all things, learning more every day about their individual talents and abilities. Maybe Eve was better at propagating plants, or Adam was better at training vines. What does one do in a garden without weeds, thorns, or pests? We don't even know!

Here is what we do know: Adam looked at his realm with a reflection of the same love with which God looked at him. He loved Eve, he loved the animals, and he even loved the plants. He had named these things. He loved learning what each animal and plant needed for happiness, wholeness, and health (not that the concept of disease or death had yet entered his head!) Every day, in everything he did, Adam gave his life to the care of those God had entrusted to him.

He never thought it would end.

Creator of relationships, Caregiver of my soul, it amazes me to think that after everything that's happened, after everything I've done, You still give me my little share of the work of caring for Your world! It's a lot harder now than it was ever meant to be. Let me see clearly my job today, and to do it with Your love, as Your helping child.

When the Woman saw that the tree looked like good eating and realized what she would get out of it—she'd know everything!—she took and ate the fruit and then gave some to her husband, and he ate. Genesis 1:27, The Message

How long was it? How long did the world's only perfect marriage last? How long did Adam and Eve live through bright days working in a thornless garden and warm nights sleeping in perfect safety?

How long did they walk and talk with God?

The way the story is told, it seems like the next day that things changed. Adam is created Friday morning, Eve is created that afternoon, and by Sabbath evening they're out of there! But some time must have passed. God must have told them the exciting story of their creation and the horrible story of the war in heaven. He surely warned them of the fallen angels who would be after their souls. "Stay away from that tree!" He must have urged them earnestly. "You'll be safe if you just stay away!"

But there she is, standing under the branches, looking at the bright fruit, listening to the brighter serpent. There she is, making a decision that will affect the rest of the world—even the rest of the universe for all time to come, if only she knew it!

There she is, reaching out, touching the fruit, smelling it, bringing it to her lips . . . *Don't touch it, Eve! Don't do it!*

I've been there. Have you? Standing at the crossroads. Making the decision. Hearing the tempter, hearing my conscience, making excuses and justifications.

Making the mistake.

I've been there. Have you?

Oh, no! She ate it! So did he! What now?

I did it again, Lord! The same mistake! I sometimes think I'll never learn to do better—to listen to You, not the tempter, not my own twisted logic.

I've made this same mistake so many times before! What can I do now?

What will You do now?

Have You run out of patience?

. . . *Do You still love me? . . .*

Creator of Redemption, Designer of Salvation, one of the things I know I am is a sinner. I'm really good at it, and I hate it! Help me! Show me the way back to Your side. Forgive me. Reform me. Walk with me again in the cool of the evening.

I still want to be Your forgiven child.

*"And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner."
1 Timothy 2:14, NIV*

There she was: his beloved, literally bone of his bone. Juice ran down her chin, and she waved a bitten piece of fruit.

"Look, Adam!" Eve exclaimed. "This talking serpent explained it all to me. We won't really die. We'll be godlike! Here—have some!" And she held out the fruit, while Adam stared at her in horror.

The Bible teaches that the serpent (really the devil) deceived Eve—he tricked her. But Paul says Adam "was not the one deceived." That certainly explains why the whole Bible speaks of "the sin of Adam" that got us into all this mess! Eve's sin *was sin*. She chose her own way over God's. There was no excuse for her to be deceived by the serpent when she had already been warned about the war in heaven.

However, there is a difference between that sort of disobedience and the deliberate choice to disobey even though you know perfectly well it is wrong. "Adam," says the Bible, "was not . . . deceived." That's shocking! Why, then, did he do it?

Have you ever been about to do something wrong, hesitated, recognized the call of your conscience and of the Holy Spirit, and then done it anyway? I have. Why do we do it? Sometimes it's sheer selfishness: *I want what I want when I want it!* Sometimes it's pride: *God will understand this once*, which really means, *I know better than God*. Often it's fear, and it seems that might have been what motivated Adam.

He'd never felt fear before. But his beloved wife had just done what they had been forbidden to do. What would happen to her now? What would God do to her? If Adam really loved her, clearly the right thing to do would be to share her fate.

What's missing from this line of thinking? *Trust!* We know that Jesus would die for just one sinner. Adam didn't know that, yet. But he did know God. He walked with Him and talked with Him face to face and heart to heart. Adam knew God loved Eve more than he did. Couldn't he have trusted that God would come up with a plan? How could he have decided fear was the way to go?

But he did. He grabbed the fruit and ate some. Then he waited to die.

Creator, Protector, and Defender, I am Your open-eyed child. Please create in me a solid trust that will do Your will even when the reason is not clear. Please protect me from the devil's sneak attacks, tricks, and rebellious attitude. Most of all, please defend me against my own selfishness and pride. I admit, I do like having my own way. But I want to love You more!

"I'm declaring war between you and the Woman, between your offspring and hers. He'll wound your head, you'll wound his heel." Genesis 3:15, The Message

Eve huddled under Adam's sheltering arm, hiding her face in his shoulder, sobbing. If *only* she had never listened to that horrible serpent! But it was too late now for "if only's." She had. And she had given Adam some of the fruit, too, and now here they were.

The serpent would be sorry—God had just cursed it to crawl on its belly. No more would it be the wisest and most beautiful of the garden creatures.

Eve held her breath to listen more clearly. What was God saying? "War between you and the woman . . ." well, that was for sure! She would never even *look* at another serpent! But . . . it must be more than that. ". . . between your offspring and hers. *He'll wound your head, you'll wound his heel.*"

Eve lifted her head. What did that mean?

We won't know for sure until we can ask them in heaven just how much Adam and Eve understood at that point. It's certain that they would soon learn, in the newly sinful earth, that head wounds were fatal, and heel wounds usually weren't. Ellen White says God explained more to them, even telling them some of the history of the world yet to come (PP 67).

Here is what we know: That day, a shining gate was closed, but not forever. That day a gate was opened, also not forever. The second gate was not so beautiful—it would involve the torture and death of the Son of God—but it would lead to salvation, and those who enter it would regain that lost garden.

As we consider the question, *Who Am I?*, we have learned that we are all children of God by way of creation—made in His image, intended to care for the world and all in it, intended to have a close friendship with God. That plan seemed to be derailed and in ruins that dark day in Eden. But God reclaimed it. He warned that care of creation (and of each other) would be harder now, but it would still be possible.

And He promised that, for those who chose it, the friendship was still possible, too! God Himself would come to us, in dreams and visions, in prophecies and oracles, in sanctuary services and miracles, and in a tiny baby who was really God! If we choose, we can be children of God in a deeper way—children by choice—children of the heart and spirit.

The gate is still open . . .

Creator of the open gate, take my hand. I want to walk through that gate with You. I want to walk in newness of life. I want to be Your close-following child by choice. Thank You, Lord.

God loves it when the giver delights in the giving. 2 Corinthians 9:7, The Message

Abel carried the perfect lamb he had chosen toward the altar near the gate of Eden. Even in the bright light of the setting sun, he could see the flashing of the sword of the angel who guarded the gate. It was nearly time for another Sabbath sacrifice.

The lamb in his arms bleated, and he looked down at it and spoke a gentle word. It always made him sad to think of the sacrifice. He was pretty sure it was supposed to make a person sad to think of it. Abel knew his mother and father were terribly sad when they remembered the choices they had made.

Adam had explained how God told him that the innocent lamb, who hadn't done anything wrong, represented the Redeemer God would send, who also would not do anything wrong, but would die for sinful humans anyway.

Abel couldn't say he really understood it all completely. But he accepted it. It was God, and Abel trusted God. After all, hadn't God forgiven his parents for the wrong they had done? Hadn't He promised a Redeemer even though they didn't feel they deserved it? If Abel could keep the memory of the promise alive by offering the best of his flock, then he was willing to do that.

Abel looked toward his brother, Cain, also heading toward the altar. He didn't worry and brood over things as Cain did. Cain was always complaining, always questioning and arguing. Look at him tonight—a basket of fruit and vegetables? Why would he bring that?

Abel brought his attention back to his own sacrifice. He lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed silently, "I am Your simple child, God. What You want me to do, that's what I want to do. My sacrifices are small, and not worthy of Your regard, but they are my best, and I offer them with love. Please accept them, and please accept me."

Today, God does not ask us to give Him burnt offerings. He has provided the Lamb for every human being who ever lived. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are sufficient for every sin ever committed. What God asks today is that we accept that gift on our behalf. It's as simple—simpler!—than the sacrifices Adam, Eve, and Abel brought. Then He asks us to give ourselves—our gifts, our talents, our interests, our hard work. It's hard, but it's not complicated. It's very simple.

Creator of every good and perfect gift, I am Your simple child. What You want me to do, that's what I want to do. My sacrifices are small, and not worthy of Your regard, but they are my best, and I offer them with love. Please accept them, and please accept me.

GOD spoke to Cain: “Why this tantrum? Why the sulking? If you do well, won’t you be accepted? And if you don’t do well, sin is lying in wait for you, ready to pounce; it’s out to get you, you’ve got to master it.” Genesis 4:6, 7, The Message

Cain knew all the rules for sacrifice. His whole life, he had watched his dad, Adam, sacrificing burnt offerings on the altar. Now Cain and his brother Abel were grown up and making their own sacrifices. Abel had made a sacrifice of a lamb, but that was easy for him, Cain thought. Abel was a shepherd and had plenty of flocks to spare. Cain was a gardener, and he thought his offering of fruits and vegetables should be just as good. Didn’t God like it that he knew how to grow good food?

Well, of course, God did. An offering of Cain’s best could have been accepted with delight if it had been given as a freewill offering *along with* the required lamb. But not instead. Cain did not get to make his own rules.

So now he was sulking. He was probably muttering to himself about how God loved Abel better, and Abel was a goody-goody.

Imagine his shock when God spoke to him! “If you do what you know is right, you’ll be accepted,” He promised. Then He added a warning. “Sin is lying in wait for you.” Other Bibles say, “Crouching at your door.” In other words, watch out—the devil is out to get you.

Cain might have thought God would only speak to people who were doing everything right. Lots of people think that today. Or they think God doesn’t speak at all, to anyone, anymore. The story of Cain teaches us otherwise. God reached out to Cain when he was in a state of rebellion, without waiting for Cain to repent and reach out to Him. God had done the same for Adam and Eve, and He’s doing the same for other sinners today.

Put yourself in Cain’s place. Think about something you have done wrong or are angry about. Do you feel God is being unfair? Read the words God spoke to Cain and imagine Him saying them to you. What would you say back? What do you think God would say then?

Great Mender of broken relationships, please forgive me. Remind me that even when I am in rebellion, I am still Your chosen child, and I can still turn around and choose You again. Don’t give up on me—keep speaking! I’m listening . . .

By an act of faith, Enoch skipped death completely. “They looked all over and couldn’t find him because God had taken him.” We know on the basis of reliable testimony that before he was taken “he pleased God.” Hebrews 11:5, The Message

You’ve probably heard the story all your life. “Enoch walked with God” (Gen. 5:22). *The Message* has it, “walked steadily with God.” Then “he was not.” He disappeared. One way it’s told is that Enoch walked with God so long that one day God said, “Enoch, we’re closer to My house than yours; why don’t you come on home with Me?”

Did you ever wonder how they knew God had taken him? Couldn’t he have just died somewhere, out where no one saw him? Couldn’t wild animals have gotten him, or bandits? How did they know that when they couldn’t find Enoch, it meant God had taken him to heaven without death?

No doubt part of that answer is to be found in revelation; in other words, God told someone, whether by vision, or in a dream. Or maybe someone even saw him disappear, as Elisha saw Elijah go into heaven.

But the most important reason people knew where Enoch had gone is because of *who Enoch was*. He walked with God. Everywhere he went, people could tell Enoch was holding God’s hand.

How did they know that? What did Enoch do that made it clear he was always aware of God by his side? Some things are obvious, even without knowing Enoch. He must have been kind and loving and helpful. He must have been self-sacrificing, looking out for the needs of others. He must have been clearly different from the rapidly worsening people in the pre-Flood era.

But there’s one more thing we know about Enoch, and it’s found in that tiny little book called Jude. Jude 13-15 says that Enoch prophesied *about the Second Coming!* Thousands of years before Jesus was even born the first time, Enoch saw a vision about Him coming in judgment. There’s only one way he could have seen that: He and God were close friends.

Great Leader, I know that Your deepest desire is that each of us follow You as closely as Enoch did. I desire that, too. I long to be constantly and contentedly aware of Your gentle, guiding presence. I want to cling to Your hand like a little child, walking by Your side through this world. Then, someday soon, I want to go home with You! The sooner, the better!

Noah was different. God liked what he saw in Noah . . . Noah was a good man, a man of integrity in his community. Noah walked with God. Genesis 6:8, 9, The Message

Now, isn't that interesting—Noah, who was Enoch's great-grandson, walked with God, too! In those days, people lived so long that it was amazing that Enoch was gone before Noah was born. Adam himself, father of the whole race, died only 126 years before Noah's birth, and he had still been alive when Enoch turned 300!

This was a bitter time for God. He had been so joyful when He created the world, with people to love. Now there was almost no one at all, on the whole planet, who loved God back. *The Message* says God's heart was broken, and I think that's true. Don't you?

Now the whole world was going to be destroyed, but God still wanted to save as many as He could. Perhaps the fear of knowing the Flood was coming would turn some of them back to Him. God asked Noah to build the ark, and to preach as earnestly as he could, begging and pleading with people to get on and be saved. For 120 years!

It's interesting to think about: God didn't ask for a change of heart or mind. He just asked them to walk up the ramp and get on. How hard was that? It was kind of like, "Don't eat from that one tree!"

Noah, by his actions, said to those around him, "No matter how silly it may appear to you, I am God's child first. Your friendship and your opinion of me come after that in importance."

I wonder how hard it was for Noah to keep on building, to keep on preaching, year after year, decade after decade, when everyone except his own family thought he was nuts.

I wonder how hard it's going to be this week for me, or for you, to keep on loving God, to keep on being kind, to go on loving everyone around us, and acting on it . . . no matter what they say or think . . .

Loving Father, help me be determined to be Your steadfast child *first*. Let nothing else in life, no matter how important or how difficult or how tempting, come before that. Let my words and actions show all those around me that I belong to You.

*"I know that God lives—the One who gives me back my life— and eventually he'll take his stand on earth. And I'll see him . . . see God myself, with my very own eyes. Oh, how I long for that day!"
Job 19:26, 27, The Message*

Poor Job! He reminds me of some people I know, people who are living through trauma after tragedy after crisis, and it never seems to stop. You have to wonder, "Why, God? What did he/she ever do to deserve this?"

Is it okay to tell God the truth about how you feel? Job did.

He got depressed: "Obliterate the day I was born. Blank out the night I was conceived! Let it be a black hole in space. May God above forget it ever happened . . . Why didn't I die at birth, my first breath out of the womb my last?" (Job 3:3, 11).

He was fearful. "If I say, 'I'm going to bed, then I'll feel better. A little nap will lift my spirits,' You come and so scare me with nightmares and frighten me with ghosts that I'd rather strangle in the bedclothes than face this kind of life any longer" (7:13-15).

Most of all, Job was angry. He was very angry, and he let God know it. "So what's this all about, anyway—this compulsion to dig up some dirt, to find some skeleton in my closet? You know good and well I'm not guilty. You also know no one can help me" (10:6, 7).

This could be seen as lack of trust, or even lack of respect. But if you read all of Job, you will find songs of praise scattered through it. Job speaks of God's power and grace, and assures his friends that even if God kills him, he will still choose to trust (13:15).

Because there's one thing Job knows for sure. It's found in our focus text for today: *I know* my Redeemer lives, and that He will take His stand on the earth, and *I will see Him*.

Oh, how I long for that day, too! How about you?

Faithful Redeemer, I don't always understand why You so often lead through such deep, dark valleys of pain, such scary, nightmarish forests of trouble, such searing deserts of loss and grief and anger. But this one thing I know: You are with me. I am with You. I will see You and You will make it all plain. In the meantime, I am still Your child, though perhaps a questioning and troubled child, and I hold Your hand, even in the dark.

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!"
Job 2:9, NASB

She had lost her wealth. That was bad. Her husband had lost his health. That was worse. But they had lost their children. *All* of them! That was so terrible that nothing else really mattered much. Only those who have lost children themselves understand this incurable pain.

Mrs. Job has gotten a bad rap over the centuries. Yes, she was angry and in pain. So was Job. Yes, she spoke hastily. Surely the one thing we know she said wasn't any worse than "Why was I ever born?" and "You know good and well I'm not guilty!" which are just two of the things her husband said in his long argument with God. They both thought God wasn't listening anymore, and both were tempted to think, "Why bother?" But Mrs. Job said it.

Fortunately, God is her judge. We aren't. Perhaps she *was* truly turning her back on God, refusing to find comfort or to express trust in Him as Job repeatedly did, despite his anger, fear, and discouragement.

But isn't it also possible that she just needed some comfort, too? After all, which is harder: to suffer yourself or to watch someone you love suffering? As far as we know, nothing happened to her personally. Can you imagine how that must have felt? She must have thought, having lost everything else, that she was about to lose her husband too, so why not hasten the process? She surely felt completely helpless, even to relieve the pain and itching of his sores.

If Job has helped millions over the centuries to realize that it's okay to tell God our true feelings (it's not like He doesn't already know them anyway!), then perhaps Mrs. Job can be an example, too. Maybe Job's answer, "Don't be silly. We take the good days from God, we can take the bad ones, too," helped her to regain some perspective. Maybe when someone we know is allowing the anger and confusion to overcome the trust, we can lovingly remind each other of God's care, too.

When Mrs. Job had more children, they never took the place of the ones she lost, and God knew that. But they did comfort her heart and give her the chance to see God in a new light.

Great Comforter, it's true. Sometimes I do get angry and wonder why You don't prevent some of the things that happen. Sometimes I'm tempted to think You don't care, so why bother? Forgive me, and help me to maintain the balance of admitting my true feelings before you as Your honest child, and also to trust You no matter what.

GOD told Abram: "Leave your country, your family, and your father's home for a land that I will show you . . . All the families of the Earth will be blessed through you."
Genesis 12:1, 3 (last part), The Message

You are probably familiar with the story of Abram: how God told him to leave the metropolis of Ur, city of learning, libraries, high culture, and idolatry, and go to "a land that I will show you." The land God showed him turned out to be the wilderness, where they wandered around from one place to another, living in tents. It seems that one of the things God wanted for Abram and his family was the simplicity of living close to the land, so all their dependence would be on Him and they would know it.

You're probably familiar with the story, but like all Bible stories, there's always more to learn. Have you ever read it over in one sitting? It's quite interesting. Notice this:

Genesis 12:7: "Abram built an altar."

Vs. 8: "He built an altar there and prayed to God."

Vs. 10-20: A very foolish mistake of telling Pharaoh that Sarai was his sister.

13:4: [Back at] "his first altar. Abram prayed there to God." (Smart—when you make a mistake, it's a good idea to go back to your first altar!)

Vs. 18: "There he built an altar to God."

And so it continues.

Do you notice a pattern here? Everywhere he went, Abram built altars! Although he made mistakes, some of them huge ones, what people remembered most about him was that he was a praying man. Even when he gathered his household army and rescued Lot and many others from the kings in chapter 14, Abram gave God the honor of the victory by tithing the goods he brought back. And since he refused to take any extra loot (see vs. 22-24), these goods he tithed were already his!

I wonder if, when people think of you and me, what they remember is that we are praying people. I wonder if, when they see us make mistakes, they learn by watching that we can find forgiveness with God . . .

Lord, let my life build "altars" of prayer and praise to You in the sight of those who know me. Let them learn by watching me that a child of God will always be a praying person. Let them learn that they can seek forgiveness with You, and that they, too, can be praying children of God if they choose.

One of them said, "I'm coming back about this time next year. When I arrive, your wife Sarah will have a son." . . . Sarah laughed within herself, "An old woman like me? Get pregnant? With this old man of a husband?" Genesis 18:10, 12, The Message

Sarah peeked out of the tent flap to see who her husband was talking to. Three strangers! They would need food and rest. Sure enough, here came Abraham. "Hurry. Get three cups of our best flour; knead it and make bread" (Vs. 6).

Sarah may have already had some flour ground, but if she didn't, she had plenty of time to grind it, because it took quite a while for the servant to butcher, clean, and roast a calf. She built a fire out of the way of the back tent flap and heated the baking stone. Then she mixed her flour with a little salt and oil and enough water to make a thick paste. She pressed the paste between her hands and baked it on the stone, making several flat loaves of bread.

While she did all this, she listened to the men talking outside the tent. She heard one say that next year she would have a child. If she could hear them, they could probably hear her, so she must have tried to smother the laughter that bubbled up at this outlandish statement. Sarah was 89 years old! She had long since given up hope of a child of her own.

Imagine her embarrassment when the Man (the Bible says it was the Lord) asked Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh?"

"I didn't laugh!" Sarah protested hurriedly.

But less than a year later, God had the last laugh. Sarah, at the age of 90, had a baby! And she said good-naturedly, "God has blessed me with laughter and all who get the news will laugh with me!" (Gen. 21:6). She named her baby Isaac, which means laughter.

Sometimes God makes promises that seem farfetched. Or sometimes He makes a promise and then you wait and wait and wait and nothing happens, so you decide it was your imagination after all. Abraham and Sarah waited twenty-five years before the promise God made them came true. And even then, all they got was one child in Sarah's lifetime. Not much of a great nation. When God comes through after all, do we laugh good-naturedly and invite others to laugh with us?

Creator of joy, as I try to follow you and sometimes embarrass myself, let me keep my sense of humor. Teach me through experience that if I am Your (sometimes silly) child, then I will see a lot of unexpected things, and sometimes You and I will laugh together over them.

She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." Genesis 16:13, NIV

Hagar had it rough. First, she was an Egyptian slave, possibly acquired by Abraham and Sarah when they went to Egypt early in their travels because of a famine. Second, her mistress got the brilliant idea of giving her to Abraham so that she would get pregnant, and then the baby would be claimed by Sarah as her own child. This was a common custom in those times, and Hagar was no doubt familiar with it, but that didn't make it any easier for her. She had no say over what happened to her own body, let alone her own child.

Yet Hagar is recorded in the Bible as having God speak personally to her, not once, but twice. This is an incredible honor, especially in the eyes of those who thought she was "only a slave," not valuable, maybe not even entirely a person.

The first time, she was still pregnant. She couldn't stand her life anymore and ran away. But God had plans for Hagar and her child, and He knew she wouldn't survive without the protection of Abraham's family, even if it wasn't exactly ideal. He spoke to her in words astonishingly similar to the ones Gabriel spoke to Mary. (Compare for yourself: Gen. 16:11 to Luke 1:30-32). Hagar gave God a new name! She called Him "the God who sees."

The second time was when Ishmael was a young boy and Isaac was born. This time, God let Abraham send her away with provisions. He must have known Ishmael was big enough to help take care of her now. But again, when they almost died of thirst in the desert, God not only spoke to Hagar and made her promises a lot like those He made Abraham, but He miraculously provided water for her, just as He would do later for the Israelites.

So Hagar, "only" a slave woman, received personal attention and care from the God who really *saw* her for who she was. He promised her a great nation of descendants, and today, believe it or not, there are almost 100 times as many of Ishmael's descendants (ethnic Arabs) as there are of Isaac's (ethnic Jews)!

All-seeing Father, even as Your beloved child, sometimes I feel invisible and unimportant. Help me to remember that just as You cared for Hagar when she was at the end of her rope and expected to die, so You care for me and will give me what I need, including living water from the spring of eternal life.

"This is totally from GOD. We have no say in the matter, either yes or no." . . . They called Rebekah and asked her, "Do you want to go with this man?" She said, "I'm ready to go."

Genesis 24:50, 58, The Message

Rebekah didn't know it wasn't just another day when she put her empty (but still heavy!) stoneware water jar on her shoulder and headed out to the well outside of town. She always tried to be kind, so when she saw the travel-weary man with ten thirsty camels, she didn't hesitate to offer to water his camels for him. It took a lot of water, but Rebekah was used to that. Her father and brother had flocks and herds, too.

The man asked, "Whose daughter are you?"

Rebekah told him, and he asked if there was room for him and his men to stay at her house. "Of course," she said willingly. "And lots of straw and feed, too."

Imagine how she felt when the man told her family that he was the servant of their relative, Abraham, who had left the area many years before, that his master had sent him to find a godly wife for his son, Isaac, and that he had just prayed, before she showed up at the well, that God would show him the right woman by having her offer to water his camels! Rebekah must have been speechless.

Her father and brother recognized the hand of God, too. "We can't say anything either way—this is a God thing!" They asked Rebekah, and she said, "I'll go." Then they blessed her. "Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands; may your offspring possess the gates of their enemies" (Gen. 24:59, NIV).

The only reason this decision was so apparently easy to make is that this family had already decided to be God-followers. In the heat of the moment, it's really hard to decide anything, if you haven't made that one, most important decision. In fact, when Rebekah answered the question, "Whose daughter are you?" she could just as well have said, "I'm God's daughter."

I wonder if I would have the faith to go off with a strange man to a strange country to marry someone I'd never met because God made it clear it was what He wanted!

Mighty One, You call us in such mysterious ways sometimes. We never know what will happen next. Give me the faith and commitment to follow wherever You lead, just because I have already chosen to live as Your trusting child.

The LORD appeared to him the same night and said, "I am the God of your father Abraham; Do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you and multiply your descendants, for the sake of My servant Abraham." Genesis 26:24, NASB

It all started with the wells. Isaac's father, Abraham, had dug them long before Isaac was born. When Isaac accumulated large flocks and herds and became wealthy, the Philistines envied him, so they filled in all the wells with dirt. (Which is pretty silly, because now where were *they* going to get water?)

Isaac moved away and found some more wells his father had dug, reopened them, and settled down. Then his servants discovered another spring and dug that out, too.

The shepherds of Gerar argued, "That's *our* water!"

Isaac moved again. He dug another new well, and the same thing happened again. By now, Isaac must have been pretty frustrated. Water is essential for life everywhere, but in a dry land like Canaan, it was a life and death matter. Wars were fought over wells. But Isaac didn't want to be like that. So he moved yet again.

This time, the Bible says, no one tried to take his well away. So he named it Rehoboth (Wide-Open Spaces), saying, "Now GOD has given us plenty of space to spread out in the land" (Gen. 26:22).

What happened next was very interesting. Verse 23 says "that very night" God appeared to him and blessed him, repeating and renewing the covenant promises he'd made to Abraham.

I wonder if the timing of that blessing had any relation to the fact that Isaac not only chose peace, but went out of his way, time after time, to maintain it? Imagine how much work it was to take down his big tents, pack up his family, servants, and possessions, and drive those large flocks and herds to new locations. And then wait to dig a new well before you even can renew your water supply!

Refusing conflict, even when it was offered, meant that much to Isaac.

Does it mean that much to you and to me?

God honors peacemakers.

Quiet One, You call us to peace, and You promise blessings to the peacemakers. Help me to be as non-combative as Isaac was, preferring to face unfairness and injustice rather than creating a battle over it. Teach me to turn the other cheek and love my enemies as You did when you were here. Then I will truly be a peacemaking child of God.

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.” Genesis 28:16, 17, NIV

I wonder if Jacob had trouble sleeping that night. He had made some really foolish choices. First, he'd cheated his brother, Esau, out of his birthright, then tricked their father into giving him the birthright blessing, too. He was really younger than Esau, even if it was only by a few minutes. But his mother had told him that God prophesied that he'd be the head of the family, not Esau. Jacob had wanted to make sure that happened. But God didn't need his help. Especially not by cheating and trickery!

Now his brother was angry enough to kill him, and Jacob was on his way to live with far-distant relatives. He didn't know what would happen to him.

And to top it all off, he was trying to sleep with a stone as a pillow!

But he did fall asleep, and when he did, he had a dream. A ladder reached all the way to heaven, and Jacob saw angels going up and down the ladder, communicating between heaven and earth.

Then God Himself entered Jacob's dream, and once again He repeated and renewed the promises He'd made to Abraham and Sarah, then to Isaac and Rebekah, and now to Jacob the cheater, as he ran for his life from his family home. How could that be?

When Jacob awoke, he felt a sense of awe, almost like fear. “This is the gate of heaven!” he exclaimed. He set up the stone pillow like a little altar and prayed. You can tell by his prayer that he didn't *really* know God yet. He bargained: “If You take good care of me and bring me back home all right, I'll serve You and You'll be my God. I'll even pay tithe.”

Have you ever prayed like that? *If You do such-and-such, God, then I'll serve You?*

God was happy with this first step. He knew that over time, Jacob would learn better.

Giver of visions, You call us to walk with You even when we have messed things up. Help me to repent, ask forgiveness, make amends if I can, and follow You faithfully *without* making conditions or bargains. Help me to believe that I am still Your child even when I have done wrong, and that it is Your love for me that grieves and longs to repair the relationship.

She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children. Genesis 29:35, NIV

The Bible doesn't really tell us about Leah's heart. How did she feel when she was given to Jacob after he had worked seven long years for her sister, Rachel? Did she have any say in the matter, or did she just have to do what her father made her do? Did she love Jacob? Did she even like him?

We can certainly imagine what a woman's feelings might be to know she was married to someone who didn't want her. And then (though this is harder for us to imagine unless we live in a country where men have more than one wife), she had to share him with her sister, too. It must have been so painful and difficult.

We can figure out some things from what the Bible does say. For instance, when she begins bearing sons, she says that God has “seen her misery,” and each time she has a son (very important in that culture), she hopes that this time, Jacob will love her.

But a very important thing occurs in Genesis 29:35. She has named her boys, “See—a boy!,” “God Heard,” and “Attached,” hoping having three boys will make Jacob become attached to her. Then she has her fourth, and the Bible records that she says, “This time, I'll praise the Lord.” And she names him Judah, which means “Praise God.”

Maybe Leah had learned the difficult lesson that the child of God must learn to praise Him no matter what. Praise Him in good times, praise Him in hard times, praise Him most of all in impossible times—it's the only way you'll get through them!

Perhaps Leah had learned that the way to make the best of a bad situation is to give it to God and just live as His child, patiently taking what comes and waiting for God to make it into His grand plan.

I wonder what Leah would think if she could know that her boy, “Praise God,” turned out to be the great-great-gazillion-great-grandpa of the Messiah?

I wonder what choice we're going to make today that will seem like a small choice, but will make a big difference in the plans that God has for us . . .

Worthy One, You deserve all of our praise! Help me learn to praise You anyway, praise You all the time, praise You whether I “get it” or not. Remind me that I am Your own, not-ignored child, even when it seems others have more say than I do over where my life is going and what I am doing. You are awesome, You are mighty, You are beyond my understanding. And, best of all, You are my very own, dear Abba.

“God has taken away my humiliation.” Genesis 30:22, The Message

The Bible tells us even less of Rachel, the wife Jacob really loved, than it does of Leah. We can be sure that the situation, having to share a husband with her sister, was just as difficult for her as for Leah, but for different reasons. In Rachel's case, she could try to comfort herself by saying, “Well, I'm really the one he loves.” But then Leah had four sons, one after the other, and Rachel had none.

Rachel didn't make the best choices at this point. First she got mad at Jacob. Jacob, predictably, was angry in return. “Do you think it's *my* fault? Talk to God about it!” Next, Rachel followed the Canaanite custom of giving her maid to her husband to have children that would count as hers, since she believed she owned the maid. (You'd think she would remember that when Sarah, Jacob's grandmother, did this, it didn't work out so well).

But the maid had two sons, and Rachel considered herself to have “won” in some kind of contest with her sister. Then Leah did the same, got two more sons from the maid, and even had two more sons herself! Poor Rachel!

But here, perhaps her attitude may have changed, because Gen. 30:22 says, “And then God remembered Rachel. God listened to her and opened her womb. She became pregnant and had a son.” Of course, we know God never forgot Rachel, even if it felt like it to her. But then it says He *listened* to her. Did Rachel finally remember to pray about the situation, instead of trying to fix it herself?

Have you ever tried to fix a problem without asking God? How did that work out? Have you learned to pray first? And then to *wait for God to reveal His plan*? That's the hard part, of course. Rachel may well have prayed at the beginning. Abraham and Sarah certainly did while they were waiting for the son God had promised. But when things didn't happen as quickly as they'd hoped, they jumped in. Never a good idea!

What are you waiting on God for right now?

God Who listens, I know that You hear me. I do know that, even when I feel forgotten. I want to do Your will. Sometimes I wait too long when You do want me to act, and sometimes I act when You wanted me to wait. Help me to learn, through all these mistakes, how to hear You more clearly. Help me to trust Your plan for me even when everything seems unfair. Help me be the persistently praying son or daughter You would have me to be.

The man said, “What's your name?” He answered, “Jacob.” The man said, “But no longer. Your name is no longer Jacob. From now on it's Israel (God-Wrestler); you've wrestled with God and you've come through.” Genesis 32:27, 28, The Message

Jacob had been through a lot since he dreamed about the ladder. He'd worked for Laban more than twenty years, become very rich in flocks and herds, married two wives, and had at least twelve children so far—eleven sons and one daughter that we know of. Now, at long last, he was headed home with his family, back to where he had been raised as a boy.

Then he heard Esau was on his way . . . *with 400 men.*

Jacob had not forgotten how he had cheated his twin, or how angry Esau had been. He was scared! He made all kinds of arrangements, dividing up his family, sending lots of presents, trying everything he could think of to make Esau not so mad at him.

Then he sent his family across the ford of the Jabbok and tried to sleep.

That didn't happen. Instead, Jacob wrestled with a stranger all night long. After a few hours, Jacob started to catch on that this was no ordinary stranger. Especially when he dislocated Jacob's hip with just a touch!

At dawn, when the man said, “Let me go,” Jacob said, “Not until you bless me.”

The man asked a strange question. “What is your name?”

Jacob told him, and Jesus (of course, that's who the Man was) changed his name from Cheater (Jacob) to God-Wrestler (Israel.)

Here's an amazing thing: Look up every time Jacob prays, and you will learn that in every case he called God “the God of my fathers,” until that morning. That morning, for the first time in his life, Jacob, now Israel, called God “the God of Israel,” that is to say, *my* God.

After a long wrestling match with God, Israel might limp, but now, suddenly, maybe for the very first time, he knew who he was.

“Jacob named the place Peniel (God's Face) because, he said, ‘I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!’” (Gen. 32:30, *The Message*).

God Who calls me by name, You are the One who sees, the One who knows, the One who names. You know who I really am, down deep. You know what wrestling and striving I have come through, and what wrestling and striving I have yet to come to in my life. No matter who else or what else I am, I always and only want to be Your transformed child, and I never want to let You go until You bless me.

But there in jail GOD was still with Joseph: He reached out in kindness to him; he put him on good terms with the head jailer. The head jailer put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners—he ended up managing the whole operation. The head jailer gave Joseph free rein, never even checked on him, because GOD was with him; whatever he did, GOD made sure it worked out for the best.

Genesis 39:20-23, The Message

“It worked out for the best.” Hmm. I wonder if Joseph would have thought so. His own brothers think about killing him, then decide to sell him into slavery instead. He is taken to be the slave of an officer named Potiphar, and Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce him. When she can’t, she tells lies about him to Potiphar. (What story would she have told if she had succeeded?) Now he’s in jail . . . and everything is working out for the best??

Joseph’s trials are by no means over. After he’s in jail for a while, God gives him interpretations of the dreams of two of Pharaoh’s officers, and he thinks surely now he’ll be released.

Two more years pass . . .

We all know how Joseph’s story ends. But he didn’t, not yet anyway. So the question is—how did he react *now*, while everything was difficult and confusing? Did he fuss and complain? Did he get angry and turn his back on God? Did he lose his faith, or give up?

No, Joseph used the time to become more steadfast in his faith. He used the time to learn to pray in dark circumstances, and to learn to trust more, not less. Joseph used his trials to grow. And so, he was ready when his big opportunity came. He was second in command over the entire land of Egypt, able to help countless thousands (including his own family) avoid death by starvation.

And in the end, he told his brothers, “You might have meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, and I forgive you.”

We don’t know how our stories will end, either, so the question is, how are we reacting *now*, while everything is often difficult and confusing? Are we fussing and complaining? Getting angry and turning our backs on God? Losing faith? Giving up?

Great God of Unforeseen Circumstances, You are with me. Whatever I do, You can make it work out for the best, whether I see it or not. Joseph was Your child, so he learned not to fear, even when life seemed dark and painful. Help me, another sometimes fearful child of Your own, learn the same lesson. *I will not be afraid.*

And she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. Exodus 2:2, 3, NIV

Most of us have heard this story so many times we’ve stopped listening to it. Think about the last newborn baby you’ve seen. Do you have one in your house, or does a friend have one? Is there one at your church? Have you held a baby this small? If you haven’t, you should, whenever you get the chance. Cuddle the tiny person in your arms and look closely at the smiling, trusting little face, the waving hands, the chubby legs. Let the baby hold your finger, and marvel at its strong grip.

Now think about a river you’ve visited. There’s probably one in or near your town or city. Maybe you’ve been boating on one. Try—just *try* to imagine taking reeds or bulrushes, weaving a basket the size of a bassinet or car seat, lining it with pitch, and be careful—it can’t leak *at all*! In your mind, wrap the baby in blankets, put a lid over it so that crocodiles won’t eat the baby, and go down to the boat ramp. Set the basket afloat and let go.

Let go??!! Yes. Take your hands off the basket and watch the current take it.

If this baby you are considering is not your own, you’re beginning to get an idea of the shivers of terror running down Jochebed’s back. If it is your baby, can you even *imagine* actually doing this? Only one thing would make you willing—a worse threat. Like a Pharaoh that wants to kill your child. Like trying desperately to keep him quiet and hidden for three long months. Only now, he’s starting to teethe, and it’s getting impossible . . .

So you go to the river, you let your baby go, and you turn your back and walk away. All you can do is leave your little girl hiding in the bulrushes, watching.

And you pray. Oh, how you pray . . .

Pilot over uncharted waters, it is sometimes hard to trust You. It’s not *You* we don’t trust, it’s just that we sometimes find ourselves in terrifying situations, and they don’t always come out as we wish they would. Lots of families lost little baby boys under the rule of that Pharaoh, and Jochebed didn’t know if her case would be any different. As it is, she still lost her son, only she lost him a few years later. Teach me to let go and trust You, even in terrifying circumstances, to know You always have a plan, and that I am always Your child, even when I tremble.

The baby's older sister found herself a vantage point a little way off and watched to see what would happen to him. Exodus 2:4, The Message

I wonder how old Miriam was? Five? Seven? Ten, maybe? Probably not older than that. Her heart must have been pounding enough to make her sick. She knew her mother was at home praying, and likely crying, too. What if crocodiles got baby brother? What if soldiers found him?

What if nothing at all happened? Would they leave him there? Take him home at night? Do this again the next day??

Miriam must have gripped her hands together to keep them from shaking. She and Mother knew Pharaoh's daughter bathed here at about this time. They had watched her before and thought she looked kind. They were hoping . . . What were they hoping? Miriam wasn't even sure.

Here came the princess with her maidservants. Miriam held her breath.

The princess saw the basket. "Bring that to me."

A servant waded out and brought the basket. The women opened it.

Watching, Miriam was sure she and Mother were right about the princess. Her face softened. Miriam could hear baby brother beginning to whimper. He wanted to be picked up.

Please, please, Most High God . . . !

"This must be one of the Hebrew babies," said the princess, looking sad.

Miriam ran out. She could feel her knees shaking. Hebrew slaves were *not* supposed to bother the royal family! "Your Highness?"

The princess still looked kind. "Yes?"

"Would you like me to find a nurse for the baby?" (The princess hadn't even said she'd keep him yet!)

The princess smiled. Miriam saw her exchange glances with the attendants. She surely must have guessed what was going on. "Yes, go."

Miriam ran for her mother, joy giving her feet wings. And in just a little while, Jochebed and Miriam carried their baby home, in full view of everyone, soldiers and all. They could keep him! Mother would be *paid* for taking care of him! Praise God!

God of unexpected surprises, You always have a plan. Sometimes we get to see it. Jochebed and Miriam had no idea, of course, what Your future plans for Moses were, but they knew their baby would not die. Their terrified risk had paid off. As Your often surprised child, give me faith and courage to take risks to save another child of Yours, too. Keep my eyes open to expect the unexpected, and to watch for Your hand there.

Moses agreed to settle down there with the man, who then gave his daughter Zipporah (Bird) to him for his wife. She had a son, and Moses named him Gershom (Sojourner), saying, "I'm a sojourner in a foreign country." Exodus 2:21, 22, The Message

Moses, at 40 years old, had already had a fairly eventful life. He had been raised for a while by his own Hebrew family. His mother and father had taught him as carefully as they could about faith in the one true God. Then Moses had moved into the strange life in the palace of Egypt. He had learned about the worship of a jackal-headed god, a cat goddess, a frog goddess, a god who devoured millions of people, a dung beetle god, a "dominant male baboon god," a Great Honker goose god who carried the egg of life, a fish goddess, and dozens more (www.touregypt.net/godsofegypt/). He learned about "magic" and endless rituals for the dead. He learned about government and politics.

He also learned that his people were being treated as possessions, not humans. When he saw an Egyptian beating one of his people, he killed him and buried the body in the sand. The next day he learned that some of the Hebrews weren't much better, fighting and hitting each other.

When he scolded them, they yelled at him. "What—are you going to kill us, too?"

Moses realized that, come to think of it, he had done the same thing himself. He had responded to anger with deadly force.

He ran away. Maybe life in the desert would be simpler.

Well, it was. He married, raised two sons, and took care of sheep. While in the desert, Moses also grew closer to God. He was impressed to write down the stories of Creation, the Flood, and the early patriarchs. Life was simpler, all right—kind of boring sometimes, but safe. He tried not to think too much about his people and the trouble they were enduring—the trouble he had escaped, first by living in the palace, then by running away.

Moses may have enjoyed this peaceful, scholarly life as a writer and shepherd, but he showed by the name he gave his first son that he recognized he was just "sojourning," that is, visiting. This was not his home. And he *was* learning to listen to God. Was there more?

God Who calls us out of our boxes, You wait, and teach, and patiently make us ready for whatever You have planned. But it's still always a surprise to us. Help me to remember that this week and this month and even today, although I can't see the future, You can, and this life right now is part of Your plan for me. Even if things are hard and painful and not part of Your original plan (which didn't include evil), You know what You are doing, and I am still Your waiting child.

"I am the God of your father: The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob . . . The Israelite cry for help has come to me, and I've seen for myself how cruelly they're being treated by the Egyptians. It's time for you to go back: I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the People of Israel, out of Egypt." Exodus 3:6, 9, 10, The Message

So there was Moses, living peacefully out in the desert, writing his books, caring for his family and his sheep, minding his own business. Then one day he saw a bush that burned, but didn't burn up. God showed up in his life in a new way, with a new call. A call Moses didn't want at all.

Can you argue with God? It must be possible, because lots of people in the Bible did it. God actually had to adapt His plans more than once to get people to go along with His calls. In Moses' case, God promised that He'd get Aaron to do the scary part of talking to Pharaoh. But finally, reluctantly, Moses said yes.

And so began his third career. He'd spent forty years as an adopted son of the Egyptian royalty, forty as a shepherd and writer, and now he was beginning forty years shepherding the people of God.

Moses didn't know it yet, but he would be seen as one of the greatest humans in history. God had taken eighty years to train and prepare him for a role that would not only combine leader, father, lawgiver, and judge, but in many ways, even prefigure the role of Jesus as Messiah. He stood before God for his people, and even offered at least once to die in their place (Ex. 32:32). In Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses promised his people that God would raise up "a prophet like me" from one of their brothers, and today we see that as a messianic prophecy.

If you had told him this when he was 20, or 40, or even 60, Moses would have laughed at you. If you had told him at 80, the day before he found the burning bush, he'd have laughed. But God had plans, and Moses, though he argued, was trying to follow God.

He could have said no. We can all say no. Jesus died to buy back that freedom for us. People who try to force you to do anything, even the right thing, are doing the devil's work, not God's.

Be like Moses. Argue and ask questions if you have to, but say yes!

God Who never leaves us alone, don't leave me alone! I may sometimes argue or doubt Your wisdom. I may insist that You must be kidding to think I can do *that*. I may ask You questions and drive You crazy with my doubts. (As if I could!) But I really do want to follow. I am Your willing child. I really am excited to see what Your plan is. I hope I don't have to wait eighty years, but remind me that today is part of Your plan, too.

[Moses] said, "Oh, Master, please! Send somebody else!" GOD got angry with Moses: "Don't you have a brother, Aaron the Levite? He's good with words, I know he is. He speaks very well. In fact, at this very moment he's on his way to meet you. When he sees you he's going to be glad. You'll speak to him and tell him what to say. I'll be right there with you as you speak and with him as he speaks, teaching you step by step. He will speak to the people for you. He'll act as your mouth, but you'll decide what comes out of it. Now take this staff in your hand; you'll use it to do the signs."
Exodus 4:11-17, The Message

We know a lot about the story of Moses, the great deliverer of his people, but we tend to forget Aaron's part. Have you ever thought about what it would have been like to be Aaron?

First of all, as far as we know, he hasn't seen his brother in forty years! (This may not be true—perhaps they had visited or written occasionally, but Moses didn't dare show his face in Egypt, because he was wanted for murder.) In any case, suddenly Aaron seems to have received a call from God to go to the desert and meet Moses. And he doesn't appear to have argued as his brother did.

Then, when he gets there, Moses tells him all about the burning bush, and the stick that turns into a snake, and the hand that gets white with leprosy when Moses puts it into his shirt. He has to admit his doubts and arguments, too, because at some point, Moses tells Aaron, "Oh, and by the way, God says you can be the spokesman."

"What?"

"Yes, you get to do the talking."

"Me? To Pharaoh?"

"Don't worry, God says you're really good with words."

"Great. Thanks!"

So they go back to Egypt, and throughout the whole story—ordering Pharaoh to "let my people go" and the magician contests and the ten plagues and everything—Aaron does all the talking, and Moses gets all the credit. For centuries and millennia to come!

Have you ever had to "play second fiddle" to someone else? How did you take it? Be an Aaron. Take it with faith as your work for God. Others may not see your role, but God does. After all, it's an orchestral term, and second violin is a pretty good spot! If there were only one violin in the whole orchestra, there'd be very few pieces they could play!

God Who calls the whole orchestra, we're all Your gifted children, and anyway, it's Your orchestra, not ours. Remind us that we're all essential, and You're proud of every one.

Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dancing. Miriam answered them, "Sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted; The horse and his rider He has hurled into the sea." Exodus 15:20. 21, NASB

If Miriam was five to ten years old when she stood watch over Moses at his birth, then she was 85 to 90 when God delivered Israel by His hand. God had told Abraham centuries before that his descendants would be in slavery for 400 years. Now that time was up, and all three of the brothers and sister were in on God's great plan.

It must have been hard for Moses' family all those years. Yes, he was delivered from death as a three-month-old baby. Yes, his own mother was paid to care for him for the first years of his life. But then he was taken away from them to live in the palace, and years later, he had fled Egypt as a fugitive, wanted for murder! Now, after all these years, Moses had shown up again and, with Aaron at his side, fought a long term spiritual battle with Pharaoh and his court. God had won, but not without hard costs. Many people and animals had died. They had left at last, then been trapped between the Red Sea and the angry armies of Egypt, thinking they were lost indeed.

Then came the miracle. God had made a dry path through the sea, the entire throng of freed slaves (plus all the Egyptians who had come along after learning that the God of heaven was mightier than all Egypt's gods put together) had walked through, and Pharaoh's army had been defeated by the waves.

Miriam was leading the dance of celebration. She might be old, but she could still leap and twirl and sing praises to God!

Did you ever wonder why they called her "Miriam the prophetess"? We are not given much detail about her life. Perhaps, all through those seventy plus years of waiting, she had kept her faith. Perhaps she had been given messages from God that her brother would be the awaited deliverer. Or maybe she'd only now begun to be used by God as a prophetess, to help Moses in his gigantic task. At any rate, with the exception of one mistake that we know of, recorded in Numbers 12, Miriam was one of the three leaders of Israel, and we know she repented of that mistake.

I hope I could keep my faith and trust for years on end if I needed to.

God of victory and celebration, stay by my side all through my life. May I be known as someone who listens to Your word, passes it along, keeps the faith, and leads the praises when I see Your mighty hand at work. No matter how old I get, never let me stop being Your praising child.

GOD spoke to Moses: "See what I've done; I've personally chosen Bezalel son of Uri, son of Hur of the tribe of Judah. I've filled him with the Spirit of God, giving him skill and know-how and expertise in every kind of craft to create designs and work in gold, silver, and bronze; to cut and set gemstones; to carve wood—he's an all-around craftsman. Not only that, but I've given him Oholiab, son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan, to work with him. And to all who have an aptitude for crafts I've given the skills to make all the things I've commanded you." Exodus 31:1-6, The Message

Are you good with your hands? Do you like to make things, or paint, or draw? Or do you know someone who can do these things well? Did it ever occur to you that these are gifts of the Holy Spirit?

This is an interesting passage! The people of Israel have been out of Egypt for two months, and they are settling down to create something God has planned—a mobile, portable temple for worshipping the one true God. This passage doesn't just say God gave Bezalel and Oholiab and the other craftspeople the skills to make things. Of course we know all our abilities and talents come from God, just like our red hair or round face or brown skin. But the passage says (and it's God Himself speaking, so He ought to know!) "I have *filled him with the Spirit of God!*" And He goes on to say that not only Bezalel and Oholiab, but all the men and women, boys and girls who will help build this special project, whether by spinning and weaving, embroidery, woodwork, metalwork, or whatever is needed, have been *chosen* by God and given the abilities they need for the work.

That means it's not just craftsmanship or artistry anymore, it's a mission. It's God's work.

If you are good with your hands, do you find ways to do God's work with them? If you are good at math or science or writing, do you watch for ways those skills can minister to others? If you sing, do you sing God's songs? If you have a strong, athletic body, do you use it for His glory?

It all came from Him. He probably has big dreams for how you can use it for others. Why don't you ask Him?

God of artistry, beauty, and creativity, thank You for the gifts You have given me. Help me to find them all, as the years of my life go by and perhaps they change. Help me to develop and cultivate them. And help me remember to ask myself (and You): Does this action glorify God? Does it help or minister to others in some way? Does it make me more my true self as a child of God, or does it take away from that? And if the answers are yes, then let me do my very best and most beautiful work for You.

"The land we walked through and scouted out is a very good land—very good indeed. If GOD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land that flows, as they say, with milk and honey. And he'll give it to us. Just don't rebel against GOD! And don't be afraid of those people. Why, we'll have them for lunch! They have no protection and GOD is on our side. Don't be afraid of them!"

Numbers 14:6-9, The Message

"God is on our side." What does that mean, exactly? For millennia, people have used it to mean, "God is *for* us and *against* you!" "God will help *us* win this war!" "God will make *my* party win this election, not *yours*!"

God loves us more than you! Nyah, nyah!

What?? The God of love, who created *everyone* in His own image? Let's look a little more closely at this.

Two years had passed since Moses led the people out of Egypt and slavery. (This would be a good place to remind ourselves that all Egyptians who chose to follow the God of heaven came along and were welcome.) Now they had reached the borders of Canaan. Moses sent twelve spies, one from each tribe. Two of those men were Caleb, from Judah, and Joshua, from Ephraim.

These two men were men of faith. When the other ten spies wailed, "Those people are too big! We can't take them!" Caleb and Joshua said, "We're following God! If it's His will, it will be fine! Don't be afraid!" They even tore their clothes in mourning when the people practically rioted, wanting to choose new leaders instead of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

These don't sound like men with an "us/them" mentality.

So let's see what attitude God had. Let's look at the very first city they came to (forty years later): Jericho. Rahab and her entire family were saved, and there may be more that we don't know of. In the laws of Leviticus, God makes it clear time and again that any foreigner who wants to join His people is welcome, and He reminds the Israelites to never forget that they used to be aliens and slaves, too, so they should know what it feels like.

"God is on our side." Yes, He is. God loves every human being on the face of the earth and works hard to get them to answer one question: "Are you on *My* side?"

Caleb and Joshua's message was: "Don't be afraid! Trust God and look on the positive side!"

God of the entire earth, I am grateful that You are on my side. Save me from thinking that means You are against someone else. Help me to remember we are *all* Your special children, and You work with anyone who is willing to work with You.

"As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you . . . Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:5, 9, The Message

In Exodus 17, 24, and 32, there are six different references to Joshua, son of Nun, being Moses' aide, or assistant. Did you know he even went up on the mountain with Moses when he got the Ten Commandments from God? He didn't go the whole way, but waited and prayed while Moses was with God. When they came down, he was the one who first heard the noise of calf-worship in the camp and thought there was a battle going on (32:17).

Yet there's no record that either Moses or God chose him for this post. It looks as if Joshua, as a young man, looked at Moses, said to himself, "That's the kind of man I want to be," and began to find ways to be with him and help him in his heavy task.

The most touching passage is in Exodus 33:10, 11. It says that when the pillar of cloud stood at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, the people would worship. God would speak with Moses face to face and then Moses would go back to the people, "but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent" (Vs. 11).

What did Joshua talk with God about during those private times? This is what we know: He became a godly leader and was actually chosen as Moses' replacement. He must have been nervous about it, because in Joshua 1, God says no less than three times, "Be strong; don't be afraid." And under Joshua's faithful leadership, the people took over their new land and settled in to make it a land of God.

It was Joshua who charged the people to choose once and for all whether to worship God, and said, "My family will!"

Have you seen someone you look up to as a godly person? Are there opportunities for you to shadow that person, helping in whatever ways you can? Would you be willing to take years and years, if necessary, training to serve God in some future capacity, as long as you are serving Him daily now, in all the ways you can think of?

Most importantly, do you spend time on your own "in the Tent" with God? Don't leave too quickly. Listen to His words to you, not just to the leader you look up to.

Patient God, I am Your student. You never seem to mind how long it takes to train me. I pray that the ways I serve You now will be of value *today* to You and others, while also training me (and perhaps those around me) to be faithful, and preparing me for whatever plan you have for my future.

"The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you."
Joshua 2:11, 12, NIV

Rahab must have been paying attention. She knew the stories about the Israelites from forty years before! Of course, lately things had been getting pretty unnerving, as the Israelites drew nearer and nearer and it became more and more obvious that God was doing great things on their behalf. Now, here they were on the very borders. The Canaanites were scared. So it's likely that the people of Jericho were retelling stories they might not have thought of for a long time.

So when the spies came, did Rahab recognize them as strangers? Did she hurry them into her inn and give them a room before anyone could see them? Did God impress her? Or did they just pretend to be ordinary travelers, and she didn't realize who they were until after they'd been there awhile?

Whatever the reason, Rahab took them in. But she wasn't the only one who realized their true business. When the king sent to her to ask about them, telling her they were spies, she hid the men under stalks of flax she had laid out on her roof to dry before she spun the fibers on her spindle to make linen thread. She sent the men on their way and smuggled the spies out. But first, she made her statement of faith.

Against everything she had probably been taught all her life, Rahab recognized new truth when she saw it. She said, "I know your God is God of heaven and earth." And she begged for mercy, not only for herself but for her entire extended family and everyone who belonged to them.

And got it. Because that's the kind of God we serve. He would have loved it if all of Jericho, like Niniveh centuries later, had turned itself over to Him. The destruction would never have happened.

But who knows—possibly there were others, from Jericho and other cities, who joined the people of God before it was too late.

Try to imagine—if you had been Rahab, taught about Canaanite gods your whole life, would you have been able to recognize truth? Would you have changed your whole belief and practice to follow God?

Have you done anything like that in your life so far?

God of the whole truth, keep leading me. I know I don't know all the truth about life and the universe and everything yet. None of us do. But I want to follow You and keep listening to every new bit of light You show me. I want to be *Your own* child, no one else's, and to be able to tell the difference between real, New Light and a misleading fake. If I make some mistakes in my learning, keep hold of me, and bring me back into Your light.

The LORD looked at him and said, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?" Judges 6:14, NASB

So there you are one day, minding your own business, working on the car, or walking home from school, or whatever, and a blazing angel flashes into being in front of you and says, "GOD is with you, O mighty warrior!"

I ask you—would you start arguing?

Anybody would think Gideon was used to seeing angels any day of the week. He says, "With *me*, my master? If GOD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all the miracle-wonders our parents and grandparents told us about, telling us, 'Didn't GOD deliver us from Egypt?' The fact is, GOD has nothing to do with us—he has turned us over to Midian" (Vs. 13).

Now, mind you, I've thought that. There have definitely been times in my life when I've thought God had abandoned me. There have even been times when I accused Him of that. But I'm pretty sure that if an angel suddenly appeared, first of all, I'd faint or something, and secondly, how could I then say God had "nothing to do with me" and had turned me over to my enemies?!

But Gideon does. Then, when the angel gives him a mission, Gideon argues about that, too. He asks for a sign, gets it, asks for another sign, gets it . . . asks for another sign. And here's the thing: God keeps giving them to him! Even when Gideon finally does agree, and gathers up an army, God keeps giving him ways to whittle them down until he has one medium-sized church full of men to fight an army of 20,000. That sounds about right!

So the lesson for us is, if you're not sure, *follow God!*

If you're timid, *follow God!*

If you have to ask for a sign, do it, and then *follow God!*

If you still aren't sure and have to ask again, well, I wouldn't push it, but clearly God will comfort weakness at least until you start deliberately taking advantage of Him. At that point, He'll probably teach you a different lesson, and my advice would be, *follow God!*

People have different opinions about asking God for signs, and that's probably good, because different people in the Bible had different opinions, too. Only you and God know whether you are honestly seeking His guidance, or being unfaithful and lazy and trying to find an easy way out.

God of infinite patience, I'm glad You are so patient with me—I need it! Make Your will as plain to me as if there were an angel of light in front of me. Keep encouraging me if I need it, but help me to need it less and to depend on You more. Like a stumbling child, help me cling to Your hand and follow You.

The town women said to Naomi, “Blessed be GOD! He didn’t leave you without family to carry on your life. May this baby grow up to be famous in Israel! He’ll make you young again! He’ll take care of you in old age. And this daughter-in-law who has brought him into the world and loves you so much, why, she’s worth more to you than seven sons!” Ruth 4:14, 15, The Message

Poor Naomi! Like Moses, she could be said to have had three lives. First, she grew up in her childhood home, then married and had sons. So far, life was on its expected track. Then trouble began. In the second stage of her life, Naomi experienced famine, a trip to a foreign country, and the marriage of her sons to two Moabite girls. This wasn’t exactly what she’d planned, but she was doing all right—until disease swept through, and her husband and sons were killed.

Naomi’s grief was deep and bitter. She headed back home, expecting to go alone, but one of her daughters-in-law, Ruth, insisted on staying with her. When they got to Naomi’s hometown, Bethlehem, she told her old friends that instead of calling her Naomi, which means “pleasant,” they should call her Mara, which means “bitter.” “God has dealt me a hard blow,” she said (1:13).

Her troubles were not over yet. As poor widows with no one to support them, she and Ruth were on God’s version of welfare, which meant that those who had crops and possessions were supposed to share. When they harvested their fields, landowners were supposed to deliberately leave the corners and edges for poor people to harvest. That way, the poor people could work for themselves and keep their self-respect. But not that many landowners followed God’s plan.

However, Boaz, who was actually a relative of Naomi’s, not only followed God’s plan, but went the extra mile and watched over the poor who were following behind his own workers.

At this point, Naomi can be an example to us all. While she waited on God to work things out, she did what she could and followed the customs of her people. She encouraged Ruth and showed her how to follow the customs, too. Naomi’s life became pleasant instead of bitter again. Even though she expressed her sorrow, disappointment, and probably anger, she didn’t stop there. She was willing to do what needed to be done to make things better. And so her “third life,” one of blessing and love, began.

God of the unexpected byways, I admit it—I wish we didn’t have to experience sorrow. Unfortunately, we live in a sinful world, though, so I’m *very* grateful that You walk alongside us. No matter how many different life periods I have to go through, and no matter how many emotions I experience as a result, I want to wait on You as Your faithful child, knowing You only desire my good.

But Ruth said, “Don’t force me to leave you; don’t make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I’ll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I’ll die, and that’s where I’ll be buried, so help me GOD—not even death itself is going to come between us!” Ruth 1:16, 17, The Message

Ruth has some things in common with Rahab. Both were raised in idolatrous homes and countries, and both saw the truth about the God of heaven and followed Him. However, in reading Rahab’s story, it appears that she believed (at first, anyway) because of the power she saw. “We’re all afraid!” she told the spies. Ruth, on the other hand, makes clear by her words and attitudes that she wanted to be with Naomi because she loved her and felt loved by her.

What would make a young woman whose husband has just died want to go to a foreign country and live with her mother-in-law instead of going home to her own family? Orpah, the other daughter-in-law, though she clearly loved Naomi and cried to leave her, went home. Did Ruth feel more loved in Naomi’s family than in her own?

One thing is clear—she loved Naomi and Naomi loved her. Boaz was first drawn to Ruth by the faithful way she took care of her sorrowing mother-in-law (See Ruth 2:11, 12). After praising Ruth for her kindness, he added this blessing: “GOD reward you well for what you’ve done—and with a generous bonus besides from GOD, to whom you’ve come seeking protection under his wings.”

There are many, many people who are much more drawn by love and kindness than they are by hearing The Truth, or the Right Words or the Right Answers. Bible studies are important, and for some people they are the most important thing that draws them to God. But many others are drawn by the love, and certainly Bible studies *without* love do no one any good at all!

Jesus said people would know we belonged to Him by how loving we are. How’s that for a test of faith? What is the most loving thing you’ve done this week? Have you looked in your mirror lately and asked, “Where’s the love?”

It only comes from one place. But there’s lots and lots and *lots* of it there! If you need more, just duck under the wings of God.

Great God of love, who draws us all under Your gentle wings, give me lots of love. Because today, I’m going to go out and give it away just as fast and as far as I can. And when people ask where I got it, I’ll point them to my Abba and tell them there’s plenty more where it came from.

A little later Boaz came out from Bethlehem, greeting his harvesters, "GOD be with you!" They replied, "And GOD bless you!" Ruth 2:4, The Message

You can learn a lot about a person by noticing how he or she greets people who are not considered to be of the same social standing as they are. The story of Ruth happened during the time of the judges, when everyone pretty much did whatever they wanted. God had made His laws concerning leaving the corners of the fields for the poor long before, but not that many people followed them. It wasn't uncommon at all for the poor to starve to death. Not only that, but harvest time could be dangerous. It brought out bandits and desperate people who would kill to eat. We can know it was dangerous there around Bethlehem because of what Boaz said to Ruth in 2:8, 9: "From now on don't go to any other field to glean—stay right here in this one. And stay close to my young women. Watch where they are harvesting and follow them. And don't worry about a thing; I've given orders to my servants not to harass you."

So, even the workers in Boaz' fields might bother a pretty young woman. But he kept watch. And notice how he greeted his workers. "God be with you!"

Boaz was a man who didn't just follow the letter of God's law. If he had, he could have felt proud of himself even for that, because many people around him weren't doing that much. But Boaz went above and beyond. He took steps to see to it that Ruth would be safe, and that she and Naomi would be cared for before he knew who she was, and before he was attracted to her himself. You can tell he would have done the same—did, in fact, do the same—for anyone who needed it. People probably knew that if they were in need or trouble, they could go to Boaz, and he would help them.

I'd like to be known for that kind of attitude. I'd like it if people knew they could come to me and I wouldn't criticize or make them feel foolish, but would help them if I could.

How about you? Do you want to be known as a person with a generous, giving heart? Would you like to be known, as Boaz was, as a person around whom the vulnerable would be safe, a person who will do the right thing?

God of widows and orphans, You take care of us all, and You usually do it by giving us to each other to care for. I may not be a rich landowner like Boaz, but I know there are people You give to me to care for. Help me to keep my eyes open today, especially for any of Your children who are (or feel like) widows and orphans and are in need of a kind word, a gentle touch, or practical help. I want to be like Boaz, known for a giving, generous heart.

Crushed in soul, Hannah prayed to GOD and cried and cried—inconsolably. Then she made a vow: "Oh, GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, if you'll take a good, hard look at my pain, if you'll quit neglecting me and go into action for me by giving me a son, I'll give him completely, unreservedly to you. I'll set him apart for a life of holy discipline." 1 Samuel 1:10, 11, The Message

Lots of women in the Bible had the painful life of sharing a husband with another wife. And many of them also faced the pain of having no children. Today, many people are sorrowful because they can't have children, but in those days it was worse in one way: women who couldn't have children were blamed for it. They were seen as inadequate or even cursed by God. So the man would take another wife, and often she would have children. But she wouldn't be as loved, and she would know it, and her secret unhappiness would lead her to taunt the childless wife and make her life a misery.

The story was repeated over and over. This was Hannah's situation. But Hannah knew what to do about it. She took her pain and tears to God. She cried and prayed, and of course we know the story, how Hannah begged for a son and promised to dedicate him to God, and God did send Samuel to her, and then several other children, as well.

But here's the real question: was Hannah comforted *just by praying*, even if her request was not granted? I think she was. I think in verse 18 when Eli said, "Go in peace" and Hannah went and "ate heartily, her face radiant," her heart was already at peace, no matter what God's answer would be.

Can we do that? Is there something you've been begging God for, some situation you pray so hard over, and don't know if it will turn out as you hope it will? When you go to God about it and pour out your heart, do you seek His peace and His presence, or do you just seek the answer you want? Do you then go and tell your friends, "I don't know what God will say or do, but I feel better having talked to Him about it?"

Or, if it doesn't turn out as you hope, do you say, "God didn't answer my prayer?"

God answers *every* prayer. He doesn't grant every request. There's a difference. May we all learn it.

Peacemaker God, when I am in conflict, remind me that You are nearby. When I am longing for some certain outcome, of course I hope You will grant my requests. But if You don't, help me remember that I am Your precious child, and if I don't understand your answer, may I know You want what's best for me—that I may always feel Your presence, Your peace. Like Hannah, that's what I truly long for.

So Samuel told him, word for word. He held back nothing . . . Samuel grew up. GOD was with him, and Samuel's prophetic record was flawless. Everyone in Israel, from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south, recognized that Samuel was the real thing—a true prophet of GOD.

1 Samuel 3:18-20, The Message

Most of the time, when we are in conflict like Hannah, we go to God for peace and comfort. But sometimes God gives a different message—a much harder message.

Just a few years after the last story, Samuel, still a young boy, is working in the house of God, when he is awakened by a voice calling his name. He runs to Eli three times, and then Eli realizes what is happening and tells Samuel it's God. So Samuel lies back down, and I doubt he sleeps again! He must feel excited and a little fearful. Wouldn't you? The next time he's called, Samuel says breathlessly, "Speak. I'm your servant, ready to listen" (3:10).

And does God say some loving or awesome thing? No, God tells Samuel that he has to be the one to report to Eli that his family will die out and not work for God anymore because they have been so faithless!

Ouch! I doubt Samuel slept any more that night!

Sometimes God asks us to do something really hard. Sometimes (though not very often), He asks one of His faithful children to tell something very painful and unpleasant to someone else. Ellen White had to do this, and she hated it. She, too, was young, and could hardly stand to tell older people that God had sent them a rebuke through her.

God had already tried to warn Eli in 1 Sam. 2:27-30. But Eli didn't listen. I think that's usually the case, and as a last resort, God sends another person, maybe someone the disobedient one loves and trusts, hoping they'll listen this time.

It's important to note that people sometimes say hurtful, judgmental things to others and then say God told them to do it. This never, ever is God's will. God always wants us to tell others about His huge, immeasurable love. He always wants us to stand for the truth, even when it's difficult. But He doesn't want us to tell others what's wrong with them unless *He has said so directly*. And then He never wants it said in unloving ways.

When He does ask that, it's always because, in the end, it will lead to more peace and love, at least if the people accept His word. I'd rather not be in that position. But if I ever am, I hope I can obey like Samuel.

Great Peacemaker, sometimes Your peace is hard to find and comes in painful ways. I am Your willing child, ready to listen. Give me *Your words alone* to speak, and let me be a force for love.

Samuel took his flask of oil and anointed him, with his brothers standing around watching. The Spirit of GOD entered David like a rush of wind, God vitally empowering him for the rest of his life.

1 Samuel 16:13, The Message

Have you ever wondered what David thought when someone came and got him because Samuel, the famous old prophet, had asked for him? There he was, tending his sheep, maybe making up a new song to play on his harp, and the next thing he knew, he was anointed in front of all his older brothers as the next king of Israel! What a shock it must have been!

Then Samuel went away and David went back to his sheep. Now what? The life of a shepherd is a lonely one. David spent most of his time with only the company of trees, breezes, streams, and a bunch of woolly animals so silly they often seem to have wool for brains, too. He must have practiced all his songs on them, and he likely talked to them, too. He may have talked things over out loud with God, with the sheep listening. Did he ask them what it meant that he, a teenaged boy out in the fields, was supposedly king now? What about King Saul? God had removed His favor from Saul, but David didn't know anything about that. How could he be king, too? David didn't know anything else to do but keep on taking care of sheep, and it was actually good practice for taking care of flocks of people, too!

Another thing that was good for him was his simple life outdoors. Fresh air, sunshine, simple food, hard work that matters, these are the things that make a person strong, healthy, and ready for any task God may send. The next task God sent David was the job of singing and playing for an angry, depressed old king. He was able to be something of a help to Saul for quite a long time. Maybe this was one reason David was able to maintain patience and mercy with Saul long after Saul had lost it with him, wanting nothing more than to kill the young upstart who was threatening his throne. Perhaps when David came upon Saul sleeping in that cave years later, he remembered the tortured moods and being able to calm them with his psalms, his voice, and his harp.

David sang for his sheep and sang for his king. He is singing still today in the psalms we love. But most of all, in the green pastures, beside the still waters, David sang for God.

God of peaceful waters and peaceful songs, may I have the compassion and patience You and Your servant David had for those who seem "crazy" and hard to understand. May I spend lots of time in Your world, and may it prepare me for any task you have for me. I am Your faithful child and your following lamb. Let me sing only for You.

Jonathan said, "Go in peace! The two of us have vowed friendship in GOD's name, saying, 'GOD will be the bond between me and you, and between my children and your children forever!'"

1 Samuel 20:42, The Message

The friendship of Jonathan and David is one of the most beautiful things in the Bible. These two men loved each other dearly, and when you think about it, it's surprising. Jonathan was the son of the reigning king. He must have grown up expecting to be king himself someday. But when he learned that David had been anointed by Samuel, Jonathan accepted it without question. He loved his friend anyway, no matter what.

It's not like Jonathan didn't know his dad was a mess. If you read this whole chapter, 1 Samuel 20, you'll see how Jonathan was trying to run interference between these two who were both close to him. He no doubt still loved his father. Certainly he still tried to honor him in all the ways he could. But he wasn't going to stand by while Saul killed the man God had chosen to be the next king of Israel.

In this story, Saul even tried, for a moment at least, to kill Jonathan! He probably didn't really mean it except for that moment, because he had just complained to Jonathan that David was a threat to Jonathan's succession to the throne, and Jonathan certainly couldn't ascend to the throne if he was dead! But Saul was mentally, emotionally, and spiritually ill now. He no longer controlled his own actions. Satan did. Saul had made the choices that got him to this place, and he was unwilling to make new ones.

Jonathan knew all this, and did his best to maintain compassion for his father. But he was steadfastly on the side of the true king, his friend David.

Have you ever been stuck in the middle? Perhaps you have friends who battle and then pour their stories into your ears. Perhaps you try to keep peace between siblings. Perhaps, worst of all, your parents are divorced and use you as ammunition. These things are painful realities in this world of sin.

We are usually tempted to take one side and turn our backs on the other. But God loves both. He wants us to maintain compassion for both, listen to both, love both, and honor even unloving parents as much as we healthfully can. (This may require help—seek it if you need it.)

Like Jonathan, may we be faithful and true friends without betraying either, and especially without betraying God.

God of peace in the midst of storm, I don't like being in the middle! Help me to be able to truly listen to both sides and honestly reflect Your all-inclusive love in both directions. Help me remember we are all Your storm-tossed children, whether we are living faithfully with You or not, and the only chance You have of calling back a stray is with love.

"Know this: Your God-honored life is tightly bound in the bundle of God-protected life; but the lives of your enemies will be hurled aside as a stone is thrown from a sling. When GOD completes all the goodness he has promised my master and sets you up as prince over Israel, my master will not have this dead weight in his heart, the guilt of an avenging murder." 1 Samuel 25:29-31, The Message

If you thought the president was about to make a bad mistake, would you run and tell him so? That's what Abigail did. Of course, it wasn't quite the same, for two reasons. First, David wasn't quite king yet. But word must have gotten around that God had chosen him. Secondly, the problem arose from within Abigail's own household.

Her husband was named Nabal, which means "fool." We don't know if he had the name first, and lived up to it, or got the name because he was stupid, but he was stupid enough on this particular day that he nearly got himself and his entire household killed—including his wife, Abigail.

David and his men had protected Nabal's flocks and the people who cared for them from all harm. Now it was sheep-shearing time—time for a festival. As custom dictated, David and his men wanted to join in. It was only fair. But when he asked, Nabal sent back vicious insults. David wasn't as humble as he used to be. Furious, he set out with battle in mind.

A servant who knew Abigail was wiser than her husband hurried to tell her. "Do something, quick!" the servant urged.

Abigail swung into action. She sent rich gifts, including the food David had asked for to begin with. Then she mounted her donkey and went the extra mile—she went to meet David herself.

Here's where it gets interesting. (Read the whole chapter—it's quite a story.) Of course, Abigail was out to save her family. But she seemed to want to save David from a costly mistake, too. Bowing all the way to the ground, she said, "Forgive my presumption! But GOD is at work in my master . . . My master fights GOD's battles! As long as you live no evil will stick to you" (Vs. 28). In other words, don't take vengeance yourself, David! Leave that to God. In our focus text, above, she reminds David that he doesn't want to be the one who ends up with a vengeance killing on his conscience.

And David listened. He wasn't too proud to listen to a woman, and he recognized truth when he heard it. That's the best thing about David. And Abigail? She ended up as a wife to the king!

Peacemaker God, I want to be your peacemaker child. Let me be eager to make peace even if I have to run to face conflict in order to do it. Give me humility to take trouble on myself to save another, especially from sin.

God, make a fresh start in me, shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life. Don't throw me out with the trash, or fail to breathe holiness in me. Bring me back from gray exile, put a fresh wind in my sails! Psalm 51:10-12, The Message

David got off to such a good start—faithful, strong, healthy—just the sort of man to make a good king of Israel, one who would follow God. Like all of us, he made a lot of mistakes, but the thing that set him apart from most other kings in Israel's history is that when David was confronted with his sin, he always owned up to it and repented from his heart. He always *wanted* to follow God, even when he didn't succeed.

But David began to lose the peace and joy of his youth as the years went by. He didn't just lose his temper, he killed his enemies. He didn't just look at women lustfully, he went after them. He didn't just take over the land and make Jerusalem his own, he went after every enemy and threat, making as much or more war as Saul had before him. Even God, when it came down to it, told David his hands were too bloody to build the temple. David could collect the materials, but his son would do the building.

However, as David grew older, he began to return to the faithfulness of his youth. He became more compassionate and less violent. Two stories in particular illustrate this. One, the story of Mephibosheth, is found in 2 Samuel 9. David asked, "Is there anyone left of Saul's family? If so, I'd like to show him some kindness in honor of Jonathan." And he sought out, took in, and cared for the last surviving member of Saul's family.

The second story is in 2 Samuel 18, where David's beloved but wild son, Absalom, tried to take over his father's kingdom. The younger King David would have called out the army and put down this rebellion, even if it was his own son. The old King David ordered that the soldiers go easy on Absalom, and when they didn't, and he was killed, mourned bitterly: "O my son Absalom, my dear, dear son Absalom! Why not me rather than you, my death and not yours, O Absalom, my dear, dear son!"

I want to be like David, a person after God's own heart, but I don't want to stray like David. If I do, I'm glad God is there to bring me back.

God who brings peace over and over again, help me to be faithful all my life to the love I have for you now, while I am young. I know I stray sometimes. Help me not to stray in ways that hurt myself or others, and when I do stray, thank You for forgiving me, restoring me, and giving me a new heart and a new start as Your beloved child.

"Here's what I want: Give me a God-listening heart so I can lead your people well, discerning the difference between good and evil. For who on their own is capable of leading your glorious people?"

1 Kings 3:9, The Message

After ruling for forty-two years, David died and his son Solomon took his place. The kingdom was greater than David had found it. He had consolidated the country, set it free from most enemies, and built up the capital city, Jerusalem. Solomon knew he had big shoes to fill.

His father had had a heart-felt talk with him before he died: "Do what GOD tells you. Walk in the paths he shows you: Follow the life-map absolutely, keep an eye out for the signposts, his course for life set out in the revelation to Moses; then you'll get on well in whatever you do and wherever you go" (1 Kings 2:3).

So when God showed up in a dream one night, asking Solomon what he wanted most, Solomon was ready to answer. "GOD, my God, you have made me, your servant, ruler of the kingdom in place of David my father. I'm too young for this, a mere child! I don't know the ropes, hardly know the 'ins' and 'outs' of this job. And here I am, set down in the middle of the people you've chosen, a great people—far too many to ever count. Here's what I want: Give me a God-listening heart so I can lead your people well, discerning the difference between good and evil. For who on their own is capable of leading your glorious people?" (Vs. 7-9).

Solomon knew that the only source of true peace was to get it directly from God. He wasn't proud or arrogant, thinking he could rule the people wisely and well on his own. Nor was he selfish, thinking of God in this dream as a genie in a lamp, ready to fulfill any greedy wish he wanted. He asked for wisdom—or, as *The Message Bible* has it, a "God-listening heart"—a heart that can "discern the difference between good and evil."

I think that sounds like a great request, and one we don't have to wait for God to appear in a dream to us to ask for.

Even more than his father, David, Solomon went drastically astray from the path God had laid down for him. In fact, the promise that if they would follow Him there would always be a son of David on the throne was never ratified, because they didn't!

Source of peace and wisdom, I too want a God-listening heart. I too have jobs to do that I think I am not up to and can't accomplish. I too feel like a foolish child, inadequate for what You would have me do. And I certainly need to discern between good and evil. Give me, like Solomon, a wise heart. And I promise I won't run after the idolatrous ways of the world and wait until I'm old to come back!

When he had consulted with the people, he appointed those who sang to the LORD and those who praised Him in holy attire, as they went out before the army and said, "Give thanks to the LORD, for His loving kindness is everlasting." 2 Chronicles 20:21, NASB

This chapter is one of the coolest stories in the whole Bible. King Jehoshaphat of Judea gets a message from his intelligence agents that a huge combined army is coming after him. And what does he do first? Get his army together? No, he prays! Good choice! What does he do second? Start gathering weapons? No, he orders a nationwide fast. Next—training? Nope, he calls the whole nation, even the children, to the temple for a prayer meeting!

This is a different kind of king! Not even David or Solomon ever did something like this when war threatened.

Jehoshaphat prays a beautiful prayer (you've already read the whole chapter, haven't you?) and ends with, "We don't know what to do; we're looking to you" (Vs. 12).

Well, you know God is not going to ignore this kind of faith. A man in the audience is inspired with a prophecy. He says, "Don't worry, the battle is God's, march out tomorrow and stand."

Do what? Fight? Send spies? Ask for a truce? No, *stand*. How odd . . .

King Jehoshaphat does even better. First, they all pray some more and praise God at the top of their lungs. The next morning he repeats the prophecy, exhorting them all to be courageous and unafraid. At last, he does gather his troops, but he puts a choir in front of them. A *choir*? In *front*?? How would you like to sing in that choir?

Out they marched, singing praises, and when they got to the battlefield, all their enemies had already killed each other.

Wow.

I haven't ever been to war. I haven't even seen a battle. But I've had a lot of spiritual ones. When I learned about this story as a teenager, it seemed to me like a really good plan for fighting those battles, too. So now I always try to remember—when temptation, or bad news, or conflict, or sorrow, or depression come, sing first! Worry later! Praise God *before* you see the victory. I have to tell you, it isn't always as easy as this story. But it's always God's victory, and sometimes it comes just that quickly.

Mighty One, who turns bad news into good news, teach me to turn my face to You as naturally as a sunflower follows the sun, as naturally as a little child turns to its mother. When I don't know what to do, let me keep my eyes on You. Remind me that the battle is Yours, and all I have to do is praise You anyway, march out boldly, and stand firm.

Elijah the Tishbite, from among the settlers of Gilead, confronted Ahab: "As surely as GOD lives, the God of Israel before whom I stand in obedient service, the next years are going to see a total drought—not a drop of dew or rain unless I say otherwise." 1 Kings 17:1, The Message

Of all the wicked kings in the Bible, Ahab was one of the worst. He did so much evil that he isn't remembered for a single good thing. His wife, Jezebel, was the same. And they weren't just making mistakes. They did wrong deliberately and weren't one bit sorry. Among other things during Ahab's reign, the nature gods, Baal and Astarte, were worshiped by almost everyone. The false priests claimed these gods were in charge of the weather. If you needed good weather for your crops, you went to Baal and Astarte.

No amount of preaching or prophesying by true prophets had made any difference, but God knew something that would. He sent Elijah to tell Ahab, "No rain until I say so."

And for three and a half years, no rain fell. The people could pray to the idols and bring their offerings all they wanted. It didn't make any difference. No rain. The streams dried up. The lakes dried up. The rivers dried up. There was only a tiny bit of water still to be found by digging for it.

God miraculously fed Elijah and other faithful people. Elijah was fed by ravens and then by a kind widow. Her bottle of oil and jar of flour never ran out while they had need of it. The rest of the country suffered.

Then came the confrontation on Mt. Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Their spells and rituals and begging with the idol did nothing. Elijah's quiet prayer, at God's chosen time, brought rain. And the people figured out it was God, not Baal, who decides these things.

Sometimes, good news comes in the form of bad news. God didn't send the drought because he was angry and wanted to punish people. He wanted them to see that *He* was the one who cared for them, loved them, and could answer their prayers. And many did turn to Him because of this experience.

I plan to keep my eyes on God without the need of such drastic measures. Still, we live every day in the midst of the terrible consequences of sin, and faithful people are caught in the middle. We may suffer even when we are not at fault. Let's continue to choose to serve God, not the fakes offered by those around us, even in a drought, whether physical or spiritual.

Determined God, one way or another, feed my soul. Help me to stay faithful so that I don't need drastic measures, but also help me stay faithful even when I am caught in the crossfire of troubles caused by sin. Let me be visibly, truly, Your child of integrity.

GOD spoke to him: “Get up and go to Zarephath in Sidon and live there. I’ve instructed a woman who lives there, a widow, to feed you.”

1 Kings 17:8, 9, *The Message*

Did you ever wonder how God “instructed her”? We usually think of the woman as having amazing faith, to go ahead and feed a wandering prophet with her own last bit of food, just because he asked. True, Elijah promised that God would care for her, but how did she know if he knew what he was talking about?

According to this text, God had already instructed the widow to feed Elijah. Perhaps she had a dream. Or maybe it was just an impression. Maybe she only had a vague idea, and didn’t know who, or even what it was that she would need to do.

Here is what we know: She was a woman who made a habit of listening to the Holy Spirit, even though most of those around her were worshiping Baal. She was probably a person who practiced hospitality to traveling strangers already. And when this man asked for a drink, even though there was very little water left in the whole country, she turned immediately to go and get him some.

It was only when he asked for food, too, that she hesitated. “I swear, as surely as your GOD lives, I don’t have so much as a biscuit. I have a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a bottle; you found me scratching together just enough firewood to make a last meal for my son and me. After we eat it, we’ll die.” But she must have been wondering, depending on what God had already told her, *Was this it? The job she was supposed to do for God?*

And when Elijah reassured her, she hesitated no longer; the miracle happened every day—just enough flour and oil to make a little flat bread for three people. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to keep them alive.

She shared, even though she had nothing. We tend to hold back when we feel poor. “I don’t have enough money for offering this week. I’ll give when I get more.” “I don’t have anything to share with ADRA, or with the homeless, or with the family on my block who were burned out. Maybe next time.”

She shared even though she had nothing. God had instructed her. Well, hmm . . . come to think of it, hasn’t He instructed us, too? Hasn’t He already asked us to share and work to bless others?

God of sharing and caring, give me the graciousness You have—the willingness to share my last crust. Or my last smile. Or my last half hour of time. Or my ability in math or help with housework. You have instructed me, and I am Your sharing child. I will listen, obey, and then share in the blessing that results.

Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”
“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied. 2 Kings, 2:9, NIV

Elijah had been a faithful prophet for God for many years. He had been worn out and exhausted by the demands and stress of dealing with Ahab and Jezebel, both of whom considered him a troublemaker just because he passed on God’s warnings concerning *their* troublesome choices. When he was depressed and discouraged, in the cave where God met him, not in wind, fire, or earthquake, but in the still, small voice, he told God he was the only faithful one left in Israel.

God told him to anoint a new king, and then to anoint someone to take over his job as prophet. Then He added, “And by the way, there are 7,000 people besides you who have never worshiped Baal” (1 Kings 19:10-18).

God knew Elijah was burned out, so he sent Elisha to help him and be trained by him. For some time the two men worked together. Then came the time Elijah was going to be taken up to heaven by God. Somehow, not only Elisha, but also all the prophets knew it. Elisha determined he wouldn’t leave the old prophet’s side. He wasn’t about to miss this.

All day he followed, while Elijah seemingly tried to get rid of him. When Elijah asked what he could do for him, Elisha asked for “a double portion of your spirit.” It’s a strange request. What does that mean, a double portion? Of course it was God’s spirit, not Elijah’s, but Elisha no doubt also meant he wanted to be faithful, as Elijah had.

He was certainly faithful that day. He never left Elijah’s side, and he was present when the fiery horses and chariots took Elijah to heaven. Elijah’s cloak, the symbol of his authority, stayed with Elisha, as if to show him that God would give him the same spirit of faithfulness. He did his first miracle moments later.

Is there a person in your life whose spirit you admire? Can you recognize the hand of God on that person, and do you want to “inherit” that same kind of spirit? You can look up to and learn from any godly person, and if you ask, God will give you that same spirit of discipline, faith, and power.

God Who sends the Holy Spirit to all who ask, I’m asking now. I don’t want to be *like* anyone else; I want to be myself, the Spirit-filled child of God You meant *me* to be. But I do admire and want to imitate the people I see around me who are faithfully following You. Help me to recognize that spirit and seek to follow it, and help me also to be aware of those who may be looking up to and imitating me! Make me worthy in Your Spirit.

“Father, if the prophet had asked you to do something hard and heroic, wouldn’t you have done it? So why not this simple ‘wash and be clean?’”

2 Kings 5:13, The Message

It didn’t take long for Elisha to become known as a great prophet, just like Elijah, even though he was clearly different in his own ways and temperament. One day, raiding parties from Aram made a raid on Israel and captured (among others no doubt) a young girl. She must have been so frightened. There was no telling what would be done with her.

But this young woman was blessed enough to end up as a maid to General Naaman’s wife. It could have been much worse!

Apparently her new owners treated her well, because when tragedy struck, she wanted to help. The general was ill, and not just ill, but deadly sick with the worst disease possible—the dreaded leprosy! The family was in mourning.

But the maid told her mistress, “It’s too bad General Naaman can’t meet the prophet of Samaria. He could heal him.”

There’s some faith for you!

It shows that this family took the word of even slaves seriously, because Mrs. Naaman told her husband, and he set out. He would try anything!

You know the story—Elisha told Naaman to wash in the Jordan, and Naaman was offended and would have gone right back home. But here is another hint that he treated his people well. The servants not only had the nerve to call him back and remonstrate with him, they called him “Father.” “You would have done a hard, noble thing! This is easy—it’s worth a try, isn’t it?”

So Naaman washed—five, six, seven times—skin like a baby. He wanted to pay Elisha, but the prophet wouldn’t let him. That’s because it wasn’t Elisha who healed him—it was God. And it wasn’t only through the word of Elisha, it was also through the word of a little slave girl.

Naaman gave his heart to God then and there. He asked God’s forgiveness in advance for the fact that he knew he would be required to go to the idol temple with his superior, and Elisha reassured him that God knew his heart.

Could we have done the same in the slave girl’s place? Would we want to help our oppressors? Easy to say, but do we, in fact, try to help those who oppress us in one way or another in our daily lives?

God of all nations, You loved idolatrous Naaman, You loved his wife and maid, You love me, and You love those people who drive me nuts! Help me never to imagine having enemies—only people who need Your love and help. May I pass on the experience of being Your child to all I meet.

“We shouldn’t be doing this! This is a day of good news and we’re making it into a private party! If we wait around until morning we’ll get caught and punished. Come on! Let’s go tell the news to the king’s palace!” 2 Kings 7:9, The Message

Four men huddled miserably against the outer wall of the city of Samaria, near the big main gates. They were starving and near death. No one offered to help, because they were lepers. On the other hand, no one bothered them, either. The city had been under siege for a long time now, so being outside the gates would have been very dangerous if they hadn’t been so sick; even soldiers were afraid to come near them.

The siege had lasted so long that people were dying, and anything remotely edible—things like field greens the animals ate, or even donkeys’ heads!—were incredibly expensive, if you could find them at all.

The lepers didn’t know that on that day, the prophet Elisha had told the king that the siege would end abruptly. They just knew they were going to die if they didn’t do something.

“Why sit here and wait to die?” one asked. “Let’s go down to the enemy camp and beg for mercy.”

“They’ll kill us!” said another.

“If they do, it will be better than slowly starving!” another pointed out.

So they made their way down the hill in the fading evening light. Imagine their astonishment to discover the whole camp deserted! Horses and donkeys still tied up, tents open, food and clothes everywhere, but not a soul around.

At first, all the lepers cared about was the food. They ate and ate. Then they started collecting valuables and hiding them. Then they realized how selfish they were being. There were starving people in the city, too. They should share the good news, even though most people had been unwilling to share with them.

So they did, and the city was saved.

Compared to God’s holiness, I’m a leper, infected with deadly and catching sinfulness. But I know some Good News. I know where there is food for the soul. Do you? Let’s share it.

Great Provider, You have shown us, Your ragged children, where to find Bread of Life and Water of the Spirit. We don’t want to keep it to ourselves. Show us how to share with other starving, tattered humans where they can find food for their souls.

“Come now, and let us reason together,” Says the LORD, “Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.”
Isaiah 1:18, NASB

There are four prophets in the Old Testaments that we call “major prophets.” These are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. It’s not so much that their messages are more important as that there are more of them. And because we have more of what they wrote, there are more relevant messages for us in those writings.

Isaiah, in particular, has so many chapters full of great messages that you could write ten big books and not study them all the way to the bottom. Two good stories to begin with are his call, found in Isaiah 6, and his main message, repentance, found first in Isaiah 1.

Isaiah’s call was more dramatic than many prophets’ calls were. He saw a vision of God the Father enthroned in His temple. God asked, “Who can we send?” Unlike most Biblical prophets, Isaiah didn’t argue or insist he wasn’t good enough. He just said, “Send me! I’ll go!” So God did. And his messages are still encouraging millions of people thousands of years later.

Especially that all-important topic: repentance.

Isaiah’s first chapter is a strong rebuke. Using Isaiah, God says that His people are inexcusably and unrepentantly evil. They think they can do anything they want, as long as they offer sacrifices according to all the picky rules. God says, “What makes you think I care about your sacrifices if you won’t give me your heart?”

Then He makes this touching invitation: “Come. Sit down. Let’s talk. You might think you’re incurable, unfixable, but I can make you clean and bright again, I promise. But you have to cooperate!” You can hear the longing in God’s voice. He doesn’t like to send angry denunciations, but sometimes it seems people don’t listen to anything else.

I don’t want to be like that. I love the thought of sitting down and talking quietly with God, even if it means crying with Him, admitting I’ve disobeyed and need my bloody sins bleached out again. I want to feel His arms around me once more, whispering, “Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for” (6:7, NIV).

High and mighty One, Your throne is eternal, and the earth is filled with Your glory! Touch my lips, purify me, send me to do the work You have for me to do. I have sinned, it’s true. I have fallen and stained the robe of righteousness You gave me. Please forgive, and cleanse, and hold me in Your arms of love, Your forgiven child.

Oh yes, people of Zion, citizens of Jerusalem, your time of tears is over. Cry for help and you’ll find it’s grace and more grace. The moment he hears, he’ll answer. Just as the Master kept you alive during the hard times, he’ll keep your teacher alive and present among you. Your teacher will be right there, local and on the job, urging you on whenever you wander left or right: “This is the right road. Walk down this road.” Isaiah 30:19-22, *The Message*

If repentance was one of Isaiah’s major messages, then the other side of that same message is restoration. God sent many harsh messages through Isaiah. Chapter 30 is a good example: “Doom, rebel children!” (Vs. 1). “This perverse way of life will be like a towering, badly built wall that . . . collapses” (Vs. 13). “A thousand of you will scatter before one attacker” (Vs. 17).

But He always ended with promises of restoration. Look at the last part of this chapter: “God. . . is waiting to be gracious to you” (Vs. 18). “Your time of tears is over” (Vs. 19). “God heals his people” (Vs. 26).

Isaiah clearly longed to stop scolding and call people to repentance and restoration. He insisted that God was eager for reconciliation; He was forever begging, *if only you would turn back to me!*

Isaiah is the one who wrote the famous verse, “They spread their wings and soar like eagles” (40:31).

He wrote, “You’ll go out in joy; you’ll be led into a whole and complete life*” (55:12). (*That’s what the word we translate “peace,” *shalom*, really means.)

He wrote the precious promises in chapter 58 to those who will stop backbiting and pointing fingers and rejoice in the gift of the Sabbath day.

I would *love* to be used by God for encouragement and comfort like that, wouldn’t you? I don’t like the rebuking part, but I’m deeply grateful that God’s rebukes never end there. He isn’t angry and looking to punish. He only says these hard things to help rebellious people turn back to Him, because He loves us so much and longs to show us compassion.

He, through Isaiah, ends this long book with the ultimate promise that He is making a new heaven and earth, where the memory of evil and all its consequences will never be forgotten, but evil itself will be gone forever!

Great Restorer, please begin with me. Restore my heart, then give me the grace to pass it on—to reassure the people I know who are feeling scolded and rebuked, who know they have made hurtful choices and are afraid that You are angry. Help me make it clear to them in words and in my own loving actions that You love even Your rebellious children, and the second You see us turning back toward You, You rush to us with open arms.

"Remember, O GOD, who I am, what I've done! I've lived an honest life before you, My heart's been true and steady, I've lived to please you; lived for your approval." And then the tears flowed. Hezekiah wept. 2 Kings 20:3, The Message

There must have been billions upon billions of people in the history of this world who have asked God to heal them from illness. Many of them have been healed by the healing properties God already built into our bodies and the healthy food we eat. Many more have been healed by the skills God has given doctors and other healthcare workers throughout the ages. And some have been healed miraculously.

Hezekiah was one of those who received a miracle. He was so ill that Isaiah told him he would die. But Hezekiah had tried so hard to be a good king. He still had many more plans. He didn't feel ready to die.

Still, his first reaction was prayer and tears. That's a good combination. We can always take our fears to God. Not everyone is as terrified of death as some people are, but nobody *wants* to die.

The interesting thing is, if you read Hezekiah's prayer carefully, you won't see a request for healing. While he is clearly unwilling to die, you get the impression that he expects to have to give in to it just the same.

Verse 4 says that Isaiah wasn't halfway across the courtyard when God sent him back to tell the king, "I've listened to your prayer and I've observed your tears. I'm going to heal you." God added fifteen years to Hezekiah's life.

If you could ask for extra time, would you? Would you want to know how long? What if you could know now, today, that you have, say, thirty years to live? What would you try to accomplish? Would it make a difference if you only had thirty days? What would you try to accomplish then?

I wonder how our lives would change if we made the commitment to live today as if it were our last on earth and we would meet God face to face at the end of it.

Restorer of life and health, whether spiritual or physical, You don't have to make the sundial shadow move for me. I know that it's already a miracle if I have today to live for you. I know what it is to be afraid, and I want my first reaction to be taking my tears and fears to You. But I also want to accept whatever days You have for me without complaining. Make me Your well, whole child, inside and out.

Now that he was in trouble, he went to his knees in prayer asking for help—total repentance before the God of his ancestors. As he prayed, GOD was touched; GOD listened and brought him back to Jerusalem as king. That convinced Manasseh that GOD was in control. 2 Chronicles 33:12, 13, The Message

The story of Manasseh, king of Judah, is very educational. If you look it up in 2 Kings 21, all you can read is that he wasn't just an evil king, he was a *very* evil king. Most of the evil kings of Israel and Judah, and there were many, are described in a few sentences or paragraphs. Manasseh's sins fill a whole chapter and spill over into a couple more. Not only does God call him "a bad king," He says that the reason the kingdom of Judah will be taken into captivity, as Israel was, is because of Manasseh's and his subjects' horrible sins.

Yet, if you look him up in 2 Chronicles 33 you find a good deal more of the story. And it's this story we want to look at.

Manasseh didn't just worship idols, he set them up *inside* God's own temple. He didn't just practice abominable worship to false gods, he sacrificed his own children to them. He practiced black magic, witchcraft, fortune-telling, astrology, and tried to communicate with evil spirits. And the Bible says he "made the Jerusalem streets flow with the innocent blood of his victims" (2 Kings 24:2).

Sounds like a hopeless case, doesn't it? Even when God tried to speak to him and to the people, "they ignored him" (2 Chron. 33:10). So God sent Assyrians. They raided the country, put the king in chains and a hook in his nose, and hauled him off to prison.

Remember the times we've said God doesn't like to do such harsh things, but only hopes people will repent? The proof is in our key text above. Manasseh repented. He really meant it, and God, who can read hearts, knew it. Did God forgive? Yes, of course. But did He also keep Manasseh where he was, where he deserved to be, facing consequences he had brought on himself? No. God actually brought Manasseh back to his throne and gave him another chance! You can read what Manasseh did with his second chance in 2 Chronicles 33:14-20. It's pretty amazing, isn't it? Not everyone who had followed him away from God would follow him back. But Manasseh did his best. His record for incredible evil still stands. But his repentance and God's incredible mercy is there too, for all ages to come.

Restorer of hearts, save me from such a career of evil! May my knowledge of this very story help me to remember that I can always turn in true repentance, and the sooner the better! I want my eternal record to show good, not evil, forgiveness, not rebellion. I want to be Your repentant, humbled child.

“Go and pray to GOD for me and what’s left of Israel and Judah. Find out what we must do in response to what is written in this book that has just been found! GOD’s anger must be burning furiously against us—our ancestors haven’t obeyed a thing written in this book of GOD, followed none of the instructions directed to us.” 2 Chronicles 34:21, The Message

Josiah’s is an interesting story, too. Just as Manasseh was more evil than other evil kings, so Josiah was godlier than other godly kings. Usually, ungodly kings are followed by even more ungodly sons, and righteous kings are followed by righteous sons. This is one of the exceptions.

Though Manasseh repented, his son followed in his earlier steps, not his later ones. He brought back the idols and did even more evil and never repented. In fact, he was so bad his own servants killed him and put his son in his place.

That son was Josiah. He was only eight years old and no doubt had a regent over him during his childhood, but he began to make good choices at a young age. During the early years of his reign, when he was between 16 and 26 years old, he not only cleaned up idols and false altars, he totally destroyed them, burning them and scattering their ashes. He even burned the bones of idolatrous priests. And he didn’t confine his work to Jerusalem, either. Josiah went all over the country doing this cleanup work. He also collected offerings to clean up and restore God’s temple, which was pretty much in ruins.

Here’s the interesting thing: Josiah didn’t even have scriptures to follow! When, during temple restoration, a book of the law was found and read to the young king, he tore his robes in dismay. It’s clear he’d never even heard of these laws. He had simply “sought the God of David his ancestor” (Vs. 3) as best he could understand.

Then, when he learned more, he followed that right away. And God honored him. His record stands as a king who “kept straight on the path blazed by his ancestor David, not one step to the left or right” (34:2).

I think this story holds a good lesson for people who perhaps weren’t raised in godly or even healthy ways. Even if your parents didn’t know God, or rejected Him, even if they died while you were small, you can still make your own good choices. You can determine to follow God to the best of your understanding, always ready to learn new light and follow that, too.

And God will honor you.

Restorer and Rebuilder, keep teaching me. Keep guiding me. Help me to do the things I know, to recognize Your new light when it comes to me and follow it, and to be a witness for good and grace in Your world. Make me your diligent child, who doesn’t quit until the job is done.

“Don’t say, ‘I’m only a boy.’ I’ll tell you where to go and you’ll go there. I’ll tell you what to say and you’ll say it. Don’t be afraid of a soul. I’ll be right there, looking after you.” Jeremiah 1:7, The Message

Jeremiah was called to be a prophet just a few years before Josiah found the scroll in the temple and learned just how badly the nation had been behaving before God. He, too, was young. Perhaps Josiah and Jeremiah were around the same age.

Jeremiah, like many who God calls (then and now), didn’t think he was up to what God was asking of him. If he could have seen ahead to the difficult and traumatic decades of his ministry, he would have been even more frightened at the whole idea. But God reminded him, “I’ll be right there, looking after you.” Neither Josiah nor Jeremiah needed strength and power. God had that. They just needed the will and faith to say yes to the call, which, according to God, had begun before birth!

By this time in the history of God’s chosen people, they were in really bad shape. The temple was in ruins, and the king himself didn’t even know the laws. The idolatrous shrines—which Josiah was in the process of finding and destroying—had mostly been set up by the kings themselves, including his own father and grandfather. God knew what was coming and warned Jeremiah the people would not listen to him, but he needed to “get dressed for work” (Vs. 17) and be faithful anyway.

Still, God began gently. He wanted to give the people every possible chance to repent. Some of Jeremiah’s first prophecies, such as those found in 2:1-3, a very moving passage, are tender and loving. “I remember your youthful loyalty, our love as newlyweds. You stayed with me through the wilderness years, stuck with me through all the hard places. Israel was God’s holy choice, the pick of the crop. Anyone who laid a hand on her would soon wish he hadn’t!”

God still longed for restoration. All he wanted was to clasp His beloved people to His heart. Would they listen?

God of beginnings and beginnings again, You knew me before you formed me inside my mother, too. Did You have a plan for me, even then? Do I know a little bit of what it is yet? Like Jeremiah, and maybe Josiah, I feel young and inadequate, too. I know I am Your child, but I don’t want to be childish! I want to hear Your call, know it’s You, and be faithful to it my whole life. I want to be one who passes on words of encouragement and restoration. I want to share, “God is calling. It’s not too late!” I want to be Your sent child.

“Because . . . you responded in humble repentance, tearing your robe in dismay and weeping before me, I’m taking you seriously. GOD’s word. I’ll take care of you; you’ll have a quiet death and be buried in peace. You won’t be around to see the doom that I’m going to bring upon this place and people.” 2 Chronicles 34:26, The Message

Jeremiah wasn’t the only prophet around during Josiah’s reign. When he first learned about the book of the law, and his scribe, Shaphan, read it to him, Josiah was horrified. He knew God had a right to be very angry, because His people hadn’t been obeying anything at all in this book for years and years.

So he sent for the nearest prophet. She happened to be Huldah, the wife of a man named Shallum, who took care of the king’s clothes.

It’s not an easy thing being a prophet of God. You so often have to give bad news. And it’s frequently to people of power, like kings and high officials. They could kill you, and sometimes they do. (More than one king was going to try to kill Jeremiah over the coming years!)

But Huldah had some good news after her bad news. First, she said, “You’re right—God has had it with the continual disobedience and bold-faced rebellion. He’s on His way to execute judgment. The curses for disobedience you saw in that scroll are definitely in force.” Like Jeremiah, she knew, as a true prophet, that what we now call the Babylonian captivity was in the near future.

But then Huldah added, “God says, ‘You, Josiah, are different. I’ve seen how you are spending a lot of time, energy, and money cleaning up the land. You have taken me seriously, so I’ll take you seriously. I’ll take care of you, and you’ll have a peaceful death and burial. These horrible things won’t happen while you’re alive to see them.’”

Josiah must have had mixed feelings when he received this message. It was good that he wouldn’t have to see it, but these were his people! Maybe he could influence some of them, at least. Maybe there would be others who would repent, to whom God would grant a quiet life and peaceful death. In verses 30-33, the Bible records that King Josiah “acted immediately,” calling the entire country to the temple and sharing the book with them. He committed himself to follow and made them do so, too. And look at those last two verses: “Josiah . . . got everyone started fresh again, serving and worshiping their GOD. All through Josiah’s life the people kept to the straight and narrow, obediently following GOD . . .”

Just think what the story would have been like if the rest of the kings had done the same!

Great giver of the word of restoration, thank You for Your mercy! Give me, like Huldah, encouraging words. Let me, Your child, speak for You.

“As soon as Babylon’s seventy years are up and not a day before, I’ll show up and take care of you as I promised and bring you back home. I know what I’m doing. I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for.”
Jeremiah 29:10, The Message

The years passed, and Josiah and his subjects followed God until Josiah died, but most people hadn’t been following with their whole hearts and quickly fell away. We know this because about four and a half years later, Jeremiah gave the people this message from God: “From the thirteenth year of Josiah . . . right up to the present day—twenty-three years it’s been!—God’s Word has come to me, and from early each morning to late every night I’ve passed it on to you. And you haven’t listened to a word of it! . . . Because you have refused to listen to what I’ve said, . . . I’m sending for . . . Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon . . . The whole landscape will be one vast wasteland. These countries will be in subjection to the king of Babylon for seventy years” (Quotes from vs. 3-11).

Seventy years! Can you imagine it? This book is for 2011, so if a prophet said that to us, and if it began right away, it would last until 2081! But in fact, it didn’t begin right away. There were still some years of Jeremiah’s prophesying, and his life became one long battle from that point. Nobody believed him, nobody wanted to hear his messages, and some people even tried to shut him up by killing him.

The one thing they didn’t try was repentance.

So God simply held fast to His way. It broke His heart, but He knew it was the only way He was going to get *some* of His children back. Jeremiah remained steadfast, and the faithful few, like Daniel and his friends, remained steadfast, and God remained steadfast.

When people begged God to change it, He basically said, “Don’t even ask! Pray for Babylon’s peace, because that’s where you will live. No one will come home until your grandchildren’s time, and in the meantime, the land you’ve misused will rest. Seventy years! Not a day sooner!”

It makes me think of God’s children stuck here on this sinful planet. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately) we don’t have a date for Jesus’ return. We just know we have to stay, pray for the peace of this world, and work to take care of it and each other as best we can—because for now, this is where we’re stuck. And God has a plan.

Lord of time, I can’t see seven minutes into the future, let alone seventy years! I hope it’s not that long until You come back! In the meantime, help me to be your steadfast child, holding Your light, calling myself and others to repentance and watching for Your deliverance.

God gave these four young men knowledge and skill in both books and life. In addition, Daniel was gifted in understanding all sorts of visions and dreams. At the end of the time set by the king for their training, the head of the royal staff brought them in to Nebuchadnezzar. When the king interviewed them, he found them far superior to all the other young men. None were a match for Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Daniel 1:17-19, The Message

The time of doom had come. For more years than Daniel had been alive, Jeremiah and other prophets had warned unceasingly that God's patience had run out, and if the people did not repent and mean it, Babylon was coming. Well, it had come. Powerful King Nebuchadnezzar had led the armies into Jerusalem and Judah and laid the land to waste. Wailing and terrified, long lines of survivors, captured instead of killed, were driven to Babylon in chains.

Among one of the waves of captives were four young men who had been born into noble families. Nebuchadnezzar believed in consolidating his power by allying heads of houses from his enemy states with his own court. It worked well for people who craved fame, power, and influence. They would want Nebuchadnezzar to succeed, because their success depended on his.

Daniel and his friends desired none of the above.

So when the court officials offered the favor of rich food from the king's own supplies, they politely declined, and asked for the simple food they had been used to. They offered themselves as guinea pigs for an experiment.

"Try us," urged Daniel. "Give us a ten days' trial. Then you decide."

Of course, you know the end of the story.

The question is, have you ever tried the ten day trial yourself? Have you ever given ten days to eating nothing but fresh food prepared as close to its source as possible, drinking nothing but water, and watching to see what the result would be? It would be very interesting to see if work, study, or play came more easily. Might you have more creative ideas at work? Might you sleep better and have more energy? Maybe you'd even get better grades, if you're still in school! (Though that might take longer than ten days.)

The Bible says Daniel and his friends stayed on this diet. It wasn't just an experiment. It was how they liked to live. And look how that turned out!

Creator God, I guess You really care about this body You gave me, even if it isn't the perfect one You meant for me to have. I'm looking forward to having the ideal one You'll give me someday, but in the meantime, help me to take good care of this one. I choose to be Your healthy child.

Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king's command, and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God." Daniel 3:28, NASB

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah exchanged nervous glances. This was going to be dangerous. "I wish Daniel was here," whispered one.

King Nebuchadnezzar had had his craftsmen working for weeks on an enormous gold statue of himself. It was 90 feet high and 9 feet thick, bigger than any idol the three young men had ever seen. Nebuchadnezzar really thought he was something special.

Now he had set the giant thing up on the plain of Dura, where it glistened blindingly in the sun. He had called all the officials and important people in the whole province to come to a great dedication ceremony, and he had gathered a huge band of an amazing variety of musical instruments. When the music began, everyone was to fall to their knees and worship the image.

The young men took deep breaths as the cacophony of music began. They whispered silent prayers and stood straight and still. It might be the last thing they ever did, and they knew it.

You've probably heard the story all your life. But have you ever *really* tried to imagine how frightening it would be to stand tall like that? Have you ever stood tall for something you knew was right?

As the men were hustled toward the angry king, they kept praying. King Nebuchadnezzar liked them and gave them another chance. But they said simply, "The God we serve can rescue us from your roaring furnace and anything else you might cook up, O king. But even if he doesn't, it wouldn't make a bit of difference, O king. We still wouldn't serve your gods or worship the gold statue you set up."

End of story. Except it wasn't. As they were hauled toward the hot furnace, they expected to die, and only hoped it would be quick and merciful. But instead of death, they met Jesus! I wonder what He told them.

Our text today is a quote from the Babylonian king himself. He was taking the first step toward a life of faith he never expected. And it wouldn't have happened if four young men hadn't stood tall, even though they thought they would die for it.

Faithful Deliverer, You stepped out of Your throne room to come and share those young men's punishment. While You were at it, You taught a pagan king and lots of watchers an important lesson. I want to be Your steadfast child, too. I want to stand tall for the right, even if You don't rescue me. But I hope you will . . .

"It is my privilege to report to you the gracious miracles that the High God has done for me. His miracles are staggering, his wonders are surprising. His kingdom lasts and lasts, his sovereign rule goes on forever." Daniel 4:1, 2, The Message

Daniel 4 is one of the most amazing chapters in the Bible. First of all, it's in letter form. But there are lots of those, like the letters Paul wrote in the New Testament. There aren't any more written by a once pagan, idolatrous king, though!

Nebuchadnezzar had been passing through some astonishing experiences. He had been strongly influenced for some years now by some of the nobles he'd brought to his court from that little country of Judah. First they ate funny food, and oddly enough, were stronger and smarter than anyone. Then they interpreted his dreams. Then they refused to worship his idol, and when he tried to execute them for it, he saw a human-like form walking around with them in the fire as if it were a picnic on a nice spring day! He had started respecting their God, even though he didn't really commit himself.

Then one day he had a dream. Of course, Daniel interpreted it for him. But by now Daniel had come to respect and maybe even love the monarch, and he was reluctant to tell Nebuchadnezzar that it was a dream of strong warning from God. Daniel gathered his courage and begged the king earnestly, "Make a clean break with your sins and start living for others. Quit your wicked life and look after the needs of the down-and-out. Then you will continue to have a good life" (Vs. 27).

Nebuchadnezzar must have done better for a while, because things went well for a year. But then he fell back into his old arrogance. Read for yourself the amazing thing that happened next in verses 29-33.

Some people take a knock on the head to see the light. Nebuchadnezzar did. If you read the praise with which he ends the letter that became Daniel 4, it looks as though he really did become converted to the true God once and for all. He ends: "And that's why I'm singing—I, Nebuchadnezzar—singing and praising the King of Heaven: Everything he does is right, and he does it the right way. He knows how to turn a proud person into a humble man or woman" (Vs. 36, 37).

He does, indeed. King Nebuchadnezzar would know!

Most High God Who lives forever, I stand in awe of Your ability to get through the armor of even an idolatrous pagan king who thought he was a god on earth, himself. If You ever see that kind of arrogance and pride in me, You have my permission to do whatever is necessary to cut it out of me! I'd rather be Your faithful witness, like Daniel and his friends.

"There is a man in your kingdom who is full of the divine Holy Spirit. During your father's time he was well known for his intellectual brilliance and spiritual wisdom. He was so good that your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, made him the head of all the magicians, enchanters, fortunetellers, and diviners. There was no one quite like him. He could do anything—interpret dreams, solve mysteries, explain puzzles . . . Have Daniel called in. He'll tell you what is going on here."

Daniel 5:11, 12, The Message

Daniel might have thought he was an old man. He was getting along in years, certainly. It had been many years since he was taken to Babylon, and he was apparently now in retirement. At least, it seems that way from the way the queen, or queen mother, spoke to Belshazzar of him.

Belshazzar was apparently co-ruling with his father, Nabonidus, at this time. Nabonidus was in a different city and had left Babylon in Belshazzar's charge.

You can see what a good job Belshazzar was making of it in the first part of this chapter in Daniel. He was throwing a big, drunken party, and not only that, he was using the sacred vessels from God's temple at Jerusalem to drink out of.

The disembodied hand he saw writing unknown words on his wall scared him sober right away!

Following the queen's advice, Belshazzar called faithful old Daniel to court and promised him all kinds of rewards if he could interpret the writing. Daniel had told the truth to kings much more powerful and dangerous than this one would ever be and wasn't impressed. "Keep your gifts, but what it means is that you've been judged, and your story is about over."

Even as they spoke, Cyrus was digging under the walls, diverting the River Euphrates, and getting ready to march into the city unimpeded.

Belshazzar, to his credit, did promote and reward Daniel, even though the interpretation was a negative one. But by morning he was dead, and Daniel was back on the job in a new administration. God wasn't finished with His faithful son. There were still a couple of kings to go before Daniel rested.

I hope you and I will be found faithful till the end of our days, no matter how many or few they may be.

Faithful Watcher, You know the services we render, small or great. You were watching Daniel and knew that he was still faithful to You, though he was no longer in the public eye. I want to be Your faithful child, too.

Esther, just as she was, won the admiration of everyone who saw her. Esther 2:15, The Message

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Hadassah, which means “myrtle,” an evergreen shrub with star-like flowers and leaves that produce a fragrant essential oil. It’s a beautiful name, and Hadassah was a beautiful girl. Not just to look at, but gentle and beautiful in spirit, which is what counts most.

We don’t really know very much about Hadassah. Several generations earlier, her family had been taken to Babylon with the first group of captives. Her parents had died when she was young, and her older cousin, Mordecai, had taken her in and raised her.

We can figure out some things about her, though. First, in Esther 2:9, 10, we are told that Hegai, the man in charge of the young women, “took a special interest in her. Right off he started her beauty treatments, ordered special food, assigned her seven personal maids from the palace, and put her and her maids in the best rooms in the harem.”

Of course, if he was trying to find the perfect new wife for his king, this could have been only because of her physical beauty, but if it was that at first, it clearly became more. Reading between the lines, it appears that Hadassah was known among the women and those who cared for them as being gentle and humble.

She appears to have been the kind of person who submitted her judgment to those she trusted. She didn’t say anything about her background or the fact that she was a Jew “because Mordecai told her not to.” When her turn came to go before the king, she asked for nothing “other than what Hegai . . . had recommended” (Vs. 15).

Then there’s the fact that King Ahasuerus “fell in love with Esther far more than with any of his other women or any of the other virgins—he was totally smitten by her” (Vs. 17). This was a jaded, experienced monarch who had known many women. It would take something special to please him so much.

How humble, gentle, and teachable are we?

Do we submit our judgment to those we trust?

Do people around us find us easy to like?

Faithful Father of us all, I would like to be Your obedient, gentle, humble, and inwardly beautiful child, like Hadassah. But I also want to stand up for the truth even in difficult circumstances. Help me to know when and how to tell the truth and to always be loving either way.

Every day Mordecai strolled beside the court of the harem to find out how Esther was and get news of what she was doing. Esther 2:7, 11, The Message

Hadassah was known by the Persian form of her name, Esther, now. In fact, she was now Queen Esther, and as far above Mordecai as the stars of the sky. But to Mordecai, she would always be his sweet little Hadassah.

Every day, probably for several years (years that seemed like centuries to Mordecai), he had taken a casual walk along the courtyard outside the king’s harem, hoping for news of Esther. He probably never *saw* her at all, unless maybe she ever accompanied her husband out of the palace on a special occasion, and likely, even then, she was hidden inside a curtained sedan chair carried by slaves.

But they’d kept up a bit of communication. It was through Esther that Mordecai had let the king know of a plot against his life, in time for the king’s bodyguards to foil the plot and save the king.

They must have exchanged bits of news when they could, through notes or messages sent by servants.

No doubt quite a few of the palace servants, at least those connected with the women’s areas, knew that Mordecai wasn’t really casually strolling. He was looking for news of Esther.

When Hadassah had been a little girl and her parents died, Mordecai saw it as his duty to take care of her. He didn’t have to do it with love. But he did. When she was a young woman and was taken away by the palace officials, he could have let her go or stayed home and wept. But he didn’t. He continued to try to gain news of her. Now that she was grown, the wife of a powerful man, he could have considered his duty to her complete. Certainly, since she had found favor and was the queen of the land, he might have thought he could no longer give anything she would need.

But I believe that family is deeply important to us. God made us that way. I believe that God honored Mordecai’s faithfulness to his charge, but more than that, I believe Esther depended on his love and support, just as when she was a child.

And of course we know, though they didn’t, that soon the fate of an entire nation would hang on this faithful relationship.

Loving Caregiver, You are always faithful. You watched over the child Hadassah and over the queen Esther. You watched over Mordecai, especially in his loneliness. You watch over me and mine, as well. As your caring child, I want to be faithful to my family and to all those I love.

“Go and get all the Jews living in Susa together. Fast for me. Don’t eat or drink for three days, either day or night. I and my maids will fast with you. If you will do this, I’ll go to the king, even though it’s forbidden. If I die, I die.” Esther 4:15, 16, The Message

Esther sat in silence near the window, looking out on the courtyard. She could see a tree and a bird singing, but she didn’t notice. Her eyes were not focused on anything in the physical world.

She hadn’t eaten in three days and nights. Neither had her maids. And she knew that the hundreds of Jews in the city, and perhaps some in the nearby countryside, had fasted, too. She had prayed as desperately as ever in her life.

And now, today was the day. Today she would dress up in her finest robes, put on her best perfume, say good-bye to her maids, and go to the king. And he might well have her killed.

This might be her last day.

She didn’t have the strength. She knew that for sure. So . . . God would just have to give her His.

Carefully, she prepared herself. Her maids, knowing the danger, were weeping.

Esther’s heart was beating so hard she felt she would faint as she walked to the inner courtyard before the throne room. She saw the king’s head turn, saw his eyes widen.

God of my fathers . . .

He smiled. The golden scepter reached toward her. For a second, she couldn’t react. She barely heard what he said. Then, feeling even more faint with relief, she gave her carefully rehearsed speech. “If it please the king . . . let the king come with Haman to a dinner I’ve prepared for him” (Esther 5:4).

This was just the first step in a painstakingly organized campaign. But the worst was over. And perhaps, just perhaps, God would hear the prayers of the people and save their lives. He had saved her life, so far. Maybe Mordecai was right, and she had become queen “for just such a time as this.”

I often wonder, when I read stories like this, if I would have had the courage. What would it feel like to be walking down the corridor of a palace, not knowing if you were about to be killed? Or knowing that the fate of your people rests on you?

God of all courage, You gave Esther heart and strength, in part through the courage and support showed by her family, her friends, and her people who didn’t even know her. May I be your courageous child, offering that kind of love and support to those around me going through trials and fears. Be with me in my own troubles, too.

From Cyrus king of Persia, a Proclamation: GOD, the God of the heavens, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has also assigned me to build him a Temple of worship in Jerusalem, Judah. Who among you belongs to his people? God be with you! Go to Jerusalem which is in Judah and build The Temple of GOD, the God of Israel, Jerusalem’s God. Ezra 1:2, 3, The Message

Seventy years, Jeremiah had said. Build houses, live in them, give your sons and daughters in marriage. Pray for the peace of Babylon; it’s going to be home for a while.

At the very end of 2 Chronicles, the writer reports: “Any survivor was taken prisoner into exile in Babylon . . . The exile and slavery lasted until the kingdom of Persia took over. This is exactly the message of GOD that Jeremiah had preached: the desolate land put to an extended Sabbath rest, a seventy-year Sabbath rest making up for all the unkept Sabbaths” (36:20, 21).

One of God’s jobs is to be the great Time Keeper, the Watcher of human affairs and Manager of prophecies. Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar, God is the one who sets up kings and dethrones them. God had said, “Seventy years. Not a minute less. Don’t even ask.”

But throughout those warnings had been scattered promise after promise, as well. “Don’t be afraid. I’ll bring you back.” And when that time came, God called on Cyrus to make the proclamation, called on Ezra the scribe and Nehemiah the priest to lead the people home, and called on repentant people to go home and rebuild.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah wrote down the stories. In Ezra 1:5, 6, we are told that heads of households, priests, Levites, and “everyone whose spirit God had stirred” (NASB) packed up and walked home. What a company that must have been! What songs of joy and excitement! They had years of difficulty and hard work ahead of them, but they were *home!*

We still have some of those songs. Psalm 126 is an example. Here is part of it: “It seemed like a dream, too good to be true, when GOD returned Zion’s exiles. We laughed, we sang, we couldn’t believe our good fortune . . . GOD was wonderful to us; we are one happy people.”

Ezra and Nehemiah had been in Babylon their whole lives. They’d had jobs and families and houses. Now they had whole new tasks—whole new identities. History had knocked on their doors, and they were ready. Now their names are known forever.

Holy Watcher of the stream of time, I feel like a little leaf blown along on the current. I don’t know what’s going to happen today, let alone tomorrow. I’m glad I know You and know that You are watching with love. You have plans for me, Your waiting, watching child.

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them . . . For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace.

Isaiah 9:2, 6, 7, NASB

Once the nation of God's people had lived under the rule of Babylon for seventy years, they never committed idolatry again. Over the centuries, they had strayed so many times. So many times, God had let them face consequences. So many times they'd wailed, "Sorry! Sorry! We'll never do it again! Save us!" And He would, and they'd do it again. But after Babylon . . . no more.

Instead, they began to stray in the opposite direction.

Before, they'd mingled with their neighbors and done everything (immorality, idolatry, etc.) the neighbors did. Now they wouldn't mingle at all. They took that word, "chosen" and began to apply it in a way God never intended. "We're the Chosen Ones. We're better. You're dogs. We're not even going to touch you!"

Before, they'd made graven images and bowed to them. Now they couldn't even have pictures. Not of anything.

Before, they'd trampled the Sabbath. Now, they made up hundreds of picky rules like: don't carry burdens (like your hanky); don't write (not even two letters); don't take journeys (2,000 steps is the limit, so be sure you count.)

But they tithed! That was good, right? They counted out even their seeds and gave every tenth one to God. To the temple, that is, not to people who had no food and could have planted them.

For the approximately 400 years between the events of the Old Testament and the New Testament, these shadows grew and grew. Ellen White says that "faith had grown dim, and hope had well-nigh ceased to illuminate the future . . . With longing eyes they looked for the coming of the Deliverer, when the darkness should be dispelled, and the mystery of the future should be made plain (DA 32).

They waited.

We wait, too. We, too, long for the coming of the Deliverer and the light that dispels darkness. What will you do today to share a little light while we all wait for the Great Light?

Manager of time and prophecies, we wait. We watch. We hope. We long for deliverance. In the meantime, I want to be Your light-bearing, light-sharing child.

"Don't fear, Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you . . . He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God." Luke 1:13, 16, The Message

During the shadow times of what we call the "intertestamental period" (between Old and New), there were still many faithful people who "lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God" (Luke 1:6). Zecharias and Elizabeth were two of them.

Zecharias was a priest, and one day while he was taking his turn at the altar of incense, an angel showed up! Zecharias must have nearly had a heart attack! So the angel (Gabriel) said what angels always say first, "Don't be afraid." Then Gabriel proceeded to give Zecharias news that was too good to believe. He was going to have a son! After all these years! They'd given up on that long ago.

You know the story—Zecharias didn't believe it. The angel rebuked him and told him if he didn't believe good news when he heard it, he wouldn't be able to pass it on, either. He would be mute from now until the child was born.

When he came out of the temple, the people knew something had happened, but he couldn't explain it. He must have written the story for Elizabeth. Of course, she did get pregnant, and Zecharias was able to speak again once he had written on a tablet, "His name is John," the name the angel had given him.

What Zecharias and Elizabeth didn't know, though Gabriel did give them a hint of it in the prophecy, was that John was the one prophesied by Isaiah who would clear the way for the Messiah to come. In other words, John was the first step toward the bright light that would shine into the darkness of people's lives, then and forever.

Are we like Zecharias and Elizabeth, living honorably before God, carefully keeping the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience? Are we ready to recognize the first beams of light God shines into our lives? Or would we argue even if an archangel came to tell us about it?

God sends light to us all the time, in small ways and large. Some are for us individually, some are to share with our family, friends, or church, and some are for the whole world. Are we helping to prepare the way?

God most high, our days may be like seconds to You, but still You count them and keep track. You know the fullness of time for each and every event we wait and watch for. And You're always sending light. May we, your honorable children, listen, believe, accept, and share.

When the course of his priestly assignment was completed, he went back home. It wasn't long before his wife, Elizabeth, conceived. She went off by herself for five months, relishing her pregnancy. "So, this is how God acts to remedy my unfortunate condition!" she said. Luke 1:23-25, The Message

Elizabeth went to the door to see who was coming. It had been a quiet few months, with no talk and laughter with Zecharias, such as she was used to. But the time was shortening now, and she believed her husband would speak again after the baby was born. In the meantime, she was so deeply happy and content that nothing bothered her.

"Mary!" Elizabeth was delighted to receive her young relative. But before she could say anything else, the second Mary called out her own greeting. Elizabeth felt something startling. The baby within her, who was big enough now to keep her awake at night sometimes, suddenly gave a great leap, and Elizabeth had an astonishing inspiration from the Holy Spirit. She knew why Mary was coming and what news she wanted to tell her.

"You're so blessed among women," she cried out, "and the babe in your womb, also blessed! And why am I so blessed that the mother of my Lord visits me? The moment the sound of your greeting entered my ears, the babe in my womb skipped like a lamb for sheer joy. Blessed woman, who believed what God said, believed every word would come true!" (Luke 1:42-45).

Elizabeth would know. She had experienced the consequences of her husband's unwillingness to believe. We aren't told whether she herself had any difficulty accepting God's promise. But she knew firsthand the blessing of believing.

Mary needed that reassurance, too. She would be facing some trouble at home, though she didn't know how much. She didn't know, for instance, that Joseph would try to put her away. But she knew her neighbors would know she had become pregnant while still unmarried, and it would probably haunt her.

The first beams of light were appearing, but only to a few chosen people at this point. The masses of people still went about their daily lives, waiting and longing for deliverance. These babies would have to do a lot of growing. But two sets of parents, at least, one young and one old, knew that God was moving. The prophecies were falling into line, stirring, ready to come to pass.

It was dawn, at long, long last.

Keeper of the stars, You cycle the seasons and bring about Your purpose. 4,000 years had passed from the promise in the Garden. 2,000 more have passed now. I am straining my eyes, watching the eastern sky, waiting for the dawning. Let me be a truth-bearing child, like Elizabeth and Mary, believing every word You say, and reaching out to those around me in encouragement.

"I'm bursting with God-news; I'm dancing the song of my Savior God. God took one good look at me, and look what happened—I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!" Luke 1:46-48, The Message

Mary didn't think she was breathing. She could feel her heart pounding and her face getting hot and red. She took a gasp of air and blinked her eyes, but the shining one was still there.

He said, "Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out! God be with you" (Luke 1:28).

Mary couldn't say anything, and the angel continued, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus" (Vs. 31). He explained that her son would rule "the throne of his father, David," forever (Vs. 32).

Mary didn't know what he was talking about, but she knew one thing. She was not yet married. "But . . . how?"

Gabriel told her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest hover over you; therefore, the child you bring to birth will be called Holy, Son of God." As if for reassurance, he added that Elizabeth was pregnant, too (Vs. 35, 36).

And so it happened. It wasn't easy for Mary, especially when her own betrothed, Joseph, didn't believe her at first and wanted to cancel the wedding. But it was all worth it in a cold stable in Bethlehem, when she held her tiny baby in her arms for the first time.

And just in case, in the ordinarieness of the moment—just another birth in a busy town—she and Joseph might be tempted to forget the specialness of this Child and the prophecies around Him, angel choirs sang over Him, shepherds came unexpectedly out of the surrounding hills to worship Him, and later, strange, noble-looking men from the east came to worship, too, and bring rich gifts.

It's as if God wanted to shout to the world, ***"Now!! This is it! The time I've planned and promised since before time began! Wake up, world! THE LIGHT IS HERE!"***

Planner, Promiser, Redeemer, there are no words big enough for You! You had it all planned even before You created this world. You knew what to do when Eve and Adam failed. You knew what to do when people through the centuries refused to listen. You knew when the right time had come. You know what to do with and for and through me, too. "I'm the Lord's [willing child], ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say."

Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced. Matthew 1:19, The Message

Joseph had a call from God; he just didn't know it yet. I've had that problem.

In the Bible, prophets usually had visions, or heard God's voice, or something, telling them they had been chosen for some difficult task. They usually hesitated, too. But in our day, our calls don't often come so obviously. There is some circumstance that seems to ask for an action on our part, and we often hesitate, too. It's not necessarily that we hesitate to do what God asks of us (though it may also be that.) The thing is, we're often not sure whether this call *is* from God.

Joseph had the same problem. He found out Mary was pregnant, but didn't, apparently, believe her explanation that it was from the Holy Spirit. He didn't realize this was a call from God to spend the rest of his life doing an exceedingly important task for Him.

You can tell a lot about his character by his plans. Instead of having Mary disgraced publicly, or even calling for her to be stoned as an adulterer, he planned to "put her away quietly." He may have even, at this point, felt *this* to be a call from God—to treat her kindly even though she had supposedly sinned.

So God made things more clear for Joseph. He sent him an angel, too, but in a dream instead of visibly during the day. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said reassuringly, "don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—'God saves'—because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20, 21).

Here's the thing about Joseph: "He did exactly what God's angel commanded" (Vs. 24).

Once we figure out what it is God wants us to do, do we still hesitate, or do we do exactly what He asks? (Even if it seems impossible.) Do we argue like Moses and Jeremiah, explaining to God that we're too young, too inexperienced, too whatever? Or do we accept, like Isaiah, saying, "Send me!" Or like Joseph—few words, just action—do we simply do exactly what God says? Our styles and personalities are different. We may analyze and question, or we may be simple and practical. That's good, and it's why God calls one person instead of another to a particular task. But our faith and obedience can be the same. We can all choose not to hesitate, once we understand.

Bender and shaper of time and lives, today is "the fullness of time" for something. If You need me, ask. Make it clear to me, please. I am your willing child, and I want to be of service.

"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." Matthew 2:2, NASB

We've heard the story so many times that we've forgotten how weird it is. If some New Age astrologers showed up at General Conference Headquarters and told the leaders of the people, "We've seen in the stars that the second coming of Jesus is near; where do we go to learn more?" I wonder what the reaction would be. That's kind of like what happened here.

Some "magi," another word for magicians and astrologers, or "wise men," another word for thinkers and philosophers, or "kings," which probably meant they looked like powerful nobles, showed up in Jerusalem with the message in our focus text. King Herod referred the question to the priests and leaders, who knew the answer to the question very well. "Bethlehem," they said, and quoted the prophet Micah on the subject. You'll notice *they* weren't out looking for the Messiah, though.

In heading for Bethlehem, the wise men picked up the trail of their star again, and they did find the baby and His family, who had moved into a house now that the rush of the census was over, and were probably waiting for Mary to completely recover from a long, difficult trip and a recent birth (likely some months earlier) before going home. Perhaps they had run out of travel money and Joseph was working locally to save up. But we don't know that.

Here's what we do know: these men were honest seekers. Honest enough to stop talking and thinking and discussing and go. They didn't know much about Jewish prophecies, though they probably had access to Daniel's writings. After all, he had lived and written in their area of the world. And he was the one and only prophet who gave the exact timing of the birth of "Messiah the Prince" (Dan. 9:25, 26). They asked questions, learned what they could, and acted on what they learned. And they took the news of the Messiah's birth back home with them.

Here's what else we know. Mary and Joseph had enough money to travel on now! Though they didn't go home. They had to hide out in Egypt until old Herod was dead.

If you have friends who have different beliefs, do you respectfully listen and answer their questions when you can? Are you willing to learn from them, too? The Jerusalem priests could have learned a lot from the wise men . . .

Keeper of the stars, You know who is truly seeking with an open heart, and You know how to lead them to answers. You know that I am seeking, too, that I don't pretend to know all the answers or to be smarter than anyone around me. I am Your seeking child. Lead me to You.

There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light. John 1:6-8, The Message

“He was there to show the way to the Light.” I like that. I think that’s what we’re all here for. John was a man who knew his mission and took it seriously. He was self-denying and self-taught, studying the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Messiah, whose messenger John was meant to be.

He had apparently never met Jesus, though they were near relatives. It could have been seen as some sort of scheme cooked up between the two of them—if they’d been friends, and then John started preaching, “The Lamb of God is here!”

But he said the Holy Spirit had told him that when he saw the Spirit coming down on a man and staying there, that was the One. And he testified honestly to that when he did see it.

He had been preaching for some time, telling the people to repent, because God’s new kingdom was close, right in among them. The leaders from Jerusalem actually took him seriously enough to send a delegation asking him who he was. Was he the Messiah? Elijah? “The Prophet?” No, said John, no, no, and no.

“Then who are you?” they demanded.

John replied, “I’m thunder in the desert: ‘Make the road straight for God!’ I’m doing what the prophet Isaiah preached.”

“Well, then why are you baptizing?”

“I only baptize using water,” John told them. “A person you don’t recognize has taken his stand in your midst. He comes after me, but he is not in second place to me. I’m not even worthy to hold his coat for him.”

And the very next day, there He was!

Kingdom Bringer, I haven’t been given the same call as John the Baptist. My job for You won’t be as dramatic. I certainly won’t get to baptize the Son of God! Yet, in a way, I do have the same call. I, too, am called to shout into the desert of busy earthly life, “Make way for God!” I, too, am to tell people the kingdom is near—right here! And I, too, am a son or daughter of God. Who knows? I may someday be called to baptize other sons and daughters of God. In the meantime, I want to be a son or daughter who is known for telling the truth, standing up for the kingdom, and bringing it ever closer.

“Come, see for yourself.” John 1:46, The Message

As the song says, “It only takes a spark.” No sooner had John baptized and announced Jesus than two of his disciples left him and followed Jesus instead, which was as it should be, as John himself pointed out in John 3:30.

Then one of those two, Andrew, hurried to find his brother, Peter. “Come quick! You’ve got to see this! We’ve found the *Messiah*!”

Can you even imagine? It would be like someone telling you they’d seen Jesus coming again, except that this time we know we’ll all be able to see it at once. But try to imagine how excited you’d be!

We’re not given Peter’s reaction, but knowing him, he either doubted at first and went only to see if his brother knew what he was talking about, or dropped everything and went off in great excitement. Peter wasn’t known for doing things half-heartedly.

Then Jesus found Philip, and Philip passed the news on to his friend, Nathanael. “We’ve found the One Moses wrote of in the Law, the One preached by the prophets. It’s Jesus, Joseph’s son, the one from Nazareth!”

Nathanael said, “Nazareth? You’ve got to be kidding.”

But Philip said, “Come, see for yourself” (1:45, 46).

Which is a good answer, by the way. Today, we can’t tell our friends to come here or there to physically see Jesus. But we can and should invite them to experience for themselves what it feels like to have a close relationship with Him. Our words are not sufficient, and if they just agree with us, and “believe” because we say so, they are not any closer to God.

That’s not faith.

Neither did these men have full-blown faith, yet. The first two came out of curiosity and because they trusted John the Baptist. The others came to see because they trusted their brother and friend. Nathanael said, “My Lord and my God!” because Jesus knew he’d been under a fig tree. Jesus basically told him, “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

But they came. They came to see for themselves and to learn more. And as we know, they stayed. They, in turn, called others. And a few years later, they turned the world upside down.

Kingdom Bringer, You invited John’s disciples, “Come and see.” They invited others, “Come and see.” You ask me, “Come and see.” I can ask still others, “Come and see.” To all of us who come, who seek, who thirst for Your righteousness and wholeness, show Yourself, I beg. We need to know You’re *here*—beside us, walking with us, making Your children citizens of Your new kingdom.

Jesus answered and said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.” John 4:13, 14, NASB

Women in the holy land used to carry water in great big stoneware jars or pitchers. These jars weighed a lot—even empty. Filled with water, they weighed a lot more. The women let down buckets, pulled them up with a rope, filled their jars, hefted them onto their shoulders, and carried them back home.

It wasn’t a job for noontide heat!

Anyone with any sense did this in the early morning and/or late evening, when it was at least a little cooler. Women went together in flocks, laughing and talking. It made a hard job a little easier.

Why, then, did the Samaritan woman go alone to get her water at noon?

Because she was the town disgrace. She’d been married five times and was now living with a man who wasn’t her husband. “Nice” people didn’t even speak to her. Of course, they might sneer at her, or even spit on her, when she passed . . .

Then she met a Man. A Man who was vastly different from all the other men she’d ever met. This Man spoke to her with compassion and respect. He talked to her as if she were intelligent and valuable. He answered her questions, discussed spiritual things with her (nobody had ever done that before!) and told her directly, as He had told no one else, “I am the Messiah.”

The woman forgot all about her water, raced back to town, and apparently ran through the streets like a town crier, telling everyone, “Come see a man who knew all about the things I did, who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?”

Here’s the interesting part: they *listened*. Don’t you think that’s odd? Why would the people listen to *that* woman, of all people? What was it about her face, her voice, her eagerness, that made them want to at least come out and meet Him for themselves? This town was practically entirely converted. They asked Jesus to stay two days, and by the end of them, they were believers.

Wouldn’t it be great if that had happened in His own country? Wouldn’t it be great if it happened in your town?

Water of Life, I’m thirsty. Break open Your artesian well inside me. Or maybe it just needs to be cleaned out—emptied of old leaves of twisted thoughts and beliefs, mud of sin, algae of selfishness. Please make it flow freely, overflowing from me onto all around me. Like the woman at the well, I want to be Your evangelist—one they’ll listen to because they can see the difference in me.

Walking along the beach of Lake Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers: Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew. They were fishing, throwing their nets into the lake. It was their regular work. Jesus said to them, “Come with me. I’ll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I’ll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass.” They didn’t ask questions, but simply dropped their nets and followed. Matthew 4:18-20, The Message

It seems that at first, Peter and Andrew, John, Philip, Nathanael (and possibly James) followed Jesus part-time and went back to their business as fisherfolk the rest of the time. But on this day, Jesus called them to follow Him full-time. “I’ll teach you a new way of fishing.”

He must have made quite an impact on them in the time they’d had with Him, because the Bible says they simply dropped everything and went with Him. Did they wonder how they were to feed their families? Did Zebedee, James, and John’s father and apparent owner of the family fishing business disapprove or approve? Did he have to hire help? Did the wealthy women who supported Jesus’ ministry (Luke 8:1) support these men, too?

We won’t know until we can ask someday. But we can ask the same questions of ourselves. Are we following Jesus part-time or full-time? And what does that mean? In other words, not all are called to leave other jobs and go into full-time ministry. We can know this for sure because Jesus only called twelve to that while He was here, and we know He had hundreds of faithful disciples. One hundred and twenty of them were in the upper room on Pentecost (Acts 1:15). So, some are called to have their lifework and their work for God be one and the same, but they are in the minority.

However, we are all called to full-time discipleship. We are all called to use our work time, play time, study time, leisure time, *all* our time in fellowship with God and in work for Him. This can take a lot of forms. Playing a game and choosing to pass by a chance to gain a dishonest point can speak for God to those with whom we play. Working hard, being a compassionate friend, choosing our leisure activities wisely, with a view to our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health, all these are ways to work for God.

Have you heard the call? What is your answer?

Great Fisher, I want to learn to fish Your way. I want to be able to speak Your words, do Your deeds, and live Your life. I need to learn from You not to be pushy and obvious about my “witnessing” efforts, but not to hide my light, either. I want to learn from those around me how to be compassionate and forgiving, knowing that all this knowledge comes from You, no matter whom I learn it from. I am Your disciple, and I’m committed to follow.

“Why all this gossip whispering? Which is simpler: to say ‘I forgive your sins,’ or to say ‘Get up and start walking’? Well, just so it’s clear that I’m the Son of Man and authorized to do either, or both . . .” He now spoke directly to the paraplegic: “Get up. Take your bedroll and go home.”

Luke 5:22, The Message

If you are disabled or know someone who is, can you imagine what it would be like to live in a society where there are no wheelchairs, no physical therapists, no medical help to speak of, and worst of all, most people believe you are the way you are because God cursed you? They usually thought either the disabled person or his or her family had sinned, so God had punished them this way. What a way to think! It’s hard enough to deal with limitations (and we all have some) without somebody blaming you for them.

But then, imagine if you really were disabled as a result of your own foolish choices—say, for instance, driving drunk, or not wearing a helmet on a motorcycle, or seat belts in a car.

That was the case with the paraplegic in this story. He had lived an unhealthy life, and he knew it, and he himself probably believed God was punishing him and that he deserved it.

Then, along came his friends. You know the ones. They’re the friends who won’t let you get away with a thing. The ones who tell you the truth lovingly, even when it hurts. The ones who, when you’re complaining about life, ask you, “How’s your prayer life?”

Those friends. They wouldn’t take any excuses from this man. He couldn’t walk? That’s okay, they could. Jesus wouldn’t want to see him? Well, we’ll find out, won’t we!

They put him on a stretcher and carried him to Jesus. Possibly the man said, “See, I told you! Look at the crowd! We’ll never get in. Let’s just go home.”

But the four friends climbed up on somebody else’s roof and took it apart! Then they let down their friend as if he were a bucket in a well. He must have felt silly and embarrassed.

Until he met Jesus’ eyes. Until he heard those blessed words, “Your sins are forgiven.” That was what he really wanted—needed. He could have lived with the crippled legs. But no, Jesus healed his body, too.

Hallelujah!

Kingdom Builder, You are forever tipping our ideas upside down! But Your upside down ideas are healing and wholeness to us. I want to be so fully Your compassionate child that I can carry my friends to You in prayer, even if they can’t come themselves.

“I’ve yet to come across this kind of simple trust in Israel, the very people who are supposed to know all about God and how he works. This man is the vanguard of many outsiders who will soon be coming from all directions . . . sitting down at God’s kingdom banquet alongside Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Then those who grew up ‘in the faith’ but had no faith will find themselves out in the cold, outsiders to grace and wondering what happened.” Matthew 8:10-12, The Message

Let’s do something a little different today. Pretend you live in a country where the military forces of another nation are occupying your land, and they are in control. Maybe you hate having them there, or maybe they’re supposedly there to help, but sometimes you’re not so sure. (There are plenty of countries like this right now.) All you know is many details of your life are overseen by these uniformed personnel. They tell you where to go, when to go, and when to be at home because of curfew.

Let’s pretend Jesus comes to your country, and He’s traveling around teaching and doing all kinds of miracles, and one day, one of the foreign captains marches up and says, “My aide is sick.”

Jesus says, “I’ll come right away.”

What is your first gut reaction? Do you want Jesus to go heal this man’s aide?

It gets worse. The captain says, “Oh, no, I don’t want to put You to any trouble. I know all about authority, and I know You can just say the word, and I’ll go home and find my aide healed.”

Even Jesus is speechless for a second. Then He turns to you and your friends, native people who are oppressed by this man and all that he represents, and He says He wishes you had faith like this man does!

Now how do you feel?

Sometimes even if we are sure we are not prejudiced or unjust in our attitudes, we require a wake-up call. This event (you can read the whole thing in Matthew 8) must have been so shocking to the Jews who saw and heard it. Master! You’re going to heal him?

Have you or I ever reacted that way when God chooses to pour out His grace on people we would never have chosen? Or do we sometimes feel *we* are not worthy of His time and attention? We should pay attention to this story. Jesus says this is the kind of faith He’s looking for.

Kingdom Bringer, sometimes it’s clearer than others that bringing in Your kingdom of love requires smashing down the walls of all the false kingdoms of hatred, prejudice, selfishness, and judgmentalism. As Your child, I want to have the kind of simple trust that captain had. Speak. It’s done. Amen.

“Go home to your own people. Tell them your story—what the Master did, how he had mercy on you.” Mark 5:19, The Message

There are several times in Jesus’ ministry when He seems to have traveled to a place for only one reason—to meet some particular person who needed Him. This was one of those times.

If the disciples had been familiar with the area of the Ten Cities, across the lake, they might have begged Him not to take them there. It was haunted.

Well, not exactly, but almost. There was a “crazy man” living there. He had been tied up, even with chains, but nothing could hold him. He wasn’t safe to be around. He yelled and screamed and hurt himself with sharp stones. He might hurt others, too. Better just to stay away.

Jesus wasn’t impressed. He walked straight toward this man, not away from him. The disciples hung back, frightened.

The man ran toward Jesus, fell to his knees, then screamed at Him to leave him alone.

Jesus kept coming. This man was God’s child, and Jesus could hear the silent, tortured cry of his heart. No one else, in all the time the man had been possessed, had ever even understood he still *had* a heart under all that horribleness, let alone tried to reach it. Jesus, unafraid of any yelling demons, threw them away from His beloved, tortured one.

There are people in our world today who, even if they are not literally possessed by demons, are tormented by mental illnesses, which Satan loves. Other people tend to look away, cross the road, avoid them. Jesus doesn’t. He walks straight toward them, and listens for the cry of the lonely heart underneath. If we are truly His children, we will do the same.

Once he was healed, this man’s first desire was to spend more time with his Deliverer. You would have thought Jesus would encourage that. But He said, “Go home and tell your story.”

Imagine the reactions of his family and friends! Do you think they might have needed time to believe the healing was real and lasting?

Ellen White says that months later, when Jesus returned to the Ten Cities, thousands flocked around Him, all because of the story the healed man told (DA 340, 341).

Lord of light and healing, I am so glad You don’t let my foolishness turn You away. I am glad you can hear the insides of us, even when others can’t, and maybe call us crazy. I am glad You understand the illnesses we suffer, whether of body, mind, or spirit, and have the power to heal all of them. Listen to me when I am “out of my mind,” and help me, Your healed child, to listen to others, too, no matter how “crazy” they may seem to me.

“Master, if you’d been here, my brother wouldn’t have died. Even now, I know that whatever you ask God he will give you.” John 11:21, 22, The Message

It was a dark, dark night, even though the sun was shining. The wails and cries of the friends and neighbors gathered around and in the house were deafening, but it was Mary’s silent grief that cut through Martha’s heart.

If only, Martha thought miserably, for the hundredth time, if only Jesus had come when we called him!

Too late now. Lazarus was dead.

A servant hurried into the room. “The Master is coming!” he said.

Martha jumped up. She looked at Mary, but Mary didn’t move. She just kept rocking.

Martha went out to find Jesus. “Master, if you’d been here, my brother wouldn’t have died. Even now, I know that whatever you ask God he will give you.”

Jesus said, “Your brother will be raised up.”

Martha replied, “I know that he will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time.”

“You don’t have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?”

“Yes, Master. All along I have believed that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who comes into the world” (John 11:23-27, *The Message*).

This is one of the most amazing statements of faith in the gospels. It’s Mary we think of as being devoted to Jesus, sitting at Jesus’ feet while Martha dashed around, wrapped in busyness. But look at those words again.

First of all, Martha actually said, “Even now, I know that whatever you ask God he will give you.” This implies a request for resurrection! Did Martha know Jesus could do that? It’s true that He’d done it a time or two before. Perhaps she’d heard of it.

And then, when Jesus challenged her faith, Martha replied simply, “All along I have believed.” And she named Jesus as not only Messiah, but Son of God, which was not very easily accepted by Jewish thought, then or now.

Meanwhile, Mary, the openly enthusiastic disciple of Jesus, sat in the house, not coming out until called, and even then only to wait for “if only’s” at Jesus. Both learned a lesson in faith that day. Which sister are you most like?

Resurrection and Life, Giver of Truth, I am more like _____. Give me both the open, heartfelt enthusiasm of Mary, and the steady dependability of Martha. I want to be your living child who never, ultimately, dies.

"The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all." Mark 12:43, 44, The Message

Imagine Jesus and His friends sitting in the courtyard of the temple, across from the offering box. They watch as rich people, some of them priests, make a great show of pouring in money bags full of clinking coins, looking around to be sure everyone notices.

Jesus says, "Watch out for the religion scholars. They love to walk around in academic gowns, preening in the radiance of public flattery, basking in prominent positions, sitting at the head table at every church function. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get" (Mark 12:38-40). The NASB says they "devour widows' houses."

It makes you wonder: could the timid widow who came next—keeping her eyes down hoping no one noticed her, sliding her two little mites into the box and turning quickly away—could she possibly have been a victim of one of those rich people? Had one of them taken away her home, or demanded more rent than she could pay? If so, Jesus would have known.

If not, it is certainly true that the large amounts of money they put into the temple treasury would have gone a long way toward helping more than one poor widow.

There's another side to this story, too. Does it teach that Jesus wants us to give *all* our money to the church? There have been news stories of Seventh-day Adventists who starved children or other family members and gave money to the church instead. They often end up in jail, and it doesn't look good for our church. No doubt there are stories like this in other denominations, as well.

We are not the judges of these people. They probably believed they were doing God's will. They might have been desperately trying to buy His favor, not understanding two things: first, they already had His love, and second, what He favors is being good stewards of what He puts into our hands, including, first and foremost, the family we are here to love.

Which are you? Which am I? Someone who makes a display of the "good" and "generous" things we do? Or someone who, with fear and trembling, offers God everything we have, not knowing what the outcome will be? Most of us have probably been both, one time or another.

Giver of all good things, You noticed the woman. She was invisible to her oppressors, but not to You. You noticed the show-offs, too. They were all Your children, beloved of Your heart. I am Your child, too—help me be generous but not showy, and help me pay attention to those who need my help.

"Keep your eyes open as you enter the city. A man carrying a water jug will meet you. Follow him home. Then speak with the owner of the house: The Teacher wants to know, 'Where is the guest room where I can eat the Passover meal with my disciples?' He will show you a spacious second-story room, swept and ready. Prepare the meal there." Luke 22:10-12, The Message

What a curious story. Who was this man? It's clear Jesus doesn't expect the disciples to know him. He would have just said, "Go to So-and-So's house." Yet it's also clear that Jesus knew the man would be prepared in advance, his room all "swept and ready," and that he would know whom the disciples meant when they said "the Teacher."

Was this someone who had been listening to Jesus, following Him perhaps in the crowds? Was it someone for whom Jesus had done a miracle? Had Jesus talked to him before and asked about a room, or was that prompting from the Holy Spirit? Did Jesus just know the man was eager to serve in *some* way?

He certainly served! It wasn't just that Jesus and His disciples had their Last Supper there, where Jesus initiated the service of Communion. That was only the beginning. Apparently this is where the disciples hid out after the crucifixion, and where they were staying, for perhaps many weeks. This seems to be where they were gathered when Jesus came through a locked door and appeared to them, and where Thomas learned his lesson. The reason this seems likely is that they were there at Pentecost, which calls it "the upper (or second-story) room," and it says this is "where they were staying."

So the owner of this house must have become a member of that blessed group that seeded the early Christian church. And we're never given his name—only that term, The Upper Room, which to this day is a synonym of being closed away with God and each other, receiving the Holy Spirit and light for the day.

But God knows who that was. God has kept a record of all that man and his family did for the cause of Christ, and someday we'll meet him and be able to thank him in person. You know what I'm almost sure he'll say? "Oh, don't thank me. It was nothing. I had the room, and I didn't mind sharing it. The one you should thank is Jesus!" And his eyes will go to that shining figure who changed his life forever and brought him to eternity.

Great Gift-Giver, one of the best gifts You offer is the chance to offer gifts ourselves. I love being a part of Your work, getting to share some small thing I have with others, and then being in on the astonishing blessing when it comes. May I be as generous as this unknown man and remain Your humble child. Help me to be "swept and ready" for service.

Mary Magdalene went, telling the news to the disciples: "I saw the Master!" And she told them everything he said to her. John 20:18, The Message

Almost anyone *could* have been the first evangelist. If, for instance, the disciples had actually believed Jesus when He told them repeatedly that He would arise on the third day, they could all have been there, waiting. Instead, they were hiding and crying. John 20:9 even says, "No one yet knew from the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead." Maybe not from scripture, but how many times did He have to say so? The priests remembered His words and took steps to prevent grave robbery!

So it was only Roman soldiers who were there, and they seem to have been knocked senseless when the angel first arrived. So all that morning there were people running back and forth, to and from the tomb—women with embalming spices, reporting an empty tomb. Peter and John, racing each other there. Women who saw angels. Women who didn't see angels.

And then there was Mary. We don't know the details of those seven demons. Was it all at once, or seven different times? Was it a straightforward possession, or does it refer to the sins of Mary by which Mary had been bound? She'll tell us all about it someday. Here's what we know: Mary had reason to be deeply, unspeakably grateful to Jesus. She didn't know how she could live without Him. And Mary stayed. She didn't leave the tomb to go and chatter and wonder and discuss, as the others did. She stayed, weeping.

Here's the even better thing we know: Jesus stayed to see her. Can you imagine? He's lived thirty-four years out of heaven. He's been, in the end, torn completely apart from the Father, and it killed Him. Now He must be longing to get back to heaven, where the Father and the angels are anxiously awaiting Him, but He stays to comfort Mary. (He would also have comforted anyone else who had stayed . . . Too bad they didn't, isn't it?)

So Mary got to be the very first one to say, "I saw the Master!!"

And nobody believed her.

Isn't that always the way? Prophets and missionaries to this day, whether in great mission fields somewhere on the globe, or you in your neighborhood, often aren't believed. "It's nonsense!" (Luke 24:11). They're still saying that. How can we stand? We can't—unless we've seen Him for ourselves. Then, no matter what anyone says, we know what we know. Nobody can take that away.

Mighty Victor over death and the grave, I am Your evangelist, too. People tell me it's nonsense. They think I'm crazy. But I know what I know, and I know You love me. Help me not to get pushy or argumentative, but to stand firm, Your Good-News-Sharing child.

"Master, you know everything there is to know. You've got to know that I love you." John 21:17, The Message

Poor Peter! He made some blunders in his time. But none compare with this one. He's betrayed his Lord. Not once, not twice, but three times in a row. He's seen the look of sorrow and love in the eyes of Jesus, who was paying more attention to one straying disciple than to His own trumped-up trial. He's cried his heart out on the bloody ground in Gethsemane where Jesus cried, bled, and prayed for *him*.

He's gotten his own special message from the risen Jesus: "Go tell my disciples and Peter that I'll meet them in Galilee" (Mark 16:7). He's seen Jesus a couple of times at least, in company with other disciples, and apparently once by himself (See 1 Corinthians 15:5). I wonder what Jesus said to him.

Now, today, he is restless and unsure, and decides to do the thing he knows always calms him. "Let's go fishing!" So a bunch of them get into the boat and fish, and it may calm them, but it doesn't accomplish much else. Not a fish to be had.

At dawn they see someone on the shore. "Catch anything?"

"Nope."

"Try the other side of the boat."

Huh? This guy must be nuts! Oh, well, why not?

When the nets start breaking with fish, Peter catches on. "That's *Jesus!*!" He dives overboard and swims to shore. He and the others eat breakfast with Jesus, and then Jesus gives Peter the chance to feel he's made up, a little, for the three times he denied him publicly. Three times, publicly, Peter gets to say, "Yes, I love You!" By the third time, he's pretty upset. "You *know* I do!"

But Jesus isn't mad at Peter. He's giving him his new commission. "Feed my sheep, Peter. Now that you're not such a know-it-all, now that you know what it feels like to be weak, to fall and fail, to feel unworthy, *and to be forgiven*, now, Peter, you are ready to tenderly guide other weak, faulty, unsure people."

Are you ready? Have you done something really awful, and cried over it and asked forgiveness and tried to make restitution if you can? We all know what sin feels like. What many of us still need to learn is what grace, forgiveness, and unconditional love feel like. When you know that, *then* you are ready to help and hold up other hurting ones.

Creator and Redeemer of life everlasting, it's true. I have failed You. I have denied You. I do feel unworthy and unable. But I do love You. Help me to feel Your love for me, and then to love You more. I am your lamb. I'd love to be Your undershepherd, too, in some small way.

"So, friends, choose seven men from among you whom everyone trusts, men full of the Holy Spirit and good sense, and we'll assign them this task. Meanwhile, we'll stick to our assigned tasks of prayer and speaking God's Word." Acts 6:2, 3, The Message

The church was growing by leaps and bounds. The work Jesus had given it, to be a citadel of light, love, and caring, was growing beyond the abilities of the first leaders. So deacons were created. At this point, tasks were divided. The jobs of teaching and preaching would be done by one group. The jobs of caring for the people, especially the poor, would be done by another. Of course, praying was everybody's business. You can't do any of the work of God without lots of it!

So they chose seven men, and one of them is famous to this day. Stephen is described as "brimming with God's grace and energy . . . doing wonderful things among the people, unmistakable signs that God was among them" (Acts 6:8).

Clearly, even though he was chosen as a deacon, he was also perfectly capable of speaking and preaching. At any rate, he did give one sermon that will never be forgotten among God's people.

He was so amazing that he came to the particular attention of some Jewish leaders who wanted nothing more than to destroy this "new way," so they rose up against Stephen and began trying to discredit him. It went so far that they bribed people to say they'd heard him blaspheme God. Stephen was taken before the High Council, and that's where he preached his famous sermon. He told the entire story of the people of God, and his listeners were with him as long as he spoke of Jewish history, but when he said Jesus was its culmination, they attacked. They stoned Stephen to death, while he rejoiced to see Jesus standing beside God's throne.

A young man stood nearby, watching the coats of the killers. He didn't know it yet, but he was eyewitness to a mighty turning point in history. The 490 years God had promised to His people in Daniel 9:24 had just come to a heart-breaking end. The Jewish nation *as a nation* would no longer be the chosen of God. The task of taking God's love to the people of the earth would go to others. And that young man had no inkling of the *big* plans God had for him.

Faithful Time Watcher, You are the only One who knows what time it really is. I don't want to keep my eyes on the cosmic clock. I want to keep them on You. Never, please, *never* let me stand by and watch Your servants hurt, pretending it's not my responsibility! I want to be brimming with Your grace and energy like Stephen—Your truth-telling child. No matter what.

*"I have picked him as my personal representative to non-Jews and kings and Jews."
Acts 9:15, The Message*

The stoning of Stephen seemed to set the course for Saul of Tarsus. And Saul was a man who, once his course was set, followed it as if it were set in concrete! Off he went, persecuting, arresting, tormenting, determined to end this "Way" and all its followers, once and for all.

God must have tried lots of methods to catch Saul's attention, perhaps even beginning with the training he received from Gamaliel, one of the greatest Jewish teachers ever, and a man of God, as we can see from Acts 5:34-39. But one of Saul's greatest strengths—his determination—could also be twisted around to become one of his worst weaknesses, and in the end, God had to use dramatic means. He flashed a light on Saul that blinded him and gave him three long, dark days to consider his path carefully.

Then God sent one of his faithful servants, Ananias (who was pretty nervous about the whole thing) to heal Saul and to give him the message that not only was he to cease and desist from persecuting followers of the Way, not only was he to join them himself, but he was the very one chosen as God's "personal representative" to take the Good News to the Gentiles—those who were not Jews. What a shock that must have been to Saul! All this time, he'd thought it was *bad* news!

This determined man, who became known as Paul, turned out to be one of the greatest apostles ever. Much of the New Testament was written by him, although all he intended was to write letters of encouragement and exhortation to the new churches springing up everywhere.

In the course of his life, Paul faced beatings, stonings, three shipwrecks, numerous imprisonments, hunger, thirst, and most of all, the scorn of people who refused to listen to him, even though he knew it meant their lives and their souls. "Besides everything else," he said, "I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Cor. 11:28, 29, NIV).

Yet of it all, here is what Paul said: "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (Philippians 3:8, NIV).

A new era had come to the life of this man, and a new era had come to God's church, as well.

Keeper of Your mighty, timeless plan, keep us all, too. Teach me throughout my life how to count everything else as loss, compared to knowing You, to having Your love, Your promises, Your righteousness—compared to being *Your child*.

Down the road a way in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha, “Gazelle” in our language. She was well-known for doing good and helping out. Acts 9:36, The Message

Acts 9:32-43, immediately after the introduction of Paul into the story of the early church, gives us just a short snippet about “a disciple named Tabitha.” This is the first time a woman is specifically named as a disciple, although that word just means “follower,” and all the women who followed Jesus were, of course, His disciples.

We aren’t told many details about this disciple. We don’t know whether she was young or old, married or unmarried, rich or poor. We don’t even know if she was a Jew or a non-Jew. But we can figure out a lot from what we are told.

First of all, Tabitha, or Dorcas, “was well-known for doing good and helping out.” Now, lots of people do good and help out. But to say that this is the main thing someone is known for is different. What do you think is the main, number one thing you are known for? It might be interesting to ask around and find out.

The next thing we learn about Tabitha is that many of the people she helped were widows. In those days, a woman who had no man or family to care for her was in very dangerous territory. She had no one to turn to except kind people who might be willing to help. The early church saw one of its most essential tasks as helping people like this. Tabitha found this to be her own calling. She made clothes for these widows, and perhaps for their children. Do you know what your calling is yet?

And they loved her. That’s the third thing. They were all gathered when Peter came, crying over their loss and showing Peter the dresses she had made. She had touched more than their lives. Tabitha had touched their hearts.

It’s interesting that no one appears to have asked Peter to do anything. They may have just wanted him to come and share their grief and comfort them. But Peter sent them all out of the house, prayed hard, and then simply said, “Tabitha, get up.” And she did!

Apparently, God also believed Tabitha’s work was very important. Has He given us work to do that will touch people’s hearts?

Holy Spirit, You moved through that long ago church in such exciting and visible ways, but also in such practical, down-to-earth ways. Show me the work You have for me to do, and fill and empower me to do it. As your child, I long to touch the hearts of others, not so they’ll love me, but so they’ll love You.

“Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God. Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer. I find myself praying for you with a glad heart.” Philippians 1:4, The Message

Paul had many strengths, but probably his greatest was teaching. He had sat at the feet of the best teachers the Jewish nation had to offer, and he was excellent at passing on what he had learned. He could write deep, difficult things designed to catch the attention of genius intellectuals (who are still arguing about what he meant in Romans, for instance.) He could speak to the secular minds of Greece and Rome in ways they would understand. He could rebuke people who were rebelling or straying, encourage those who were faltering, and train young ministers like Timothy.

But he rarely showed such lighthearted and loving gentleness as he did in the letter he wrote to the Christians at Philippi. It doesn’t take very long to read the whole letter, and I highly recommend it. Here’s just one sample from each chapter:

Live a lover’s life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul (1:10, 11).

Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is God’s energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure (2:12, 13).

We’re citizens of high heaven! We’re waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He’ll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him (3:20, 21).

Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you’re on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute! (4:4, 5).

As you can see, Saul of Tarsus had changed dramatically. He was now Paul, the teacher, the apostle of Jesus Christ, with only one message in life: “first Jesus and who he is; then Jesus and what he did—Jesus crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Spirit of Truth, I know You don’t give the same gifts to everyone (thank God!) but I also know You want us all to be teachers in a way, all sharing what we know, all encouraging and lifting each other up in faith and love. I want to be that way. I want to be Your teaching child.

They sent Barnabas to Antioch to check on things. As soon as he arrived, he saw that God was behind and in it all. He threw himself in with them, got behind them, urging them to stay with it the rest of their lives. He was a good man that way, enthusiastic and confident in the Holy Spirit's ways. The community grew large and strong in the Master. Acts 11:22-24, The Message

I've seen three different translations of Barnabas' name: son of comfort, encouragement, or consolation. I especially like encouragement, because it is from the French and means literally "to put heart into." The best thing about it is that this wasn't even his birth name. His name was Joseph. But the apostles gave him a new name—Son of Encouragement (Acts 4:36). Why would they do that? Because Barnabas was a man who put heart into others.

Like many people, named and unnamed, who play small parts in the New Testament, we are given few details about him. But we do get to see some snapshots of what kind of person he was and why his friends called him "the encourager."

Acts 9:26-30 tells the first story. After being converted, Paul started right in preaching in the very city where he'd been sent to arrest all the Christians. He then went to Jerusalem and tried to make friends with the disciples, but they were afraid of him. It was Barnabas who "took hold of him" (9:27, NASB), brought him to the others, told his story, and soothed their fears.

Then, in Acts 11, after Stephen died, persecution rose and people scattered. Some spread the Good News only to other Jews, but some began teaching Greeks in Cyprus and Antioch, and when the apostles learned about it, it was Barnabas they sent to help and encourage there. But Barnabas knew just who could help him in this work. He promptly went and looked for Paul and brought him to Antioch, too.

From that time, they worked (and suffered) together often, until they had a sharp disagreement. In Acts 12:25, they took John Mark with them. He grew fearful and ended up going back home, but later (in chapter 15) he wanted to try again. Paul, being the firm-minded person he was, couldn't understand giving someone a second chance, but Barnabas, the encourager, did. So they separated for awhile, Paul to work with Silas and Barnabas to work with John Mark. And later, in 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul calls Mark his "right hand man," so obviously they made up.

And it was all because of Barnabas, the encourager.

Comforter Spirit, I want to be encouraging and supporting like Barnabas. I would love to be so strong in that way that my friends started nicknaming me "The Encourager." Let me be Your encouraging child.

One woman, Lydia, was from Thyatira and a dealer in expensive textiles, known to be a God-fearing woman. As she listened with intensity to what was being said, the Master gave her a trusting heart—and she believed! Acts 16:14, The Message

Lydia is another of those "snapshot disciples." We don't know a lot about her, but we can guess quite a bit from the details we are given. For instance, she was from Thyatira and a dealer in expensive textiles, so that tells us she was probably well-to-do, possibly wealthy. She was probably well-educated and literate, since she was a dealer in her own right.

We can know she was faithful and God-fearing, not just because Luke says so, but because she and her friends had prayer meeting on Sabbath. There may have been no synagogue to go to, but they met and worshiped just the same.

And we know she listened with an open, prayerful heart to the new truths Paul and Silas were bringing to Philippi, where she lived now. She didn't just casually listen, she listened intently. And God gave her a trusting heart. She believed in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God.

We can tell another thing about Lydia, too. She was kind and hospitable. She invited the men who were traveling together, Paul, Silas, Dr. Luke, and probably several others including servants, to stay at her house while they were in Philippi. They hesitated at first, but "she wouldn't take no for an answer" (Acts 16:15).

Philippi wasn't all fun and joy for Paul and his friends. They were arrested, beaten, and thrown in jail. Lydia must have been worried and upset. Perhaps she tried to use her influence to free them. But they ended up being delivered by the fact that they were Roman citizens and what had been done to them was illegal.

Still, once they were freed and asked to leave the city, they took the time to go back to Lydia's house, saw their friends, encouraged them to remain faithful, and then left town. Lydia may have been one of the well-to-do people who had churches that met in their houses. Or maybe they still met on the riverbank—a great place to have church! Only now, they had more to praise God for—the gift of His Son and His salvation.

Spirit of Hospitality, help me to be open and hospitable like Lydia. I'd like to gather my friends, too, to worship and praise You and also to learn new truths as You reveal them. Let me be Your hospitable child.

"Say hello to Priscilla and Aquila, who have worked hand in hand with me in serving Jesus. They once put their lives on the line for me. And I'm not the only one grateful to them. All the non-Jewish gatherings of believers also owe them plenty, to say nothing of the church that meets in their house."

Romans 16:3, The Message

When Paul said that Priscilla and Aquila "worked hand in hand with him," he didn't mean God's work alone. They had also worked together at what you might call their "day job," making tents. Can you imagine what it would have been like to make tents in that day? First you had to spin the fiber from wool or cotton into thread. This was probably done by others, not the tent-makers. Then you had to sew together *huge* pieces of cloth, all by hand, with a heavy needle made by a local metalsmith, or possibly made of bone. It must have been hard on hands and backs.

However, hard work is always made easier by doing it in the company of good friends. Aquila, Priscilla, and Paul had lots to talk about. They could discuss the heavy theological issues Paul was always wrestling with. They could share counsels, concerns, and joys about the local people with whom they were working. They could sing together. We know Paul and Silas both liked to do that, because it's the way they chose to encourage themselves and each other when they were in prison.

Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned quite a few times in Paul's letters, mostly to say hello or good-bye to, as they each headed off in different directions to spread the Good News. The couple had a church that met in their home. Paul would probably have enjoyed such a luxury, rather than having to travel all over the known world starting new churches, and then being lucky to come back once in a year or two to check on them.

But we're each called to, and gifted for, our own labor. Paul was God's sent-out one. That's what "apostle" means. Aquila and Priscilla were called to stay at home and minister to one community, though they did move a time or two, as well.

Which way are you called? Thinking of it in gardening imagery, do you think God wants you to travel and broadcast seed, so to speak, or to stay home and tend one garden plot? Or, at least, what does He want you to do right now? These things may change over the course of our lives.

Whatever it is, pray to be faithful and do your best, as Priscilla and Aquila did.

Holy Spirit, giver of diverse gifts, help me to support the ministries of others as well as find my own. Teach me which gifts You have granted me, and how to use them wisely and well. I want to be Your supporting child.

"That precious memory triggers another: your honest faith—and what a rich faith it is, handed down from your grandmother Lois to your mother Eunice, and now to you!"

2 Timothy 1:5, The Message

Talk about "snapshot disciples!" Lois and Eunice are named nowhere else but right here, though in Acts 16:1, Timothy is mentioned as being the son of a devout Jewish mother and a Greek father. We don't know a single thing about these two women personally. We only know them through the legacy they left in one boy, beloved to them both.

It seems likely that Lois and Eunice first heard the truth about Jesus there in Lystra, when Paul arrived and met them. We don't know whether Timothy's father was a believer or not. In any case, Paul credits the women directly with planting and cultivating the precious outgrowth of faith in their boy, Timothy.

He was probably quite young when Paul first met him, but he was already well-known in the area. Both in Lystra and Iconium, people said "what a fine young man he was."

For Lois and Eunice, this was all they wanted. They were not looking for praise or glory for themselves. They just wanted Timothy to be a godly man.

I look forward to meeting these women. I wonder if they were quiet or lively, stern or fun-loving, deep, studious types, or quick learners. Maybe between the two of them, they embodied all of the above!

Do you have a mother, grandmother, or other woman in your life who seeks to plant and cultivate faith in you? What are some of the ways they use to do this? Do you always appreciate it, or is it sometimes uncomfortable, even painful?

Have you thanked them lately?

Proverbs 1: 8 says, "Pay close attention, friend, to what your father tells you; never forget what you learned at your mother's knee. Wear their counsel like flowers in your hair, like rings on your fingers." Mothers are mentioned ten more times in Proverbs alone. Their love and counsel can guide you to the feet of Jesus. But what if your mother doesn't believe, or isn't in your life for some reason? Then pray for another motherly influence, and watch the godly women you know. You can learn a lot from a godly woman. And a godly man, too, of course!

Holy Spirit, the Bible teaches us that You are like a mother, too, stirring us wayward children up in our cozy nests, bearing us on Your wings, remembering us always, even if our earthly mothers forgot us. Help me to pay attention to what the godly women and men in my life have to teach me.

"I'm passing this work on to you, my son Timothy. The prophetic word that was directed to you prepared us for this. All those prayers are coming together now so you will do this well, fearless in your struggle, keeping a firm grip on your faith and on yourself."

1 Timothy 1:18, 19, The Message

As we finish this first quarter, studying the Bible figures of old who showed us the foundation of our faith, we will end with young Timothy, spiritual son of Paul. He had been raised by devout women, his mother and grandmother, who both loved God and wanted Timothy to do so, too. We don't know what role his Greek father had in his life. Did he approve? Disapprove? Was he distant? Loving?

It's quite possible that one of the things Timothy needed most was a loving father figure. In any case, he found one in the apostle Paul.

The letters Paul wrote to Timothy contain priceless counsels, specifically for young people who want to follow God faithfully. Here are a few gems from the first letter:

The whole point of what we're urging is simply love—love uncontaminated by self-interest and counterfeit faith, a life open to God (1:5).

The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know. Pray especially for rulers and their governments to rule well so we can be quietly about our business of living simply, in humble contemplation. This is the way our Savior God wants us to live (2:1-3).

Stay clear of silly stories that get dressed up as religion. Exercise daily in God—no spiritual flabbiness, please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever (4:7, 8).

Finally, as we prepare to leave the Bible stories and move into lessons from the lives of pioneers in more recent times, let this blessing from Paul be God's blessing for you:

And oh, my dear Timothy, guard the treasure you were given! Guard it with your life. Avoid the talk-show religion and the practiced confusion of the so-called experts. People caught up in a lot of talk can miss the whole point of faith. Overwhelming grace keep you! (6:20, 21).

Holy Spirit, Flame of God, the older adults on whom we've depended all our lives are in the process of passing the torch on to us. Sometimes I feel completely inadequate. Other times, I get proud and think I can do better than they could. Guard me from both extremes, I pray. Let me be just *me*, a humble, teachable, simple child of God.

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

Acts 17:11, 12, NIV

Fasten your seatbelts! We're going to move forward in time almost eighteen centuries, to take a peek into the lives of some of those who became the pioneers of a whole new denomination, though that was far from their intention when they began.

If you were to choose one Bible passage that was particularly characteristic of these early Adventists, the one about the Bereans might fit. These 19th century Christians came from all kinds of backgrounds. There were Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, and some without church backgrounds at all, but they had one thing in common: when they heard something claiming to be newly discovered Bible truth, they didn't just take a preacher or Bible scholar's word for it, they looked it up for themselves.

The first thing that happened was a Great Awakening, some say beginning in the 1730s, but certainly at a high pitch in the first half of the 1800s, resulting in what many called "a revival of primitive godliness." In other words, people "woke up" and began to have the kind of faith the early church had, as we've been studying.

The second thing that happened was a new interest in prophecy, particularly concerning the end of time and the second coming of Christ. We'll go deeper into this in the next devotions, but for today, bear in mind that these people were already members of various churches, and so excited about what they were learning that they shared in their Sunday Schools—and met mostly with determined opposition. They were hurt and amazed, especially when they began to find themselves kicked out of their churches.

Now what could they do? They began meeting together in smaller groups, praying and studying, asking God for guidance.

To consider: Is our faith so strong that we could get in trouble with it?

God of Truth, You lead in all times. You've always had Your faithful few, and all too often, they are persecuted by the majority. As Your child, am I so faithful that I would face persecution? Please help me to develop such a close relationship with You, day by day, that where You lead I will follow, no matter what.

By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can't see: eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of his divine being.
Romans 1:19, 20, *The Message*

During the War of 1812, a certain Captain Miller had his beliefs rearranged for the first of many times. Captain Miller believed in God, but as a Deist, he believed that God had created the universe and then gone on a long vacation. Deists believe that reason and nature can show that there is a God (as Paul pointed out in Romans 1), but this God is not personally involved in human affairs, there are no holy writings, and no miracles.

It's a cliché that there are no atheists in foxholes, and Miller had to admit that the miracles he saw seemed to have been the work of a Supreme Being. Could there actually be a God who cared?

Once you open that gap, God starts creeping in, and after the war and the death of his father and sister, when Miller was very perturbed by questions of a life after death, God saw His next opportunity. Miller had been a Baptist when he was younger, and he wanted to go back to church, so he tried attending the Baptist church while still insisting that he believed in Deism. It didn't work out that well for him, though.

One day someone asked him to read the sermon because the minister was gone. It seemed innocent enough, being on the duties of parents. But Miller got choked up and started to cry. He later wrote, "Suddenly the character of a Savior was vividly impressed upon my mind. It seemed that there might be a Being so good and compassionate as to Himself atone for our transgressions, and thereby save us from suffering the penalty of sin. I immediately felt how lovely such a Being must be; and imagined that I could cast myself into the arms of, and trust in the mercy of, such an One."

His Deist friends were horrified. Miller promised them he would study the Bible so carefully that he could answer all objections, otherwise he would remain a Deist himself, despite his feelings. (They might only be feelings, after all.)

So he began at Genesis 1:1, and he studied hard.

Lord, I am so glad You didn't make us and go out to lunch beyond the galactic rim! I am even more glad that You find ways to show us You are near, even if we are not sure we believe in You. Help me to study that hard, so I, too, can find answers for objections.

When you see all these things, you know he is at the door. Don't take this lightly. I'm not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too—these things will happen. Sky and earth will wear out; my words won't wear out. Mark 13:29-31, *The Message*

William Miller had learned that when you give God an opening, He pours in like a flood. Now he was learning that when you start studying the Bible, even though it was written by humans and contains enough human quirks to give Deists and others plenty of things to question and argue over, things start falling together. He became convinced it was the Word of God, after all.

Then he got into the prophecies.

At this point, it was between the years of 1818-1820. He figured out that the common belief of "postmillennialism," that is, that there will be a millennium of peace and prosperity on the earth before Jesus comes, was not biblical. Then he got hooked on that little text in Daniel 8:14: "Unto two thousand, three hundred days, and then shall the sanctuary be cleansed."

The sanctuary, most people believed in those days, was the earth. How would the earth be cleansed? By Jesus' coming, of course, and purifying the earth with fire. That meant—why, that meant you could figure out the date of the coming! Miller did some math. "From the decree to rebuild Jerusalem"—easy to look up in any encyclopedia, that was 457 B. C.

Contrary to popular opinion, Miller did not set any specific date. He studied five more years before he began to talk about it, just to be sure. He didn't begin to teach publicly until the 1830s. At that time, he began to teach that Jesus would come "sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844."

The excitement, as he must have imagined it would be, was intense. He began getting letters and requests to speak. Little by little, the areas of New England where he shared his study came alive with excitement, speculation, and controversy.

And Bible study. Some just listened and agreed or argued. Or ignored. But the smart ones studied for themselves. And began to tremble with joy at what they saw.

God of all ages, what would it feel like to believe You were returning *this year*? Despite the fact that we now know they were mistaken as to what would happen on that date, in a way I envy them. Help my sense that You are coming *soon* infuse my days with enthusiasm, as it did theirs.

In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps. Proverbs 16:9, NIV

One of the small and interesting details about Joshua Himes' life concerns his lifework. His father's intention from the time his son was a boy was to send him to be trained for the ministry, but when Joshua was only 12, the family faced a tremendous financial loss. Mr. Himes was no longer able to afford college, but decided Joshua would still learn a trade so he could support himself. He apprenticed him to a cabinetmaker.

While young Himes was still an apprentice, he became a member of a local Christian church, and by 18, it was clear he had a gift for preaching. The church encouraged him to follow it. He held successful evangelistic series, and he started a new congregation at only 22 years old. His apprenticeship turned out to be a double one—he finished learning to be a cabinetmaker and became a successful, full-time minister! Clearly, God had a plan for Joshua Himes.

Himes would be surprised to learn what that plan included. In 1839 he was invited to hear Miller speak about the second coming. He didn't agree with everything he heard, but he agreed in general with the truth of the prophecy.

He asked Miller why he didn't take his message to the large cities. Miller replied that he only went where he was invited, and he hadn't been invited to any large cities. "If you were, would you go?" asked Himes. "Of course!" said Miller.

Well, besides being a good pastor, Himes was also a well-known reformer. He had worked with Joseph Bates against liquor, and it was his very church that became the headquarters for William Lloyd Garrison's New England Anti-Slavery Society. So he knew how to promote a cause and get a lot of people interested.

He actually quit his job and began working fulltime promoting Miller and his speaking engagements, and the most famous way he did it was by starting a little magazine, published for the first time on March 20, 1840. You may have heard of it. It was called *Signs of the Times*.

From that day on, Millerism was transformed from a small, regional curiosity to a national sensation, all thanks to a young man who thought he would have to be a cabinetmaker instead of what he really wanted to be.

God of the plans behind our plans, You always see to it that what You want is what happens, using those people who are willing to follow You. I want to go along with You. I want to be what You want me to be. Make it plain to me, today.

While they were praying, the place where they were meeting trembled and shook. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak God's Word with fearless confidence. The whole congregation of believers was united as one—one heart, one mind! Acts 4:31, 32, The Message

One of the great gifts Joshua Himes gave the early Advent movement was the incredible campmeetings. Adventists didn't invent campmeeting, of course. It was similar to what the Chautauquas were in New York, and Methodists had had campmeetings for years. But when Himes turned his organizational and motivational abilities toward setting up campmeetings, things got done!

These early campmeetings were very different from what we know today. They would lease a tract of land with a good spring for water and trees for shade, with a nice large area for seating. There might be chairs, but were more likely long boards on tree trunks. A makeshift platform would be built at one end.

Around the meeting area were several large tents, such as circuses used. In each tent would be all the people who had traveled from a given town or county, all living together, and if it rained, the meetings could be held in these tents, too.

There was a dining tent where you could get meals for \$1.42 to \$2 a week! There were buggies and wagons all over, and horses tied under the trees, or if you wanted your horses cared for in a stable tent, that cost 25 cents a day. Stages and omnibuses (long wagons drawn by teams of horses) came and went, and as campmeetings became more popular, trains provided a tent for a temporary depot near the ground. Lay people rode for half fare, and ministers were free. Can you imagine the airport near your conference's campmeeting making similar arrangements?

The first Adventist campmeeting was held in June, 1842, under Himes' management, and between 7,000 and 10,000 people attended! Most of today's campmeetings would be amazed at such a crowd, if they could even accommodate it. In 1842 there were thirty-one campmeetings, in 1843 there were forty, and in 1844 there were at least fifty-four, with attendance running from 14-15,000!

Joshua Himes was doing what God had planned for him to do.

God of the great, stirring events of history, You predicted this movement, and You knew how it would end and what You wanted it to accomplish. Each person involved followed You to the best of their ability, doing what they believed You wanted them to do. Help me to do the same.

“Tell me what you think of this story: A man had two sons. He went up to the first and said, ‘Son, go out for the day and work in the vineyard.’ The son answered, ‘I don’t want to.’ Later on he thought better of it and went. The father gave the same command to the second son. He answered, ‘Sure, glad to.’ But he never went. Which of the two sons did what the father asked?”

Matthew 21:28-32, The Message

Josiah Litch had heard of this doctrine of the second coming. He didn’t agree with it. In fact, he was downright hostile. So when a friend asked him to read Miller’s writings, he wasn’t very happy about it. But his friend urged, so he agreed to read it. Maybe his intention was to find all the things he could disagree with. Or maybe he did read willingly for his friend’s sake. All we know is the result.

Josiah Litch changed his mind. He decided Miller had the truth after all, and he wanted to see the Advent of Christ.

Not only that, he proceeded to write his own book, *The Probability of the Second Coming of Christ About A.D. 1843*. In that book there was a comment that made history. In commentary on Revelation 9, Litch said that if he understood the prophecy correctly, the Ottoman Empire should lose power in August of 1840. This was still two years in the future. As he continued to study, he decided that the date would be August 11.

So when the Ottoman Empire signed a treaty with the Great Powers of Europe on July 15, 1840, and that treaty was hand-delivered to the Egyptians by the Turkish Envoy on August 11, you may imagine what the effect was on the growing Adventist movement.

The following year, the Millerites hired Litch as their first paid general agent. He was granted leave from his pastoral duties to become a successful promoter and secretary for the movement.

The suspense was heating up. Thousands were becoming believers.

As for Josiah Litch, he wasn’t through studying.

Great God of prophecies, we humans tend to both underestimate Your hand in human events, downplaying Your involvement, or we overestimate it, seeing You as some sort of giant puppet master in the sky. Help me to steer clear of both extremes—to see You as watchful and protective, working out Your sovereign will while respecting each one’s choices, and even weaving those free choices into Your great tapestry of time. Help me to choose wisely today.

For Christ didn’t enter the earthly version of the Holy Place; he entered the Place Itself, and offered himself to God as the sacrifice for our sins. He doesn’t do this every year as the high priests did under the old plan with blood that was not their own; if that had been the case, he would have to sacrifice himself repeatedly throughout the course of history. But instead he sacrificed himself once and for all, summing up all the other sacrifices in this sacrifice of himself, the final solution of sin.

Hebrews 9:24-26, The Message

Here’s something that may surprise you—it did me. In 1840, four years before the Great Disappointment, Josiah Litch was already developing the idea of a pre-advent judgment. He said, “No human tribunal would think of executing judgment on a prisoner until after his trial; much less God.”

He began publishing his ideas in 1841, and given his success at interpreting Revelation 9 to predict the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, people listened. But it didn’t really catch the imagination as the thought of the second coming itself did.

It may have been in part because of the success of his precise date-setting for that event that more and more people were now pushing for a specific date for the second coming. Miller only said “sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844,” under pressure from his followers.

When March 21, 1844 passed, he studied a different Jewish calendar and made the date April 18. But when that date, too, passed, he said publicly that he “confessed his error and expressed his disappointment,” but still believed the time was near, “even at the door.”

In August of 1844, at a campmeeting in Exeter, New Hampshire, a man named Samuel Snow presented a message that set the date, for the first time, as October 22, 1844, the date of the Jewish Day of Atonement. This date seemed to take people’s interest more than any other had so far. Far and wide, people refused to take in their harvests or make any plans. They asked others to forgive them and tried to live as lovingly as if they were in heaven already.

Josiah Litch, however, was very hesitant to accept this date. He still wasn’t through studying.

Lord of love, You know Your purposes. You must have been so pleased when You saw people living in Your love, seeking Your truth, waiting for the Great Day, even though You knew they had misunderstood. Today, when we try to understand Your word and sometimes miss the boat, I pray that we may do the same, living in love, trying only to be like You.

A white-tailed deer drinks from the creek; I want to drink God, deep draughts of God. I'm thirsty for God-alive. I wonder, "Will I ever make it—arrive and drink in God's presence?" I'm on a diet of tears—tears for breakfast, tears for supper. Psalm 42:1-3, The Message

An interesting thing happened the first time Charles Fitch heard William Miller preach. The thirty-three year old pastor did not accept the teaching concerning the second coming, but he did get fired up. Miller's enthusiasm made Fitch want to be that enthusiastic, too. So he left his home church and began to travel, holding evangelistic series throughout New England, New York, and even as far west as Lake Erie (which was considered pretty far west in those days.)

After a while, though, Fitch began to feel he'd lost his fire. He couldn't witness. He went home to Massachusetts and began to fast and pray for God's help. Like the psalmist, he was thirsty for God and wondering if he'd ever make it.

One December day there was a knock at his door. Josiah Litch stood there. Somehow he had heard of Fitch, and had come to encourage him. They talked for awhile, and then Litch said, "Brother, you need the truth of Jesus' coming with the message you have been preaching."

Fitch agreed to study the Bible again on the subject, and sure enough, it was true! He found his second wind and went forth to preach again.

Soon after this, the words of Habakkuk 2:2-3 came to his mind: "And then God answered: 'Write this. Write what you see. Write it out in big block letters so that it can be read on the run. This vision-message is a witness pointing to what's coming. It aches for the coming—it can hardly wait! And it doesn't lie. If it seems slow in coming, wait. It's on its way. It will come right on time.'"

Others had already written a great deal about this "vision-message," but Fitch had a different idea. He sat down and made some charts of the prophecies. It is believed that he made the very first charts to be used by Advent preachers of his day.

Thanks, in part, to Josiah Litch, who had changed his mind and decided to accept the truth of the Advent.

Giver of gifts, I'm glad you gave skills to someone with visual ability, as well as word skills to preachers and writers. There are many ways to learn the truth of God. Help me find my gifts and use them for you.

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. John 15:13, The Message

Charles Fitch didn't just preach, and he didn't just make prophecy charts; he, too, published a paper. It was published in Cleveland, and for two years it spread the Good News throughout the Great Lakes area. The paper was called *Second Advent of Christ*. It was very instrumental in bringing people to faith who had not had a chance to actually hear one of the many speakers now preaching the message.

In October of 1844, just before what people believed would be the end of the world, there was a large group of believers who wanted to be baptized. So Fitch took them to the lake and baptized them all, despite the fact that it was cold.

Nearby, a number of other people who had not yet decided watched the others go into the water and come out shining with joy, but they still couldn't make up their minds.

Wet, cold, and uncomfortable, Fitch started to walk home. Partway, he heard a shout. A group of people—those who had been undecided—were running after him. "Baptize us, too! We believe!"

So Fitch turned back and baptized all of them as well, then started home again. A third group came to find him! He baptized all of these as well. He caught a chill, which led to illness, but the next day he still rode several miles in the cold wind to another appointment. The chill became a fever, and after lingering for some time, he died on October 14.

So Fitch himself did not live to see the Great Disappointment. He died with the words, "I believe in the promises of God."

And just think. He'll open his eyes, and there will be Jesus, coming in the clouds! Charles Fitch will probably think at first that it's only been a couple of weeks. Imagine his surprise when the truth is explained to him.

God of faithfulness, thank You for the faith and courage of Charles Fitch and others like him. Help me to be that self-sacrificing for the good of others and for your work.

The person who trusts me will not only do what I'm doing but even greater things, because I, on my way to the Father, am giving you the same work to do that I've been doing. John 14:12, The Message

God works in spectacular ways. With His perfect knowledge of all hearts, He knows what is required for each one.

Hiram Edson was a successful farmer near the Erie Canal in New York. He was also a Bible-believing Christian and a steward in the Methodist church. One evening, it seemed to him that a nearly audible voice said, "Go, heal thy sick brother."

Edson was startled. "The age of miracles is over," he thought, and immediately a sense of darkness, deep sorrow, and fear rolled over him. He began to pray fervently, and again the same message came. "Anything, Lord, to save me from this predicament!"

The distress left.

Bewildered, Edson put on his boots and went to the neighboring farm where a man lay sick and expected to die. The family was watching by his side, but had fallen asleep. Edson crept over to the bed in the light of one flickering candle. He put his hand on the man and said, "Brother, the Lord Jesus make you well."

The man jumped up and began to praise God, which roused the family. What a prayer meeting there was in that home that night! The doctor was shocked the next day to see the healed man cutting wood. The experience led to a revival in their whole church.

Edson had heard Miller in about 1839 and had been sharing the message, as many others also were. In the last days before the October date, his house became a meeting place for those who were waiting and watching for Jesus to come. On at least one occasion, just when they were singing together, the Holy Spirit fell on them with such power that there was another revival right there in the Edson living room.

The time was creeping nearer and nearer. They couldn't wait!

Master, Healer, and King, so much time has passed. We often find it difficult to keep up our eagerness for Your appearing. I don't need to be permanently on a high-emotion mountaintop, but I do pray that You will maintain in me the certainty that You are coming, and the joyous anticipation of that Great Day.

Sometimes I ask God, my rock-solid God, "Why did you let me down? Why am I walking around in tears, harassed by enemies?" They're out for the kill, these tormentors with their obscenities, taunting day after day, "Where is this God of yours?" Psalm 42:9, 10, The Message

October 23, 1844. Surely the second grayest dawn in history after that dark Sabbath in AD 31, when God's Messiah lay dead.

At Hiram Edson's farm, believers who had encouraged each other all through the long day before by reciting Bible promises were nearly in despair. Weeping and pale, they asked each other, "Where did we go wrong? Is He ever coming at all? Is the Bible false?" There had been dates set before, but none had carried the certainty that this one had. How could they be so wrong?

Edson reminded them that God had always sent help and light when they needed it, and He would do so again. Many went home, but some remained to go out to the barn and pray in privacy. On their way back through the harvested corn field, Hiram Edson suddenly looked up and stopped moving.

His friends didn't notice until they reached the edge of the field. Then they looked back and saw him staring into the sky. One called, "What's happening? Are you all right?"

"He is answering our morning prayer," replied Edson. He told them he had felt something like a hand on his shoulder, stopping him. When he looked up, he saw Jesus leave the Holy Place and move into the Most Holy Place to cleanse the sanctuary. Had the date been correct, but their understanding mistaken?

Several set out to study as they had never studied before. When they thought they understood the significance of the Old Testament sanctuary and its relation to what they had just been through, Edson published another issue of his paper, *Day Dawn*, which had been spreading the news of the second coming. It now spread the news of a possible explanation for what had happened.

Among others, Joseph Bates and James White received copies of this magazine. It revolutionized their thinking.

Steadfast God, You don't lose heart when we do. You sympathize and comfort us, but You are not afraid or distressed. Nothing is a surprise to You. When I face great disappointments of my own, help me to keep on clinging as these people did, trusting that You will send light and help.

And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart. Ecclesiastes 4:12, NASB

In the spring of 1845, Hiram Edson was hosting meetings to discuss the new doctrine of the sanctuary in heaven. Both Joseph Bates and James White intended to go, but at the last minute Elder White was called to a funeral and couldn't attend.

When Bates arrived at the meeting, Edson didn't know he was a minister, but invited him out of courtesy to lead the meeting if he wished.

Now, it so happened that Joseph Bates, about whom we'll learn more shortly, had just accepted the seventh-day Sabbath, but James White had not. When Edson asked him to host, Bates took a tract about the Sabbath out of his pocket and began to read.

Edson couldn't believe his ears. While studying the sanctuary, he had actually been impressed that the seventh day was the true Sabbath, but he hadn't had any particular impression that it still ought to be kept. Now, here was a man in his own home, reading the most convincing things about that holy day, and how God said it was to be a statute forever and ever.

Edson could hardly hold still until the end of the reading. The second Bates ended, he jumped up, crying out, "Brother Bates, that is light and truth! The seventh day is the Sabbath and I am with you to keep it!"

This formed the basis of the connection between the Sabbath truth, the judgment, and the sanctuary. When the Whites joined in accepting the Sabbath, the fall of the following year, these three men, Bates, Edson, and White, who had all been preaching the first two angels' messages for some years, joined in proclaiming all three.

The nucleus of what would become the Seventh-day Adventist church was now in place, though no one recognized it yet.

Except God.

Master Hand behind the scenes, You must smile when You see us running around, figuring out truths You tucked into the Bible centuries before us. Do You still have treasures for me to discover? Help me to keep digging in my Bible until I uncover them for myself. I promise to treasure them far more than any amount of dug-up gold, gems, or silver ore!

Jesus . . . put spit in the man's eyes, laid hands on him, and asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked up. "I see men. They look like walking trees." So Jesus laid hands on his eyes again. The man looked hard and realized that he had recovered perfect sight, saw everything in bright, twenty-twenty focus. Mark 8:23-25, The Message

As soon as Hiram Edson had his cornfield vision, he began to study, but not alone. He studied together with two friends, Dr. F. B. Hahn, and a younger man, O. R. L. Crozier, a local schoolteacher. The men studied for several months until they were sure they had everything clear and could relate it well.

Edson and Hahn had been the ones who put out the *Day Dawn* paper before the Disappointment. Edson said to Hahn, "Let us get out another number of the *Day Dawn* and publish this truth."

But who should they get to actually write the article? They asked Crozier to do it. Not only was he a schoolteacher, but he was also a clear and articulate writer, and this wasn't exactly a simple subject!

Crozier agreed, and put into words the subject of their long study, which was that the date in 1844 had been correct, but on that day, what had happened was that Jesus had moved from the Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary to the Most Holy Place to begin to administer the complete salvation provided for all by His sacrifice. One of Crozier's interesting points is that the atonement had to be made by a priest, a high priest, specifically, and since Jesus had Himself been the sacrifice, where was the high priest who put the sins thus died for onto the head of the scapegoat?

He believed, with his friends, that Jesus had, as Hebrews stated clearly, become the high priest once and for all, and was now in the heavenly sanctuary ministering before God for those who accepted His perfect sacrifice for them.

This special issue, which you can still find online (along with all kinds of commentary, for and against, of course) was instrumental in the formation of the earliest doctrines of what became the Seventh-day Adventist church.

Holy High Priest, I am so thankful that You held those faithful pioneers together and showed them the light. I am grateful for the knowledge that You are on our side, and are ministering Your shed blood to all who are willing. It makes me feel secure and loved. May You use the gifts you have given me as You used those of farmers and schoolteachers of long ago.

GOD spoke to Moses: "Tell the Israelites, 'Above all, keep my Sabbaths, the sign between me and you, generation after generation, to keep the knowledge alive that I am the GOD who makes you holy. Keep the Sabbath; it's holy to you.'" Exodus 31:12, The Message

There have always been a faithful few, sometimes in far, obscure corners of the world, keeping all of God's law. In New York in the 1840s, there was a group of Seventh-day Baptists who did. Among these was a widow, Rachel Oakes. When she and her daughter moved to Washington, New Hampshire, she tried to share her views on Sabbath. Some listened, and some didn't. Most were so taken up with the excitement of the coming Advent that they couldn't spare thought for anything else.

One day a visiting preacher, Frederick Wheeler, was there for a quarterly meeting with the Advent believers. They were having communion, and Wheeler made the point that all persons who followed Christ and participated in communion should be prepared to go all the way, to obey and keep all the commandments.

Mrs. Oakes could hardly sit still. Should she stand up and say something? No, that wouldn't be respectful, and besides, she didn't want to embarrass or humiliate Mr. Wheeler, she just wanted him to know the truth. She waited until the service was over and went up to him.

"I almost stood up when you said that about keeping the commandments, and told you that you should put the cloth back over the communion table until you yourself are ready to keep all of God's commandments!" She explained that one of the central commandments in the law was the fourth, which was the Sabbath command, and that God had said it would be in force "throughout all generations."

He wasn't the only one she spoke to. Later, William and Cyrus Farnsworth, along with Joseph Bates, and eventually the Whites and many others, began to teach the Sabbath, in part due to this one woman's influence.

Rachel Oakes later married Nathan Preston and today she is known as Rachel Preston, the woman who brought the Sabbath to the Adventists.

God of courage, give me the bravery to stand for what is right, the willingness to share it with my friends and neighbors, and the kindness Mrs. Preston showed when she waited and shared what she knew in a way that would not embarrass or humiliate others.

You can't pick and choose in these things, specializing in keeping one or two things in God's law and ignoring others. James 2:10, The Message

Frederick Wheeler was a circuit-riding preacher of the Methodist Episcopal church. It was common in those days for one pastor to have charge of many churches, riding on horseback to visit the various ones, and leaving them to gather together with God themselves in between. This is an old tradition, beginning with the traveling apostles, and it is still going on today as some pastors' car allowances almost outstrip their salaries!

When he was in Washington, New Hampshire at the quarterly meeting and heard what Mrs. Oakes had to say, Wheeler was cut to the heart. He knew Seventh-day Baptists, of whom Mrs. Oakes was one, believed that the seventh-day Sabbath was still binding on Christians, but he hadn't taken them seriously. Now she was turning his own words back on him. Was he, or was he not, willing to keep all ten of the commandments?

He began to study in earnest, and ended up accepting the Sabbath for himself and teaching others. He became the first of the Advent believers to preach about the importance of the Sabbath before 1844.

But not many people were willing to listen. Only a few accepted this truth at the time, and some who were very earnest Christians did not, including James White and Ellen Harmon, and many others. Many, especially the Whites, did eventually accept this truth and begin to share it with others, but it is never a good idea to just agree with something because someone says it persuasively. We must study for ourselves, and that is what these early pioneers did.

God is patient, waiting until each one understands the truth that his or her own soul needs at any given time. We can be this patient, too, with those who struggle with truths we have already recognized. After all, we want people to do the same for us, right?

God of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, You alone know where each heart is and how to judge it rightly. I can see such obvious blind spots in some people I know. Yet, I wonder—do I have blind spots that are so obvious to them? Help us to be as patient with each other as You are with us.

If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. Romans 12:6-8, NIV

Like Johua Himes, Frederick Wheeler was also involved in campmeetings, sometimes called “grove meetings.” His eldest son has left a description of one of them, held not long before the great day they were all expecting, October 22. In essence, the description is much like the other we have learned about—people coming by stage and wagon, some even walking as far as 100 miles, seats on tree trunks, tents of coarse sheeting draped over forked sticks as poles, horses turned out on the farm where they were meeting.

But there is a different addition given in George Wheeler’s story, and that is the part his mother played in the campmeeting. She never got to go to any of the meetings, although she might have been able to hear some, since all were in the open air. Mrs. Wheeler (and the farmer’s wife as well) “baked all the while—wheat bread and rye and Indian meal (corn) bread. The campers paid if they had money; otherwise it was free. A farmer near the grounds sold them milk.”

This gives a different picture. There were some—there have always been some—who were working hard at the practical details while others were doing the analyzing and the charting and the preaching and teaching. God saw all the gifts that were given, and gave full credit to hearts who did their tasks cheerfully and for Him.

Have you ever been to a campmeeting where those who could not afford to pay for food got it free? I doubt there was any paperwork to fill out proving you were really poor enough to qualify, either. They simply assumed that those who could pay, would, and left it to God to sort out. I wonder what difference it would make in our churches and homes if we took this kind of attitude seriously.

Between Frederick Wheeler and his wife—who gave more to the cause of God? Did God value either one’s gifts over the other?

Lord of hearts, You know who is honest and who is not. You know the ways in which those with no “silver or gold” give their all to You, just the same. You know who, blessed with earth’s means, quietly help others with it, and who does not. Help me to find my place in Your work and to be faithful there.

If you find the godless world is hating you, remember it got its start hating me. If you lived on the world’s terms, the world would love you as one of its own. But since I picked you to live on God’s terms and no longer on the world’s terms, the world is going to hate you. John 15:18, 19, The Message

It’s amazing (though perhaps it shouldn’t be) how many of the early Advent believers were ministers. They loved God already and knew how to study their Bibles. When someone pointed out a truth they hadn’t seen, they went and looked it up—especially a straightforward truth like the Sabbath. The time prophecies in Daniel and Revelation and the doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary, these took time, prayer, and deep study. But the Sabbath is pretty plain once you look at it with your eyes open.

It’s also amazing how many got kicked out of their churches for believing Jesus was coming!

Thomas Preble was one of these men. He was an ordained minister for the Freewill Baptist church. When he used his free will to accept the teachings set forth from Daniel by William Miller, he was not only stripped of his pastorate, he was excommunicated.

Nothing daunted, he found Advent believers to worship with. Then he heard of the Sabbath keepers in Washington, New Hampshire. It may have been through Frederick Wheeler that he accepted the Sabbath, but in any case, Preble was the first Advent believer to publish the truth about the seventh day as holy, sanctified by God forever, not just for the Jews. *The Tract, Showing that the Seventh Day should be Observed as the Sabbath* was a March reprint in tract form of an article that first appeared a month earlier in a periodical called *The Hope of Israel*. It was this tract that Joseph Bates read and began spreading around.

Jesus said the gospel was like salt—you only need a little, and it starts to spread. In those days, it was certainly visibly true!

Lord of the Sabbath, You lead us on step by step, giving us only as much light as we can handle at one time. Help me to remember that and leave You in charge, not myself, of how much I think my family, friends, or even I myself should know or accept at any given moment. Just keep leading me . . .

But me he caught—reached all the way from sky to sea; he pulled me out of that ocean of hate, that enemy chaos, the void in which I was drowning. Psalm 18:16, 17, The Message

When Joseph Bates was a little boy in Massachusetts, he had only one dream—to be a sailor. His parents did their best to talk him out of it, but eventually they let him take a trip by water to Boston, hoping he'd get it out of his system. No such luck—Joseph was more in love with the sea than ever. Finally, when he was 15, his father got him a job as cabin boy on a new ship sailing all the way to Europe—a long, long trip in those days!

On the way home, a shark followed them all day. Superstitious sailors thought someone was going to die, and the shark was waiting for the body. Toward evening, the cabin boy climbed the main mast to try to see another ship, but he lost his grip and fell, hitting a rope and falling straight into the sea.

He came up, gasping, barely able to swim in his heavy, wet clothes. He thought he might die, but someone had seen him fall, and they threw a rope as hard as they could. Joseph barely managed to grab the end of it, and hanging on for dear life, he was hauled aboard.

Then someone asked, "Where's that shark?"

Joseph began to quake. He'd forgotten all about the shark! Now that he was safe, his trembling was half reaction and half delayed fear when he thought of what the shark would have done.

But it was peacefully swimming along on the other side of the ship. God had saved Joseph Bates for a purpose. How surprised he would have been if he could have known what it was!

As the years in the navy passed, Bates worked his way up until he was captain. It was then that his future as a reformer began. He allowed himself only one glass of strong liquor a day, but he began to realize that he looked forward to that one glass more than to his food. He decided he would never touch strong liquor again. Joseph Bates must have been a strong-willed person, because he never broke that vow in the years that followed, though he continued to drink a glass of wine in company.

But God wasn't through with Joseph Bates yet.

Lord of the heavens, earth, and sea, You take care of "those who go down on the deep" as well as those of us who never leave dry land. I know You are with me today and that You have a plan for my life, as well. Help me to be strong in following You.

By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. Romans 3:20, NASB

Captain Bates was reforming himself completely, one step at a time. First he gave up strong liquor. Then he decided to give up wine, too. Other seafaring men made fun of him, but it didn't faze him. When George Washington's birthday came and the men wanted to drink a toast, he drank his with water. Next, Bates decided to give up tobacco and swearing, both very difficult to quit! He began to study his Bible, too. He wrote later, "I concluded that I was making myself a tolerably good Christian."

You can see already that Bates' knowledge of God and His ways was limited. Oddly enough, at this point he wasn't even praying. Anyone who has tried to "make him/herself a good Christian" would say, "Good luck with that!"

For some reason, Bates wasn't as happy with all his reforms as he expected to be. Something was troubling him, but he didn't know what. On one voyage, his wife sent along a New Testament and a poem about spiritual things. Bates began to feel conviction, but didn't know what to do about it. He actually considered suicide at one point.

He knew what he needed was prayer, but he didn't want his men to see him. He made a secret place under the table in his cabin for prayer. He said his hair stood on end the first time he tried it. When a sick member of the crew died, he thought, "What if that had been me? I'm not ready to die!"

Into his under-table prayer closet he went—praying, crying, and confessing his self-will. He promised God he would serve and honor Him and finally felt peace come over him. Then something changed. Instead of spending all of his energy trying to reform himself, Bates spent time every day in prayer, Bible study, and meditation.

From that point, Bates was a new man. When he heard the Advent message a few years later, he accepted it within months, and when a call was made for the first general conference of all the Advent believers in the world, Bates was one of the sixteen who signed. He was the very first of all those who later became Seventh-day Adventists to embrace the movement.

God who chases us until we "find" You, don't ever give up. Don't give up on me, on my family, on my friends. Help us to give up trying to reform and "make ourselves" pretty good Christians, but to give ourselves entirely to You, and let *You* make us perfectly loving Christians instead.

*Peter and the apostles answered, "It's necessary to obey God rather than men."
Acts 5:29, The Message*

In the spring of 1844, when the first and second dates set had passed, the believers clung fast to the text in Habakkuk, "Though the vision tarry, wait for it." Joseph Bates was one of those studying, praying for new light.

He went to the meeting in Exeter, New Hampshire, where Samuel Snow first proposed that the cleansing should follow the fall festivals and happen on the Day of Atonement, which that year would be October 22, 1844.

For Bates and others, living through that dark October 23 was really their third Great Disappointment. But by now, Bates was accustomed to daily Bible study, prayer, and meditation, and he *knew*, as did all those who clung to faith instead of giving it up in despair as so many had, that God was still with them and still had a plan.

In the spring of 1845, he visited the Adventists in Washington, NH, where they were keeping the Sabbath, due to the influence of Rachel Preston, Frederick Wheeler, and T. M. Preble, as well as a man named J. B. Cook. Bates immediately recognized Bible truth when he saw it, and began to keep the Sabbath in March of 1845.

If it's hard to learn to keep Sabbath now—hard to go against teaching, hard to go against family, hard to go against the custom of a whole life and of the whole country—think how hard it must have been then! Today there are millions around the world, in many different denominations, who honor the Bible Sabbath. And that's not counting the Jews, who always have.

In the 1840s, the number of Christians keeping Sabbath was pitifully small. But then, these same Christians had been trained in a hard school. They had stood for truth when all those around them jeered, and this smaller number was still standing firm for God even after their hopes had been dashed to the ground.

At first, Joseph Bates couldn't convince many others, but he stood for the truth anyway. By now, he was an old hand at reforming, and in August of 1846 he wrote his own Sabbath tract, not knowing how on earth he could publish it when he hadn't a cent to his name.

Miraculously, God provided. Bit by bit, His plan was coming to fruition.

Patient God, I don't know how You do it! Help me to be even a fraction as patient as You are while You wait for people to catch up and go along with You.

*The man of integrity walks securely. Proverbs 10:9, NIV
Kings take pleasure in honest lips; they value a man who speaks the truth. Proverbs 16:13, NIV*

This story will be a little out of the timeline we have been following. Up to now, all the stories have been before, during, and after the 1840s Advent movement. But this story of Joseph Bates shows God pulling together another detail into the edifice He was building—a denomination no one on earth knew anything about, as of yet.

In 1849, Joseph Bates traveled through Michigan, and among other accomplishments, raised up a church in Jackson, Michigan.

In the summer of 1852, he traveled there again, as the apostles did in the New Testament, to visit the church and see how it was doing. After this visit, he had an impression to go farther west.

Ever obedient, he got on a westbound train. "Get off at Battle Creek," whispered God.

Joseph Bates got off. He must have wondered what to do next. The idea he had, which must have come from God, was a very creative one. He went to the postmaster and asked, "Who is the most honest man in town?"

Now this is fascinating in itself, but here is what is more fascinating still: the postmaster knew! He told Bates to go to the home of David Hewett, a Presbyterian.

Bates knocked on his door. "I have been directed to you as the most honest man in Battle Creek; if this is so, I have some important truth to present to you."

What would you say? David Hewett said, "Come in; I will hear it."

The next Sabbath, Hewett kept the day holy, becoming the first Seventh-day Adventist (though probably not by that name—in fact, no doubt still Presbyterian) in Battle Creek.

If David Hewett—or Joseph Bates, for that matter!—could visit Battle Creek, Michigan today, I wonder what they would think!

God of the small things, it makes me wonder what seemingly insignificant detail of my day today is part of some grand plan that only You know anything about! I ask that You live in me and help me to live the kind of life that would make someone point me out as "the most honest person in town."

It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. James 3:5, The Message

This text from James speaks of the power of a tongue for negative purposes, but a tongue is just as powerful for positive purposes. Just as one misplaced word can start a destructive blaze, so one word spoken in season can start a fire of new light. This story is like that.

Merritt Cornell was yet another preacher. He was what we might call a first-day Adventist, though there was no such denomination. He “just happened” to be traveling to see a friend in Michigan, and Joseph Bates “just happened” to be speaking there on the Sabbath.

Cornell thought, *I can disprove that!* His wife wouldn’t go in with him, so he went in by himself . . . and stayed to listen in growing interest.

When he finally came out to his wife, he said, “I have to admit it—it’s true!”

She protested, “If we keep the seventh day you’ll have to resign from your pastorate!”

Merritt replied, “Angie, if this is truth, the Lord will open some way for us.”

He drove on, thinking hard. When he drove past a neighbor, J. P. Kellogg, working in the hayfield, he stopped and had his wife hold the horse while he jumped over the fence to “give Brother Kellogg the light.”

Kellogg accepted, just like that.

They drove on, met another neighbor, and the story was repeated.

The very next Sabbath, an interested group met together to study and praise God for new light.

In just one day, the word of truth, passed from mouth to mouth, created a blaze of light, and Brother Merritt had his new pastorate.

Lord, let me be that excited and instant. Let me start a wildfire of light and love and truth. Let my attitude be so positive and personal and excited that others will at least be interested, whether they agree or not.

Isn’t it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these “nobodies” to expose the hollow pretensions of the “somebodies”?

1 Corinthians 1:27, The Message

We have now arrived at the stories of two people who are so central to the history of the Seventh-day Adventist church that we will give them a larger share of this book. The first is James White, who was born August 4, 1821. You may be surprised to learn that he was, as he said, “a feeble, nervous, partially blind boy.”

His eyes were so weak as a child that he couldn’t go to school at all until he was 16 years old. He was terribly embarrassed to be learning basic children’s schooling at that age, but in only twelve weeks, studying eighteen hours out of the day, he was actually granted an elementary teaching certificate!

That winter made a great change in James. Before, he had felt so inferior and deficient that he actually wished he hadn’t been born. Now he could see that with hard work, he could be someone who would make a difference in the world.

He was determined to go to high school, too. He got a job in a sawmill to pay his way, and he lived on apples and cornmeal mush he made himself, but he went to school.

The devil wasn’t through throwing difficulties at him, however. He cut his ankle at the sawmill so severely that he was out of work for a long time and permanently weakened. For the rest of his life, he could never put full weight on his left heel.

Given what we know of James White’s future wife, it’s particularly interesting that God would choose this partner for her. Is it possible God thought the two of them would be able to encourage and support each other as physically stronger people could never do?

When you feel weak, unable to make a difference in the world, not smart enough, not good enough, remember James and Ellen White. They made a mark, that’s for sure! And with God, so can you.

God of the weak and feeble, I may not face the same challenges that James White did, but there are definitely times when I feel very inadequate. When I get low, or down on myself, help me to remember that You have faith in me, and that the antidote to low self-esteem is not to try to build myself up, but to build You up and accept the value you see in me as Your precious child, worth Your life.

Start with GOD—the first step in learning is bowing down to GOD; only fools thumb their noses at such wisdom and learning. Proverbs 1:7, The Message

Once James White got a taste of learning and the way it made him feel stronger and more important, all he wanted was more. He was so determined to learn more that he worked himself nearly to death to get a college education, as well as the twenty-nine weeks of high school he had so far. James had been baptized at 15, but now, at 20, he was so engrossed in learning for its own sake that education became his god.

He was astonished to arrive home from school one year to learn that Millerism, that “rank fanaticism,” had taken hold in his own home. His mother believed it! He was even more surprised when she was able to answer all his objections, so he began to study it for himself. He went to the meetings, and he was convicted.

God now began making His plans known to James, and they didn’t go along with James’ plans. He convicted James that he should go back to his old community and work with his former pupils, only in spiritual work instead of schoolwork.

James walked for miles, hoping to wear out the feelings. That, he was sure, was all they were—feelings.

That didn’t work.

He begged to be excused from this duty.

God said no.

Finally, James actually stamped his foot on the ground and said, “No! I won’t go!” He packed up rebelliously and went back to school. But he couldn’t study anymore. He would work and work, but he couldn’t remember anything. Not only that, he was sunk in a terrible darkness and confusion.

Finally, James changed his mind. He got up and headed for his old school. Instantly, his mind was filled with a sense of God’s approval and joy. He raised his hands to heaven and praised God with a triumphant voice.

James didn’t find it easy to work with his students, some he would still be teaching the next year, but he did it. Perhaps he will meet some in heaven as a result.

Isn’t it a good thing that God allows U-turns?

God of the U-turns, there may be “no shadow of turning”* in You, but there are all kinds of twists and turns in me! Thank You for being so patient and understanding, but thank You, too, for keeping after us!

*James 1:17

Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am. Philippians 4:13, The Message

James White didn’t know what to do next. He still really wanted to go back to school and become a scholar, but if Jesus really was coming in only a few years, it seemed far more important to try to spread the news. He tried preaching a few times, but wasn’t very good at it, and felt more timid and unprepared than ever.

Finally, he committed himself wholly to God and felt more at peace. He realized that preaching needed preparation, too, and there was more than one form of schooling. He bought books and charts on the Advent and began getting ready to teach others what they most needed to know—to get ready for Jesus. He also went to a big campmeeting, where he was fired up and renewed his determination to do whatever God asked.

He prepared three lectures and set out on a borrowed horse, a saddle onto which he’d nailed its pads, and a bridle he tacked together with nails he could bend. As he traveled, he worked on more lectures, until he had a series of six.

There was only one problem. People listened! Lots of people listened! He had sixty who wanted to join the cause and had no idea what to do with them. He called on his brother, who had been a minister for five years, and his brother started a new church with the new believers.

No longer could James White doubt that he had been called of God. Like Paul, he set out with the same determination he’d once shown in going his own way. He preached through jeers, catcalls, and flurries of snowballs pelting him as he spoke. He took a spike that had been thrown and hit his head, held it up, and made it part of his appeal. “Why should I resent this insult when my Master had them driven through His hands?” He held out the spike, his arms to the side in a position reminiscent of the cross, tears pouring down his face, and nearly 100 came forward. There was still excitement, and an apparent angel locked arms with him and led him safely through the crowd.

Only 22 years old, James White didn’t know it, but within twenty years he would be the head of a growing body of believers called the Seventh-day Adventist church.

God of the Pauls and the Whites and the Bates of the world, be the God of me also. I don’t have much, but what I have is Yours. Do with me as You wish, and may Your will be done.

I took the little book from the Angel's hand and it was sweet honey in my mouth, but when I swallowed, my stomach curdled. Then I was told, "You must go back and prophesy again over many peoples and nations and languages and kings." Revelation 10:11, The Message

James White was one of the people who attended the Exeter campmeeting where Samuel Snow put forward his understanding that the coming would be on the Day of Atonement, October 22. Fired up more than ever, he continued to travel and preach, sometimes three times in one day. "Get ready!" he implored. "Jesus is on His way!"

He was also one of those bitterly disappointed when October 22 passed without incident. Up to this point, White and the others had been part of an ever-growing crowd. Now the true test came, because most people turned away at this point, repudiating the message, and sometimes even God and faith entirely. What would James do?

Well, he had too much obvious experience with God to think He had left them. He saw that God had also said, "You must go back and prophesy again." So White was also one of those who clung to faith and hope and continued to study. He was one of those who accepted the new doctrine that they were correct about the date, but mistaken about what had happened on that day.

In the winter of 1845, White visited Orrington, Maine. There were some extreme fanatics there that year, and an 18-year-old girl came to rebuke the people for this fanaticism. Some, of course, were offended that a mere teenager should call them to repent, but some were impressed. White was one of the latter.

As they talked and became acquainted, he liked this young Ellen Harmon very much. She was as passionate about the Advent truth as he was, and as led and convicted by God. They were both interested in public labor to help others to learn and be faithful, even though they were both young—too young, in some eyes, to be doing this work. More than that, Ellen had some of the same physical weaknesses he did. She, too, knew what it was like to have to work especially hard to accomplish what others took for granted.

At first, all they did was work together, but in August of 1846, they were married, and they worked together for God the rest of their lives.

God, through Whose strength all is possible, I hope I have the kind of dedication, faithfulness, and unswerving loyalty that those young people in other days did. I know You have a job for me to do, and I will do it as You lead me and teach me how. Unite me with other believers to work together for You.

But how can people call for help if they don't know who to trust? And how can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the One who can be trusted? And how can they hear if nobody tells them? And how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to do it?
Romans 10:14, 15, The Message

One of the things James White is most known for in the infancy of the church is publishing work. His first magazine was *Present Truth*. He began it because his wife had a vision in November of 1848 and told him God had said he should. She also said people would support it and it would be a success from the start. Which goes to show both that God has different terms for success than humans, and that even visions don't negate free will, because in fact, the Whites had to fund this paper mostly themselves, and went through some terrible times to do it. In 1850, Elder White wanted to quit, but God told him through Mrs. White that it was his duty to soldier on. That little paper brought new truth to thousands, just the same, so in God's eyes, it was a success.

During that same summer, publication was temporarily suspended, and in its stead, Elder White brought out a 16-page periodical called the *Advent Review*, because it reviewed the truths of the 1830s and 40s that had brought them this far. In November, he decided to combine the two. That month the last *Present Truth* and the last *Advent Review* came out, and *Second Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* made its first appearance in Paris, Maine. The *Review* has been going ever since.

Elder White still wasn't through. In 1852, he began a paper especially for young people, called *The Youth's Instructor*. He knew the movement had had its beginnings among young people (he was still only 31 himself), and he felt that young people needed their own paper to help them cling to Jesus and develop strong faith even in the midst of adversity.

The Whites were leaders through the thorny problems of organizing in 1863 as the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Then, in 1874, White revived and established *Signs of the Times*. So many of our church papers can be accredited directly to James White, publisher extraordinaire. You can see the original copies of many of these at www.adventistarchives.org, and they are fascinating to look at. It just goes to show what a young person can do if they set their mind to following God all the way.

God of Good News, You've sent angel choirs and shepherds and astrologers and fisherfolk to do Your work. You've called farmers and vinedressers and merchants and housewives and children and teenagers. You are calling me, too, I know it. Here I am; send me.

Men and women who have lived wisely and well will shine brilliantly, like the cloudless, star-strewn night skies. And those who put others on the right path to life will glow like stars forever.

Daniel 12:3, The Message

There was one thing James White was not so good at, and that was taking a break. His motto was “Better to wear out than to rust out,” and in the end, he worked himself to death.

In 1863 when the denomination organized, the people voted Elder White in as president, but he refused it. He said that others knew how hard he’d pushed for organization, and those who were opposed to it would think he had done so in order to give himself a high position. Besides that, his health was not good enough for such a big job.

Very true, yet during the 1860s and 70s, he traveled, preached, wrote, and was the publishing president; also, against his objections, conference president in 1865 (at which point they gave the publishing to Uriah Smith). He helped to organize Battle Creek Sanitarium and our first college, started new magazines and reestablished older ones. He was wearing out.

Mrs. White had the same problem, but it’s always easier to see in someone you love, so in 1867 she insisted that they move to a farm and work outside in the hopes of improving his health. After two years of continuous care and gentle outdoor work, he was much better.

Then he set right out to pour himself out for the people again.

In 1873, the Whites moved to California, partly for the weather and partly to get away from the hard work at Battle Creek. Unable to be idle, he worked in a tent meeting in Oakland, and this is where he restarted *Signs of the Times*.

At 60 years old, after working fifteen to eighteen hours a day for decades, his health was not so easy to recover. He went to a Michigan campmeeting in 1881 and caught a severe cold. Every day he got worse, and after a while, his wife caught it, too. They were taken together to the sanitarium, but on August 6, James White died.

Here’s a moving detail: When I chose the text above I had no idea it was the one Mrs. White also chose, to close the writing called, “The Death of My Husband.” In her grief, she was still able to write, “I take up my lifework alone, in full confidence that my Redeemer will be with me.”

And He was.

God of the Valley of Tears, You are with us in every grief and trouble, weeping with us, yet also comforting us. Mrs. White knew she would see her beloved again. I want to live in that certainty, too, no matter what.

That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:10, NIV

Ellen Gould Harmon was born, one of twin girls, November 26, 1827. She was raised in a loving, Christian family who taught her to love and follow God.

When Ellen was on her way home from school at the age of nine, a simple incident changed her life dramatically forever. She said something that an older girl took offense at. The older girl threw a rock, and it hit Ellen between the eyes, causing such serious injury that Ellen had to be carried home and hovered between life and death for weeks.

Her father was away, and when he came home Ellen was finally out of bed, but he literally did not recognize her. Ellen was a very sensitive child, and was hurt by this, too young to understand why her father didn’t know his own daughter, but he apologized and comforted her.

By this time, it was clear that she would live, but her injury had not only disfigured her face, but also caused breathing difficulties, headaches, and other health problems, which affected her for the rest of her life.

During the two years following her injury, she still wanted so badly to go to school that she kept trying. She would be so weak she’d have to come home and rest for weeks. At the school, the girl who had thrown the rock was appointed monitor, and as Ellen recorded in her diary, the other girl was so terribly sorry, and patiently did her best to help Ellen with her reading and writing.

This is a part of the story that is not so familiar, but provides an excellent example to us when we are hurt or when we hurt others. We can try to make amends if we are the injurer, and we can be forgiving if we are the injured. The fact is, we’ll be both more than once in our lives.

It became clear that Ellen would no longer be able to go to school or to study too deeply. She was so disappointed, and resigned herself to being an invalid. Little did she know God had plans she could never have imagined!

Forgiving Lord, even on the cross You begged forgiveness for those who hurt You. Help me to have that attitude, to be willing to forgive as I am forgiven. Help me also not to lose my temper in the first place, but if I do, to be willing to make amends in any way I can.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:3, NIV*

Have you ever felt as though your emotions had you on a roller-coaster? Up one minute, down the next, high as a kite or low as the very bottom of Mammoth Cave? Are you sick of people telling you it has to do with being young, that your feelings will settle (at least somewhat) as you grow older?

You are not alone. Ellen Harmon was a super-sensitive child, and you can see what I mean by reading some of her own stories in *Life Sketches* or the first volume of the *Commentary*. When she was 12 years old, she and her family went to hear William Miller. She was impressed not just by his Bible knowledge, but by his kindness and compassion, as he would stop speaking to help some elderly person to a seat. She says they started calling him “Father Miller.”

Ellen was entranced by Miller’s explanation of prophecy, too. At one of these meetings, impressed that if Jesus was coming soon, she’d better get ready, she went forward. She tried her very hardest to be good enough, Christian enough, to be saved, but continued to feel frightened and discouraged. Her own sins looked insurmountable to her, and every little thing made her feel she was separated from God again.

A while later, the family went to a Methodist campmeeting, and this time she begged God, “Help me, or I perish!” She gave herself to Him without reserve, and a new peace, so unfamiliar that she called it “a strange peace,” came over her.

When they came home, Ellen was baptized, choosing immersion. She felt the joyful glow of a new connection with God. In fact, she felt so much better that she tried school again, but poor health forced her home. Once again, she was sorrowful, because while at the young ladies’ seminary she had been tempted by worldly distractions and feared that she was lost again.

She kept doing the only thing she knew—praying with all her heart.

God of the discouraged heart, I know how Ellen felt. Sometimes I feel like that. Other times, it seems I don’t care about anything except what I want. I hope You understand me, because I don’t understand myself! I’m glad You love me, anyway. Help me to love You back, and to stick with You, no matter where the roller-coaster takes me.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:3, NIV
“I live in the high and holy places, but also with the low-spirited, the spirit-crushed, and what I do is put new spirit in them, get them up and on their feet again.” Isaiah 57:15, The Message

One of the major reasons why Ellen Harmon as a young girl was so easily beset by despair was that she was taught to believe in an eternally-burning hell. Not only that, but the preachers at the churches she attended used to describe the tortures of this hell in gruesome detail. A sensitive child like Ellen could barely withstand such mental anguish, and it was not exactly conducive to trust in a loving heavenly Father! Ellen hated to see anything in pain, so how could a holy God take delight in the torture of His children? Yet, if it were true . . . and if Jesus were coming in a couple of years . . . and if she weren’t quite perfect enough . . .

You can see the cause of her terror and nights of prayer and anguish.

Finally, she confessed all her difficulties to her mother, which she probably should have done sooner. Mother listened, comforted, and then sent her to talk to a gentle, godly man named Elder Stockman.

Elder Stockman heard it all. Then he said, “Ellen, you are only a child. Yours is a most singular experience for one of your tender age. Jesus must be preparing you for some special work.” (He little knew!) After more discussion and explanation, he told her kindly, “Go free, Ellen. Return to your home trusting in Jesus, for He will not withhold His love from any true seeker.” Then he prayed earnestly for her.

Mrs. White later recorded, “During the few minutes in which I received instruction from Elder Stockman, I had obtained more knowledge on the subject of God’s love and pitying tenderness than from all the sermons and exhortations to which I had ever listened.” Her heart was so changed that it seemed to her that she could hardly be the same person.

She passed on her increasing knowledge of that love for the rest of that century and part of the next! We can be forever grateful to Elder Stockman, and to all the ministers down through the years since then, who bring sorrowing people to the feet of Jesus and tell them, “Look up—He loves you!”

God of the spirit-crushed, I ask two things: Hold me and comfort me when I am laid low, and send me people who will remind me of Your love. Let me also be one of those people for the disheartened around me. Let me always point them up, so that they may also know of Your love.

"I've told you these things to prepare you for rough times ahead. They are going to throw you out of the meeting places. There will even come a time when anyone who kills you will think he's doing God a favor. They will do these things because they never really understood the Father."
John 16:1-3, The Message

Those Harmons were getting in deeper and deeper. First they bought into all this hoopla about a second coming. Then they actually started believing the soul wasn't immortal! What next? It was bad enough they believed such odd things, but much worse that they kept talking about it. If they'd only keep it to themselves, that would be one thing. But they were disrupting the church.

So they were disfellowshipped.

It was a painful day, but they weren't the only ones, and as Jesus had explained to His disciples, they could be happy to follow God, even if others hated them for it. They were so excited to count down the days that their joy was only shadowed by fears for those who were refusing to be warned, not fears for themselves.

But then the Great Day came. And passed. Mrs. White later wrote: "It was a bitter disappointment that fell upon the little flock whose faith had been so strong and whose hope had been so high. But we were surprised that we felt so free in the Lord and were so strongly sustained by His strength and grace."

That was because God had still more truth to pour out on His faithful few. They began to realize the truth of the beginning of the investigative judgment. Still, it was hard to remain unmoved when there was scoffing and ridicule on every side, to say nothing of vandalism and violence in some places.

Then came the first vision sent to Ellen Harmon. She was somewhere near her 17th birthday, praying with four other women, when she seemed to leave the room and be carried right into heaven itself. She saw the "little flock" ascending the steep path by the light of Jesus. She saw Jesus' coming—and heaven with all its joys. She saw the Tree of Life and the throne and the golden streets.

When she came out of it, earth seemed dark and foreign. But the most important thing was that the believers accepted this as the comforting gift it was, straight from God. So the little flock was comforted.

Jesus who still leads the little flock like a shepherd, keep shining Your light around us. Show us the path, one step at a time, and remind us to hold hands and press together. Come soon!

But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. Jeremiah 1:7, NIV

In her second vision, soon after the first, God warned Ellen Harmon of the troubles she would go through. She was to share all the messages she would receive with the people, going where God sent her and saying what He told her to say, but they wouldn't all listen. Ellen couldn't believe He would call someone "so young and feeble."

"How could I, a child in years, go forth from place to place, unfolding to the people the holy truths of God? My heart shrank in terror from the thought."

Her family and friends tried to encourage her, and her father reminded her that if God sent her, He would give her the power to go. But Ellen couldn't bear the thought, and she fell into despair again.

Some of her friends held meetings at her house to pray for her, but she wouldn't come downstairs. When she did finally come down, an amazing thing happened. One of the men there, "Father Pearson," had opposed the visions, but now he was here to pray for her to submit her will to God.

Ellen relates that the thick darkness around her rolled back and something like a ball of fire struck her in the chest. Angels surrounded her, repeating, "Make known to others what I have revealed."

Father Pearson shouted, "A ball of fire came down from heaven and struck Sister Harmon right on the heart. *I saw it!* . . . I will never doubt again. We will help henceforth."

Ellen asked one favor from God. What if she got proud and thought she was special because of the visions? God promised that if she were in danger of that, He would "draw her to Himself by affliction" (See 2 Cor. 12:7-9).

Sure enough, when she would speak, even though her lungs were diseased and she couldn't talk at home, she would breathe and speak perfectly clearly, even for two hours. After the meeting, her disability would return. By methods like this, God continued to make it clear to this young girl that He was with her, and in His strength she could do anything.

God of the young and feeble, of the old, the strong, the wise and the foolish, help us to cling to You by faith, to do what You ask, nothing more or less, to go where You send, and never to let our heads swell because of it.

GOD said, "It's not good for the Man to be alone; I'll make him a helper, a companion."
Genesis 2:18, *The Message*

So, at 17 and 18 years old, Ellen Harmon traveled where God sent her, telling people what God told her to tell them. Sometimes she withheld reproofs, and God made it clear that she was disobeying. Sometimes people said she was mesmerized or hypnotized. Ugly whispers circulated about her. You know what it feels like when someone gossips about you or twists something you said and uses it against you. Just imagine what a position this girl was in!

She went to a meeting in Orrington where she had to reprove some fanatics, and there she met James White. She approved of him and his work, but had no intentions of getting married at this point, to anyone.

In New Bedford, Massachusetts, she met Joseph Bates, who was teaching about the Sabbath. She felt (as many people say today) that he was going overboard, concentrating more on the fourth commandment than the other nine. Of course, the other nine weren't being ignored.

In August of 1846, James White and Ellen Harmon were married. They might have been made for each other, these two young people who had known illness, depression, and timidity. It was as if God were saying to the watching universe, "Wait and see what I can do with the weakest people, if they are totally committed to Me."

Right about this time, the Whites read Joseph Bates' own tract on the Sabbath, and he must have made it clearer to them than what they had heard so far, because this time they realized it was God's truth. That autumn, they began to keep the Sabbath, and to teach it, too.

It may be these early struggles that gave Ellen White the compassion she showed in later years, when she wrote things like this: "We must go no faster than we can take those with us whose consciences and intellects are convinced of the truths we advocate. We must meet the people where they are. Some of us have been many years in arriving at our present position . . ." (3T 20).

This quote is referring to health reform, but the principle is the same in any new light. God is patient. Who are we to move ahead of Him?

Patient, all-seeing God, You understand each of us as no one else does. You know which truth is more needful for each person at each moment. You know which one I should most concentrate on today and this week. Give me Your patience and compassion with those who are working on a different thing than I am.

Our work as God's servants gets validated—or not—in the details. People are watching us as we stay at our post, alertly, unswervingly . . . in hard times, tough times, bad times; when we're beaten up, jailed, and mobbed; working hard, working late, working without eating; with pure heart, clear head, steady hand . . . 2 Corinthians 6:4-6a, The Message

When Ellen Harmon and Joseph Bates first met, she was cautious about his Sabbath belief, and he was cautious about her visions. Neither of them were people who simply changed their minds with every wind. They had to study and pray first. But each was convicted of the rightness of the other's cause, and they worked together now, along with a nucleus of other believers who would form the infant Seventh-day Adventist church.

The newlywed Whites were very poor. Elder White cut hay or hauled stone on the railroad to make fifty cents a day, and if they were called to travel or preach, they could only do it if the other believers donated enough money for travel. They lived in a part of another believer's home, with loaned furniture and two boards on a barrel for their table.

Within three years their first and second sons were born, and they now had those burdens on top of the others they carried. In addition, it was during this time that Mrs. White had the vision telling her husband that he should begin the paper, *Present Truth*.

Still they traveled and worked, insisting that the judgment had begun, and that Jesus would still be arriving sooner than most people expected. As time went on, some began to ask for Mrs. White's visions in printed form, so she wrote her first book, a sixty-four page volume entitled, *A Sketch of the Christian Views and Experience of Ellen G. White*. Today, this is part of the book *Early Writings*.

She also kept diaries, and all through those early years there are discouragements and setbacks of illness, misfortune, and the disbelief or outright scorn of others. She would record the difficulties, but they only brought the couple to their knees, closer to God than ever. Then she would add, "The watchful eye of the Lord was upon us, to see that we were not destroyed."

Watchful Lord, You keep track of all Your children, all the time, in all places. I know that Your eye is upon me, too, guarding and protecting me. Guide me in all my ways, and let me only be strengthened by the trials and difficulties I face.

... in gentleness, holiness, and honest love; when we're telling the truth, and when God's showing his power; when we're doing our best setting things right; when we're praised, and when we're blamed; slandered, and honored . . . 2 Corinthians 6:6b-8a, *The Message*

From the very beginning, there was a lot of controversy over Ellen White and her visions. There were—and still are—those who thought she was deceived, hypnotized, hysterical, over-imaginative, or downright fraudulent. There were—and still are—those who acted as if every word from her mouth or pen, down to her shopping lists, were dictated by God, and she was infallible.

In the wiser middle of these two extremes were (and are) the sensible, studying, praying people who saw a godly, though frail, young girl, with sins and foibles like the rest of us, growing in wisdom and faith as she grew in years, given an enormous gift and equally enormous responsibilities by God, who also was by her side to make it possible for her to fulfill those responsibilities.

At a conference held in Battle Creek in November of 1855, Joseph Bates, M. E. Cornell, and a man we will be learning more about, J. H. Waggoner, were asked to address the conference on the gifts of the church. This address was soon printed in the *Review* and was the first official pronouncement acknowledging Mrs. White's visions as not only being from God, but being a fulfillment of Revelation 12:17 and 19:10, which said two distinguishing marks of the remnant church would be obedience and the spirit of prophecy.

It seems to me that we could more easily guard against both extremes if we would pay closer attention to this phrasing: the *spirit* of prophecy, the testimony of *Jesus*. The gift was not Ellen White's. The testimony was not hers, nor is it ours. These were gifts of the Holy Spirit of God, and they testified to Jesus, just as He promised the Spirit would do in John 16:15. As always, we have heavenly treasures in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7), and we must try to maintain the balance between the two, neither thinking the treasure makes the vessel perfect, nor that the vessel profanes the treasure.

Giver of both the vessel and the treasure, it isn't easy to try to steer a clear path through the deceit on both sides. We know the "earthen vessels" (our bodies) that you created have been desecrated by millennia of sin. We know we never fully understand the heavenly treasures You give with our dimmed minds and weakened bodies. Let me neither give that weakened body more than its share of credit, nor deny the heavenly treasure, but simply walk with You, learning as I go.

... true to our word, though distrusted; ignored by the world, but recognized by God; terrifically alive, though rumored to be dead; beaten within an inch of our lives, but refusing to die; immersed in tears, yet always filled with deep joy; living on handouts, yet enriching many; having nothing, having it all. 2 Corinthians 6:8b-10, *The Message*

One of the most moving stories of Ellen White's life is also a perfect example of the fact that there is, indeed, a Great Controversy between Christ and Satan over every soul, especially one as single-mindedly devoted to God as Ellen White.

In 1857, the Whites finally, with the help of other believers, built a home of their own. Mrs. White was so happy. She would spend the first half hour of the day working in her flower garden with her little boys. Then she would write all morning. In the afternoon she was the housewife—sewing, mending, knitting, more gardening, etc.

Then in 1858, for the third time in her life, Ellen White had a stroke of paralysis, the description of which sounds very much like what we would also call a stroke. For some weeks, she was ill, barely able to move, unable to feel the pressure of a hand or cold water poured over her head. She expected to die.

Satan wanted her silenced.

God wanted her witnessing to His power.

Guess who won.

As her mind cleared, she gathered paper and pen and began to write *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, (the earliest and shorter version.) At first, she was so weak that she could only write one page in a day, then had to rest three days to gather energy for the next page. By the time the 219-page book was written, she was well.

Those who insisted it was all her imagination or deception ought to have paid more attention to stories like this, clearly showing God's power. Better yet, those inclined to criticize might have spent their attention on their own lives, their own difficulties and faults, their own faith, and their own relationship, if any, with God.

Patient God, am I that dedicated? Would I, in similar circumstances, give up? Or, conversely, refuse to give in to weakness, ignore my need of rest, and force myself into workaholicism? Keep me balanced, keep me in prayer, keep me in the center of Your will for me.

Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.
3 John 1:2, NASB

It was in 1860 that the question of whether or not to become an organized church really heated up. For three years people studied, prayed, debated, disagreed, and tried to come to consensus. Both James and Ellen White felt that organizing was necessary. Already, in twenty years, several thousand Advent believers had come to also accept the seventh day as Sabbath. How could so many have unity unless there was some central organization?

Those who disagreed had good concerns, too. They were very afraid of becoming just another dinosaur entity, with lists of rules and regulations, and the power to say who is “in” and who is “out.” These concerns were taken seriously, and the decision was made to refuse to write a specific creed by which membership would be tested. They already had plenty of experience with changing as they grew in knowledge, and wanted to leave room for that in the future of the church as well. We will dig deeper into the Adventist “non-creedal creed” in the fourth quarter. But here is a good example:

Through the early years, many had grown to see the truth of a literal second coming, the seventh day Sabbath, and even the investigative judgment. But no one except Joseph Bates saw much importance in health issues.

In June 1863, shortly after the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists was formed, Mrs. White received a long and famous health vision. It was clearly explained to her that if one wanted to have the clarity of thought to understand God’s Word, and the energy to live it, it was necessary to take good care of the body. This included a lot of things that young Mrs. White really didn’t like. She loved pork and seafood, and the thought of eating only whole wheat bread was distressing to her. But she had long practice already in denying her own wishes and submitting to God’s, so she shared what she had learned, and forced herself to eat nothing but brown bread for three weeks until she got used to it and learned to like it.

The following year, the Western Health Reform Institute was begun in Battle Creek. This later became the famous Battle Creek Sanitarium, which saved countless lives and pioneered the worldwide health ministry for which the Adventist church is most known to this day.

Holy Spirit, I do want my body to be Your temple. I know there are things I could improve, whether eating habits, or habits of cheerful and loving thought. Help me to be whole and well-rounded in You.

[Jesus] told them, “You don’t get to know the time. Timing is the Father’s business. What you’ll get is the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world.” Acts 1:7, 8, The Message

During the decade of the 1870s, Mrs. White, along with her husband, traveled all over the country visiting churches, conferences, and campmeetings, and still she wrote constantly. It’s tempting to wonder what she could have done if she had *not* been ill and weak! Of course, as she learned to live by God’s health principles, her health improved, but she was never completely strong. And the very fact of her fragility makes it even more obvious that what she did, she did in the strength of the Lord.

In the 1880s, after she lost her husband and had to go on alone (though never alone), she branched out and began to visit overseas. She stayed in Basel, Switzerland for a while, and traveled all over European countries, where we already had mission work going on. In 1887, she attended the first ever European campmeeting at Moss, Norway.

Back in the states, she continued to write and teach. Then she and her now-grown son, Willie, went to Australia. By now, both health and education were hallmarks of Adventism, and she urged that a school be built in Australia.

In August, 1892, the Australasian Bible School opened, and she spoke at its opening, making a statement that must have seemed impossible to a fledgling church: “The same work must be accomplished in Australia, New Zealand, in Africa, India, China, and the islands of the sea, as has been accomplished in the home field.”

(What would she think if she could see us today?)

As she grew older, she didn’t slow down much. She helped to found more schools, continued to travel and speak and write, and encouraged that the church headquarters be moved from Battle Creek to somewhere on the eastern seacoast.

She even helped to shepherd the church through its first major conflict in 1888. We’ll look more closely at that crisis later.

The century changed. She could hardly believe we were all still here on this old world, but while she was here, she would work for her Lord.

Patient God, unwilling that any should perish, *still* we wait! I don’t understand the delay, but I do trust You. Help me, too, to work and watch and pray while I wait.

You take over. I'm about to die, my life an offering on God's altar. This is the only race worth running. I've run hard right to the finish, believed all the way. All that's left now is the shouting—God's applause! Depend on it, he's an honest judge. He'll do right not only by me, but by everyone eager for his coming. 2 Timothy 4:6-8, The Message

Mrs. White lived long enough to see the whole world go to war, although the United States had not yet joined the European conflict. She must have felt surer than ever that Jesus was coming soon.

During the last years of her life, she spent most of her time preparing manuscripts for the press. She felt a burden to get as much as possible of the light God had given her into the hands of many people. She also wanted it all edited and improved until it was as perfect as possible. This in itself was a stumbling block to those who believed that the way God inspired was to give exact words. How could you edit and change God's words?! Mrs. White explained, "God didn't inspire the words, He inspired the person." (You can read her complete explanation of inspiration and how it works in the introduction of *The Great Controversy*. It's good reading and makes a lot of things clear that are often argued about.)

Ellen G. White died on July 16, 1915. She still holds a unique place in the life of the church.

According to whiteestate.org, "At the time of her death Ellen White's literary productions totaled approximately 100,000 pages: 24 books in current circulation; two book manuscripts ready for publication; 5,000 periodical articles in the journals of the church; more than 200 tracts and pamphlets; approximately 35,000 typewritten pages of manuscript documents and letters; 2,000 handwritten letters and diary materials comprising, when copied, another 15,000 typewritten pages. Compilations made after her death from Ellen White's writings bring the total number of books currently in print to more than 130."

Pretty astonishing for a "young and feeble" girl, called at 16 to be a messenger for God.

God who calls and empowers whom You will, You are calling me, too. I dedicate myself wholly to You and to Your cause to spread the love of God far and wide. Whether You call me to Bangladesh or down the street, to speak, to paint, to help, to build, or whatever, I know You are calling me to love—love You, love everyone, all the time. Help me to do just that.

Everything's falling apart on me, GOD; put me together again with your Word. Festoon me with your finest sayings, GOD; teach me your holy rules. Psalm 119:108, The Message

John Byington was the man the conference elected as first president when James White turned it down. His history is an interesting one.

His father was an itinerant preacher, and when John was only seven years old he realized he was a sinner and gave himself to God. By 18, he was active in lay ministry, but at 21, his health failed. For three years he suffered from depression.

Those of us today who suffer with depression often feel we are alone, or that we can't work for God. It would surprise most of us to know that early pioneers who accomplished great things by the Holy Spirit's power suffered just the same. Look at the physical weaknesses of even such famous leaders as James and Ellen White!

At 21, Byington began to work again, dividing his time between farming and preaching, which was probably a good way to maintain his health physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Outside time always helps.

We know that he was active in the antislavery movement, going so far as to leave his church when it came out against abolition. A new organization, the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, had some out against slavery, and he joined and became a Wesleyan minister.

It is suspected that his home on the farm in New York was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Certainly he entertained Native Americans and fugitive slaves there.

In 1844, Byington heard a sermon on Millerism, but he wasn't very impressed with it. However, he continued to follow God as he understood it, and step by step, God led him.

God of the small steps, help me to see that no one is too weak or frail to do something for You. Perhaps those who are actually bedridden or homebound and can "only" pray are doing the greatest and most necessary work of all. I want to be like John Byington and those other pioneers, standing for the truth they see, and continuing to watch for new truths they don't see yet.

By your words I can see where I'm going; they throw a beam of light on my dark path. I've committed myself and I'll never turn back from living by your righteous order. Psalm 119:105-107 The Message

In 1852, John Byington got his hands on a new magazine called the *Review and Herald*. He read it, studied what it said, prayed, and began keeping Sabbath.

Not long after that, James and Ellen White visited him at his New York farm. Naturally, they prayed with and encouraged him. For the next three years, he held Sabbath meetings in his home. Then he built a church on his own property. As far as we know, this is the first church built by a Seventh-day Adventist (though the denomination by that name did not yet exist.)

In 1853, his daughter, about whom we'll learn more, also taught at what is believed to be the first Seventh-day Adventist elementary school in a home nearby.

In 1858, the Whites asked him to move to Battle Creek, where he could be more closely involved with the Whites and with J. N. Andrews as they developed plans for the growing movement.

In the 1860s, as the believers struggled with the idea of organization, Byington must have been part of the process. When the Conference of Seventh-day Adventists was formed and Elder White turned down the presidency, John Byington was elected. At the time, terms were only one year, and Byington served two of these terms.

I don't know whether John Byington the GC president had the kind of troubles with depression that John Byington the young man did, but I do know he was still human and had his struggles and temptations. I want to be the kind of person who can cling to God's hand and overcome any difficulty the devil throws my way.

God of the lightened path, lead me, guide me, show me the way. And thank You for Your patience.

Sing GOD a brand-new song! Earth and everyone in it, sing! Sing to God—worship GOD! Shout the news of his victory from sea to sea, take the news of his glory to the lost, news of his wonders to one and all! Psalm 96:1-3, The Message

Annie Smith was 16 when the Great Disappointment occurred. Her mother still believed, but Annie and her brother, Uriah, were not so sure. But you know how mothers are. As several years passed, she kept praying, and kept asking her daughter and son to reconsider faith.

Finally, one Friday, Annie agreed to go hear the visiting speaker, Joseph Bates. That night, Annie had a dream. She saw the meeting room and the preacher. When she went the next morning, there it all was, just as it had appeared in her dream. She was amazed.

She listened to the speaker with interest, but that was nothing to what happened after the meeting. Elder Bates came to her and told her he wanted to be sure to meet her, because he recognized her. He had dreamed the night before that she would be coming to the meeting!

Annie had to study after all that, and she came to believe the message was true. She became one of the workers in the new printing office that was being set up in Rochester, New York. When she wrote a poem and submitted it to the *Review*, James White said she had a talent for writing.

Annie Smith died young, only 27 years old, but before that she wrote about forty-five articles for *Review and Herald* and *The Youth's Instructor*. She also wrote hymns, some of which are in our hymnal today.

Best of all, her experience was instrumental in causing her brother to turn back to God as a young man, too.

God of dreamers, thank You for mothers, fathers, and others, who pray faithfully for us. I will join my prayers with theirs. I want to be instrumental in showing Your glories to those around me. Call me to the work You have for me, and give me the strength to do it, as long as You wish, whether that's eighty years or eighty days. I want to live to serve You.

So turn around! Turn your backs on your rebellious living so that sin won't drag you down. Clean house. No more rebellions, please. Get a new heart! Get a new spirit! Why would you choose to die, Israel? Ezekiel 18:30, 31, The Message

Uriah Smith had troubles! He was only 12 years old, Jesus had just failed to appear on October 22 as he had believed He would, and the same year, Uriah had an infection in his leg that meant it had to be amputated!

It is hard to imagine this sort of sorrow unless one has experienced it. Like many before him and many after, to this day, Uriah gave up on faith. When he was well, determining that his handicap would not define his life, he went to Philips Exeter Academy, preparing to be a teacher.

Then his older sister, Annie, gave in to their mother's urging and went to a meeting to hear Joseph Bates. Uriah heard all about it—the dream, Elder Bates' dream, Annie's studies. He had to admit, there must be something to all this. Maybe he had given up on God too soon.

Uriah studied and made a U-turn. It was 1852 when he decided to give himself back to God, and he didn't waste any time. In 1853 he joined the publishing house staff. By 1855, he was editor. In 1865, when James White accepted the presidency of the General Conference, Smith took on the entire publishing work so that Elder White would not be so overwhelmed. For nearly half a century, Smith was the backbone of the publishing work, in one way or another.

He was a writer himself, too. For one thing, he wrote one of the most famous early Adventist books, *Daniel and the Revelation*. Ongoing scholarship is still refining details of its teachings, but the book stands as a monumental work showing God's leading in those early days.

He was also a poet like Annie. The hymn, "Oh, Brother, Be Faithful," found on page 602 of the Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, takes on a whole new significance when you realize it was written by someone who went through the Great Disappointment!

I'm glad God allows U-turns!

Faithful God, You stick with us even when we don't stick with You. I want to make U-turns if I need to, and then to be as faithful as Uriah and Annie Smith, following You through thick and thin, no matter what trials intervene.

Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. 2 Timothy 4:2, NIV

Can you imagine being called to preach by Ellen White herself? Not that her call is any greater than another human's. The call, of course, is from God, no matter what lifework you were created to take up. But you have to admit, a call from Mrs. White would feel more direct, and less easily argued off as imagination!

In 1852, just about the time Uriah Smith was reading the *Review* and making his U-turn, and Joseph Bates was looking up "the most honest man in Battle Creek," Ellen White (only 25 at the time) called a 20-year-old man named John Norton Loughborough to preach. He said yes. And another Adventist pioneer journey began.

In the 1860s, Loughborough was very influential among those involved in discussion as to whether to organize as an official denomination or not. He wanted to be sure the church didn't become merely a gathering of people around one certain statement of faith, but would continue to be free to worship God as individual consciences directed.

Loughborough worked for the church in New England, Ohio, Michigan, California, and even Great Britain. He often traveled with the Whites to various campmeetings, and they all spoke. Sometimes, later, he invited them to stay at his house when they were traveling in his area.

In 1878, Mrs. White told Loughborough his work "must be made to tell for its full value."

What do you think that means? Do you do your work in such a way that it counts for its full value?

Loughborough wrote two books: a book called *The Rise and Progress of the Third Angel's Message*, which was burned up in the 1903 fire at Review and Herald. In 1905 he wrote another, *The Great Second Advent Movement*, which is available online if you are interested in reading more of what early Adventists thought and taught.

Lord God, I want my work to count for its full value, but I'm not even always sure what my work is or how You want it to be valued. Help me to continue, all my life, to study, pray, and strengthen my ability to hear and follow Your call.

“And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” Matthew 18:5, 6, NIV

In 1866, a young married man named Goodloe Harper Bell came to Battle Creek. Although he was a teacher, he was almost entirely self-taught, except for some months at Oberlin College, Ohio, known to this day for its progressive educational methods.

But Bell was not in Battle Creek to teach. He had been studying too hard, and it had affected his health. A friend of his had been helped by time at Battle Creek Sanitarium, so Bell thought it might help him, too. He volunteered to do light work on the grounds and in the gardens, and this brought back his health.

In the meantime, an interesting thing was happening. Local children, including the Whites' boys, loved to hang around with Mr. Bell, and discovered that not only did he know how to garden, he knew all about the math and English problems that beset them! They begged their father to get Mr. Bell to be their teacher.

By this time Bell was an Adventist, and so James White arranged for the Bells to have a cottage where they could have a small school. Well, the school was small, but not for long! Bell's fame spread, and soon the cottage was too small. He was given an old building the press had given up, moving into larger quarters. That got too small, and he held school at the new church building.

There are still recorded memories of those who learned under Mr. Bell. He was apparently strict and precise, but the most important thing was that his students, whether young or old (he taught all from small children to college students) felt loved by him. He knew them outside of the schoolroom, and he was their friend. He also published eight little books that came to be well-loved, called *Bible Lessons for the Sabbath School*.

Master Teacher, please teach all the teachers. From Beginner Sabbath School class to Ph. D.'s teaching doctoral candidates, and including mothers, fathers—all of us! May everyone who claims to teach or lead another be ongoing students in Your school of humility and faithfulness. Help me in the ways that I am a student and learner, and help me in the ways that I am a teacher and guide.

And then I heard the voice of the Master: “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” I spoke up, “I’ll go. Send me!” Isaiah 6:8, The Message

In Ypsilanti, Michigan, two young people were attending a school to learn to be teachers. Their names were Ellen S. Edmonds and E. B. Lane. They grew to love each other, got married, and bought a farm in Bedford County. But they kept reading appeals in the *Review and Herald* for committed Adventists to enter the ministry. It wasn't an easy decision. They prayed and prayed.

Finally, they put their farm up for sale. “Let's see what happens.”

What happened is that they got a buyer in one week! They still weren't sure. They decided to ask church leaders, especially the Whites. Did Mrs. White see the answer in a vision? No, she and her husband told the Lanes they needed to follow their convictions.

Ellen and E. B. knew they were right. They sold their home and entered the ministry, and right away E. B. received a license to preach. But of course, he didn't work alone. Ellen helped. She preached, too, and some people liked her preaching better than E. B.'s!

They worked in several states, even through terrible sorrows like the death of a baby and Mrs. Lane's illness with typhoid. They returned to Michigan, and in 1878, the General Conference gave Ellen Lane a preaching license, too. She was one of the first women to receive one. Later, the Michigan conference renewed her license at a campmeeting.

Together, the Lanes continued to work for souls. At one point, they decided they could reach more people if they worked separately, so they were conducting series in different parts of the state at the same time. But more sorrow was in store for them.

Mr. Lane became seriously ill. At first, he didn't tell his wife, because he didn't want to interrupt her meetings. But then he began to realize it was really serious, so he sent word. It was worse than he thought. He died almost immediately.

Poor Mrs. Lane. She sorrowed and mourned, of course, but she knew she would see her beloved again, and in the meantime, there were more people to reach. So she went back to her work alone, knowing she was never truly alone.

God of sorrowing hearts, I hope to work together with a partner for You, but if I must work alone, remind me that we are never alone. You are with us always, even when our world seems to fall apart.

Tune your ears to the world of Wisdom; set your heart on a life of Understanding. That's right—if you make Insight your priority, and won't take no for an answer, searching for it like a prospector panning for gold, like an adventurer on a treasure hunt, believe me, before you know it Fear-of-God will be yours; you'll have come upon the Knowledge of God. Proverbs 2:1-5, The Message

Little Kate Lindsay, growing up in a log cabin in the North Woods of Wisconsin, was the descendant of determined, adventurous, Scottish forebears, and you could tell it! She was "Scot to the backbone." Her parents could not understand why Kate was so determined to try everything, do everything, and learn everything about *everything*. She walked miles through the woods to school, and practiced her writing with a stick, scratching in the dirt.

Not that they were against education, of course. They sent her to school. But Kate didn't look as if she was going to settle down to the life expected of girls at that time. She was energetic and adventurous, devouring every book she could find. She even did "boyish" things like building her own wagon from scratch. While she was working on it, her mother had been reading to the children about Palestine. When Kate finished her wagon, she announced, "I'm starting for Palestine today in my wagon!"

Kate wasn't even afraid of the long walk in the woods, even though at first, until some of her siblings grew old enough, she had to walk alone.

Fortunately, she was deeply spiritual and read her Bible as zealously as anything else. So one of these days, surely she would realize that God meant for women to be only wives and mothers.

There was only one problem with that. Kate read her Bible so thoroughly that she left her family's church and joined a different one! That was bad enough, but then an itinerant preacher showed up, with posters of weird beasts and prophetic time charts . . . and Kate studied and believed that, too!

Her mother was horrified. The whole family fought the idea, but eventually they, too, all became Adventists.

Then came the day her mother had been waiting for. At 18, Kate fell in love!

God of the strong-minded pioneer families, it sometimes seems that there is no frontier left if one has an adventurous spirit like Kate Lindsay. I know some spirits like that, (perhaps I am one, myself) and I know You have plans for them. Show us, today, Your adventures!

"Is anything too hard for God?" Genesis 18:14, The Message

At some point in her pursuit of knowledge and her determination to find a way to make her mark in the world, Kate had gotten her hands on a book about Florence Nightingale. It was one of those "Aha! moments" not everyone is fortunate enough to have. "I'll be a nurse!" exclaimed Kate.

So imagine her joy to find a young man, Mr. Porter, a local schoolmaster who actually *liked* a woman with brains, was interested in politics, as she was, and even knew about Florence Nightingale! The two became fast friends and then an engaged couple. Kate threw her whole soul into preparing for marriage, as she had into everything else in her life.

Then the horrors of the Civil War loomed on the horizon. Mr. Porter went to a training camp . . . and died of pneumonia.

Kate was shattered. There was nothing left for her but to throw her life into the cause of nursing—not only to become one herself, but to improve the state of nursing in the country.

Nursing was still poorly thought of, and education for nurses was practically nonexistent. Kate kept up on her reading of Nightingale, now in the Crimea, and learned of something called "the water cure," which sounded a great deal more sensible than the medieval medical practices of her day. She wanted to go and learn at a health institution in New Jersey. Her parents were completely opposed and said she'd have to get there herself. By now, they must have known she would!

And she did. For two years, she deepened her knowledge. Then, since there were no good schools for nursing, she decided to go to medical school. The University of Michigan had begun to admit women, although townspeople thought girls who would go to a men's college must not really be *ladies*, and even some faculty were against it.

The Greek professor was bitterly opposed; he made the entrance exams as hard as he possibly could in order to keep them out.

"Well, miss, what do you know about Greek?"

He handed Kate pages and pages of Greek to translate.

Lord God, may I have this kind of bravery and courage, even if my particular calling is not as far off the beaten path as Kate Lindsay's was. I, too, must stand against trial and sorrow. I, too, will have to face opposition and perhaps false accusation in my life. Let me stand with You, unconcerned about others' opinions if I please You.

*Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."
Matthew 19:26, NIV*

Kate looked over the pages of Greek she had just translated. Yes, they were her best. She handed them to the frowning Greek professor. He looked them over and scowled even more. He asked her more Greek questions, and more, and more, until it got too dark to see. Reluctantly, he had to let her into the school of medicine. She wasn't the only woman, either. By 1876, the board of regents voted that coeducation in the University of Michigan was established fact.

Dr. Lindsay graduated in 1875 at the very top of her class. She immediately set out to change the world of nursing in the United States. First, she joined the staff at Battle Creek Sanitarium. Then she began agitating for their own school of nursing. She finally got one, but if time or money were short, they went to an ever-increasing patient list instead of to nursing students.

Dr. Lindsay forged ahead. She insisted that her students not miss their classes. She lectured on anatomy and physiology, of course, but she also lectured on the need for nurses to have compassionate hearts—to understand that, just as Battle Creek Sanitarium, and indeed, the Seventh-day Adventist church as a whole, believed, a sick person was not just a disease, but a person who had become broken and needed to be made whole again, and that included heart and soul, not just body.

Of course, she was pretty strict about bodies, too. She would interview prospective students in her office, and although she didn't make the interviews as painful as hers with the Greek professor, she didn't mince words. She would check their scholarship, their determination, their preparation, their spirit . . . then she would say, "And the next time I see you, that corset had better be off!"

Dr. Lindsay advocated healthy diet, natural remedies, fresh air and water. She wrote prolifically, started a nursing club, and met frequently with the medical society. She did indeed visit Palestine, and many other countries as well (though not in a little homemade wagon). Dr. Lindsay left a country in which nursing was truly a profession, and it was due to her tireless efforts and the efforts of other dedicated women.

God of compassion, You touched lepers and fevered foreheads. You said, "Go, and sin no more." You left whole villages without illness. And You give the pure water, fresh air, fruits and vegetables, and peace and joy that make health possible. Whether I enter the health field or not, let me cooperate in my own health and that of others.

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Romans 12:6-8, NASB

When John Byington was called to help in Battle Creek in 1858, his daughter, Martha, was with him. The journey was not an easy one. First they drove to Lake Ontario in their horse and buggy and crossed the lake by boat—buggy, horse, and all. Next they drove to Buffalo, crossed Lake Erie, and drove west to Battle Creek. Today, if you didn't fly, you could drive this in a matter of hours.

Martha had been teaching in the first known Seventh-day Adventist elementary school, but when the family moved to Michigan she got work in the publishing house. Later, when the publishing work was moved to Rochester, New York, Martha was still there, and a young man by the name of George Amadon joined them. The two had much in common, and they were soon married.

They opened their home to those who were homeless or in need and were mighty prayer warriors. After Review and Herald burned and was moved to Washington, D. C., George Amadon was ordained to the ministry and he and Martha went back to Michigan, where they shared God's work for over fifty years until 1913. Then Elder Amadon died, at the ripe old age of 81.

Martha Amadon didn't know how much time she had left, but she was determined not to spend it idly. She gathered women, both young and old, in her home to do sewing and mending for the poor while they talked over the Word of God and the progress of His work. Thus began the community services branch of the church, known for decades as "The Dorcas Society."

And still Martha Amadon lived on, more than 100 years old, still attending Sabbath school nearly that long! This one life spanned from the Great Disappointment to the worldwide ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the Americas, Europe, India, Australia, Africa, the South Sea Islands, and the Caribbean.

Ageless Father of us all, to You a century might seem short, but it's long to us! I know that Martha Amadon thanked You for every year she could still praise and lift You up. I do, too, whether my life lasts for another day or another century!

As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers. Acts 16:4, 5, NIV

1852 seems to have been a busy year among the Adventists. A young man named S. N. Haskell, 19 years old, first heard of the Sabbath that year, and his reaction was, "If you want to keep that old Jewish Sabbath, you can do so, but I never shall!"

Haskell was a soap maker and had just traveled to Springfield, Massachusetts on the train. He had a large trunk and didn't know quite what to do with it. The Sabbath-keeper, William Saxby, had a home nearby and offered to let Haskell store it there. He also invited the young man home with him.

Haskell related in later years that Saxby hung up charts on the walls and briefly explained the sanctuary and the three angels' messages. Then he explained that the Sabbath was closely connected with these things and gave Haskell a tract on the Sabbath to take with him as he traveled on.

Haskell read the tract on the train, and he soon began to really wonder if it was all true after all. About five miles short of his destination, he got off the train, took the tract and his Bible, and went alone into the nearby woods to wrestle it out with God once and for all.

S. N. Haskell came out of the woods not only a Sabbath-keeper, but also a great believer in the value of tracts and pamphlets.

When he and his family settled later in S. Lancaster, Massachusetts, he found a group of women there who were doing missionary work by sending letters and pamphlets, and he organized this beginning into a Vigilant Missionary Society. He went on to be instrumental in the founding of Atlantic Union College, and to travel in many countries on several continents, spreading the word.

He is remembered as "the father of our tract and missionary society."

God, You promised Your light would circle the globe, and it has done so. There is still too much darkness, and today we have even more globe-spanning technology to reach all the corners of the earth. Show me my part in spreading Your light.

Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age." Matthew 28:19, 20, The Message

John Andrews was 15 when he went through the Great Disappointment. He, like the rest, was so disappointed and sorrowful that he hardly knew what to do next. Then he heard of a little group teaching the third angel's message. On September 14, 1849, he publicly took his stand with James and Ellen White and Joseph Bates. These became a central quartet in the founding of our denomination. And three of them were in their twenties, with Bates as the fatherly figure of the group.

By the next year, now 21, Andrews became one of the main writers for the *Review*. Summer and winter, on good roads, bad roads, and places where there were no roads yet, John Andrews traveled, preached, and wrote. He especially had to hold up the Sabbath and three angels' messages against the division that was already coming. Some early lights, such as O. R. L. Crozier, were now speaking out against the truths they had once taught. Andrews wrote, "My heart has bled to witness your strange course . . . I leave you to the mercy of . . . God."

In 1852, that momentous year, Andrews held a series in New York. At one of them, Loughborough, a first-day Adventist pastor, came armed with texts to refute Sabbath, and was amazed when this young man dealt with all those texts in his lecture before Loughborough ever had a chance to use them. Many were brought to the light by the work of this pioneer missionary.

But there is more than one way to be a pioneer. About this time, Andrews, his parents, and some others, went to the frontier wilderness of Iowa to break ground for a new community. Andrews' health, like many others, had become poor, and he helped his parents at hard outdoor life and recovered.

I wonder what would happen if some of us who spend our lives indoors gave some time to outdoor physical work?

Creator, today life is so complex and yet so easy at the same time, that way too many of us forget all about Your creation and that you meant us to be out in it. As these early church leaders sometimes overdid it in their enthusiasm, so we do as well. Let me keep a balance, and remember that I can work for You in the good earth as well as with my mind and words.

How can a young person live a clean life? By carefully reading the map of your Word. I'm single-minded in pursuit of you; don't let me miss the road signs you've posted. I've banked your promises in the vault of my heart so I won't sin myself bankrupt. Psalm 119:9-11, The Message

Having traveled widely in the United States, John Andrews was already an experienced missionary, so it was no great feat to him to go to Europe. But it was a big step for the young church. Already, several people had taken the message to Europe and there was growing interest there. So in 1874, the General Conference voted to send an official church-sponsored missionary, and as a guiding light, scholarly writer, and clear advocate for the truth, they chose J. N. Andrews.

His wife had died two years before, so with his adolescent son and daughter, he set out. The work was very difficult and discouraging, not only for the reasons anyone would expect—working in an unfamiliar language among unfamiliar and not necessarily welcoming people—but also because, again, Andrews was a pioneer. General Conference leaders, so many miles away, didn't completely understand his difficulties and weren't always of the best help. Andrews worked hard to learn French, Italian, and German, and so did his children. Mary was especially good at learning languages and at translating, and she was becoming very important to the work.

Then tragedy struck again. Andrews was brought home to a campmeeting in Battle Creek, and because Mary was ill, he brought her, too, hoping the Sanitarium would be able to help her. But nothing worked, and Andrews watched the life of his beloved girl, 17 years old, ebb away. He told a friend, "I seem to be having hold upon God with a numb hand."

Mrs. White sent him a letter he must have treasured, telling him she had seen his sorrow, and also God's comfort, in a vision. She reminded him that Jesus would come again and he would see his loved ones again.

J. N. Andrews wore himself out in the work of God, and died even before his mother, who was at his side when he passed away. He is most known as our first "official" missionary, and for the astonishing feat of memorizing the entire New Testament and much of the Old. Andrews University is named in his honor.

Compassionate God, You send comfort when we need it, mostly through the words and the consoling arms of our friends. Let me be ready to both give and receive that comfort in Your name.

Pay close attention, friend, to what your father tells you; never forget what you learned at your mother's knee. Wear their counsel like flowers in your hair, like rings on your fingers. Proverbs 1:8, 9, The Message

Maud Sisley, as the youngest of seven children, could have been a spoiled brat. But her older brothers and sisters helped and taught her instead. When she was 11, her family emigrated from England to the states, to follow a brother of her mother. To their surprise, when they got here he was keeping the seventh day of the week holy! He explained, and the family soon agreed it was Bible truth.

Young Maud represented several firsts in her life. At 15, she was one of the workers in our first publishing house, there in Battle Creek. She was among the first to gain a Seventh-day Adventist education, because she was in the group Mr. Bell was teaching through evening lectures after work. At first, they met outside under the trees. Later they were given part of the carpentry shop as a classroom.

They also had Sunday morning talks in Elder White's office, and on one of those mornings they discovered the Bible's tithing system. They had already been giving faithfully, but when they realized that ten percent isn't even given—it already belongs to God—then Maud and the others became the first to faithfully tithe their income, too.

She went to the first Seventh-day Adventist campmeeting in Wright, Michigan, in 1868, and was a charter member of the first tract society organized in Battle Creek under S. N. Haskell.

Perhaps her greatest first, though, was when, in 1877, the Andrews family wanted to print tracts in Europe and needed an experienced print operator. So Maud Sisley was the first woman officially sent as a missionary by the church.

When she married a few years later, she and her husband, C. L. Boyd, became some of the first missionaries to Africa, as well, and later, after her husband died, Maud Sisley Boyd worked in Australia. Her last public message, in 1937, was "That God may keep us all faithful is my prayer."

Faithful Lord, Your gospel news has been circling the globe for two millennia. In the 19th century, You were beginning to send the light of the three angels' messages all around the world, as well. I hope the work will soon be finished, because I long for You to come.

I choose the true road to Somewhere, I post your road signs at every curve and corner. I grasp and cling to whatever you tell me; GOD, don't let me down! Psalm 119:30, 31, The Message

The new church grew with the country, and by the 1880s there were campmeetings in far-off California. Young Hetty Haskell went to one in 1884 and became a Seventh-day Adventist. She gave up her teaching position in the public schools and became a teacher, Bible worker, and missionary for the Adventist church.

In 1881, the General Conference had resolved “that females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry” (DG 248). There were already (from the beginning of the movement) women who preached God’s word, and now they were being officially recognized.

Mrs. White never came out directly in favor of ordination for women, but she herself had been voted ministerial credentials by the Michigan conference for many years.

Hetty Hurd was one of those who received a ministerial license. She was known as a powerful preacher and worked tirelessly for God and His cause.

However, her first training had been as a teacher. Not all people who can do a thing, preaching or anything else, can also teach it. Hetty could. She was able to articulately and effectively train others to do the work she did.

So in 1887 she was called to train workers in England. She worked there for five years, until 1892. Next she was called to work in South Africa, and she labored there for five more years. Finally, she was called to train workers in Australia.

There, her life changed. She met S. N. Haskell, who was quite a bit older than she, but who was working for God, just as she was. Friendship ripened into love, and they were married in 1897.

After they returned to the states, they decided it would be a good idea to have a publication that could travel more widely than they could. So they published a magazine called *Bible Training School*.

Hetty H. Haskell died in 1919, having given thirty-four years to God’s work.

Jesus, You came as a Master Teacher, and were most commonly called “Rabbi” or “Master.” Thank You for the gift of teaching well that You give to so many. Show me if that gift is also mine. In any case, let me be a good and studious learner.

Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. Genesis 1:29, NIV

Probably no name was as synonymous with Adventist health care, and especially Battle Creek Sanitarium, as the name of John Harvey Kellogg. He was a physician there from the time it was still the Western Health Reform Institute and continued as chief medical officer for many years.

Dr. Kellogg was a driven man. He believed strongly in the foods advocated in Genesis 1, when God first created humans: plants which contained their seeds in their fruit; that is, fruits, nuts, and grains. He especially believed nuts were very highly nutritious and could help to feed a hungry world.

He also pioneered various kinds of hydrotherapy, or “water cures.” This included drinking large quantities of water, especially when ill, taking hot and/or cold baths and water massages, and enemas, since he believed much disease could be traced to an unhealthy condition in the intestines.

Besides all this, Dr. Kellogg became known for creating a healthy dry breakfast cereal of whole, de-germinated corn meal. Dr. Kellogg and his brother had a huge argument over the idea of sweetening the cereal, and Will Keith Kellogg started his own cereal company, thus starting down the road which brought us the sweetened, artificial cereals we know today.

Unfortunately, Dr. Kellogg is a very good example of the dangers of unbalanced and fanatical thinking leading to obsession and eventually to loss of faith. He held some very extreme views on some matters and was unwilling to listen to the counsels of others. Ellen White wrote repeatedly to him throughout 1898-1899 in words like these: “Brother John Kellogg, my mother heart goes out toward you with weeping, for by symbols I am warned that you are in danger. Satan is making masterly efforts to cause your feet to slide; but God’s eye is upon you.” But he would not listen. He became, among other things, a pantheist (a believer that God is everything and everything is God) and was removed from the church rolls.

Oh, Lord God, save me from extremism! I know there are many ways to go off Your safe path, and I don’t want to go off on any of them! On the other hand, there can be danger in sliding complacently along in the “middle of the road,” too. Help me to keep my eyes open and my heart on You, nothing else. Remind me that attention to the health of my body will help me in this, since my spiritual health depends on my body’s health.

Each day is God's gift. It's all you get in exchange for the hard work of staying alive. Make the most of each one! Whatever turns up, grab it and do it. And heartily! Ecclesiastes 9:9, 10, The Message

We have now seen many, many people give up or change their life work in response to God's call when they learned the new messages that were abroad in the last half of the 19th century. However, Dr. Margaret Caro didn't have to change a thing.

Dr. Caro was an Australian dentist. She did her work faithfully and well, and was no doubt in great demand when teeth made people miserable as only teeth can do! When she learned about the Sabbath truth and the three angels' messages, she saw immediately that her work as a dentist could be part of the health work of the church.

If you ask a doctor, you will find that unhealthy teeth can affect every other part of your system, from heart to lungs to brain. How can a person sensibly and intelligently follow God and learn new truth if their system is poisoned with bad teeth?

So Dr. Caro kept right on with her work as a dentist. But that wasn't enough. She began to share the word with her patients and with others, and soon she was given credentials as a minister. From that time on, she did both. Since she was already working full time, she did not preach regularly, but she took the pulpit when there was no minister, which may have been often in those days in Australia. In 1893, Ellen White met Dr. Caro in Australia. She wrote a letter to her friend, Jennie Inggs and said:

"I am greatly attached to her [Dr. Caro]. She holds her diploma as dentist and her credentials as a minister. She speaks to the church when there is no minister, so you see she is a very capable woman."

I wonder whether, in Australia, Margaret Caro had as much trouble getting a dentist's diploma as women did in the United States at that time? In any case, I'm glad she persevered, and that she received the affirmation of another strong and capable woman.

Lord Most High, You are God of men, God of women, God of youth, and God of children. We each have our part to play, small or large, in Your final work. Make me faithful in mine.

[Jesus speaking] "I see what you've done. Now see what I've done. I've opened a door before you that no one can slam shut. You don't have much strength, I know that; you used what you had to keep my Word. You didn't deny me when times were rough." Revelation 3:8, The Message

J. H. Waggoner didn't have the advantage of much formal education, yet he was a master of Greek, Hebrew, and theology! It seems there were quite a few of the early pioneers who didn't take their lack of schooling to mean that they couldn't go ahead and learn on their own. In 1851, he was editing and publishing a political paper when he heard of the Adventist message.

In the 1840s and early 1850s, there were those who believed that the door of probation was closed and only those who had been part of the original 1844 movement could be saved. So at first, there was some question as to whether Waggoner could be saved because he hadn't been part of the original number.

We've seen how much outreach was happening in the late 40s and early 50s, so it's hard to believe anyone still believed that, but remember that in those days communication across distances was slow and difficult.

Apparently, Ellen White was at the very meeting where these concerns came up, and she was told in a vision to encourage Waggoner to trust God and give his heart to Jesus. She says "he did, then and there."

Early in 1852, he also accepted the Sabbath and the responsibility of living healthfully. He threw his wad of tobacco in the stove and declared he would live for God. And from that time on, he did. Because he was so experienced in printing and publishing, he wrote a great deal, and was also editor of *Signs of the Times*, *Pacific Health Journal*, and *American Sentinel*, a religious liberty magazine.

Waggoner did not fully agree with everything the church taught. (In those days they took seriously the concept Mrs. White would later state: that we must be and train our children to be "thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts.") However, he was a great leader in the early church, pioneering health reform, religious liberty for all, and righteousness by faith.

Lord and Author of our salvation, let me never, never forget that it is You alone who can save! Let me refuse to become involved in arguments whose goal is to divide the church and distract from the light of God. Let me cling to You, study Your word, do Your acts, and love as You do. Let me be as true and bold a student of Your word as these early pioneers.

But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. James 1:25, NASB

Alonzo T. Jones had always been interested in history, particularly ancient history. Even when he was a young man serving in the army, he spent his spare time reading books about ancient civilizations.

When he left the army, he became a Seventh-day Adventist and began preaching in California. He was a good writer, too, and met the editor of *Signs of the Times* and became the assistant editor. Soon J. H. Waggoner's son, E. J. Waggoner, became co-editor with Jones.

Then Jones also became editor of a paper called *American Sentinel*. This later became *Sentinel of Liberty*, known today as simply *Liberty*.

In the years leading up to the famous 1888 conference in Minneapolis, Jones was studying, just as both Waggoners were, the subject of Christian liberty, as well. They realized that an emphasis had developed in the church on obedience to the point that many people believed perfect obedience brought salvation. The church never officially believed this, but many people acted and taught as if it were true.

In 1888, both Jones and E. J. Waggoner gave sermons on the perfect righteousness of Christ, and that the only way to find salvation is through Him and His perfect obedience. Some church leaders insisted that this would make people believe they didn't have to obey the law at all, but they weren't saying that. They said that we could only obey through love and freedom, and that once we were secure in our salvation in Christ, then obedience would naturally follow.

Far from turning away from Sabbath observance, in 1889, just one year after the conference, Jones spoke before a United States Congressional subcommittee and helped to defeat a bill that would have made Sunday observance the law in the Washington, D. C. area.

Later still, he used his interest in ancient history to write books about history and prophecy.

God of perfect liberty, help me to experience the freedom You promise—the freedom You have delivered in Your Son. Help me to let You translate that into free and loving obedience, and may my life, more than my words, be a witness of that perfect liberty in You.

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19, NIV

E. J. Waggoner was the sixth of J. H. Waggoner's ten children. He was one of the fortunate ones who were blessed to attend the earliest Seventh-day Adventist college, known then as Battle Creek College. (It later became Andrews University.) Then Waggoner went to Bellevue in New York and became a doctor.

For a while, he worked at Battle Creek Sanitarium, and later as manager of St. Helena Hospital in California. However, in 1882 he had an experience that changed his life forever.

He was attending a campmeeting in Healdsburg, California, when the most amazing thing happened to him. He wrote about it twice, once in his book, *The Everlasting Covenant*, and once in his *Confession of Faith*, not long before he died. Here is his description of the event that changed his life:

"Suddenly a light shone round me, and the tent was, for me, far more brilliantly lighted than if the noon-day sun had been shining, and I saw Christ hanging on the cross, crucified for me. In that moment I had my first positive knowledge, which came like an overwhelming flood, that God loved me, and that Christ died for me. God and I were the only beings I was conscious of in the universe. I knew then, by actual sight, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself; I was the whole world with all its sin. I am sure that Paul's experience on the way to Damascus was no more real than mine."

Waggoner decided then and there to spend the rest of his life making known to others the biblical message of God's love for individual sinners. From then on, no matter what he studied in the Bible, he was led by that light from the cross—that Jesus had brought all the power any sinner would ever need from God.

Waggoner's turning point became a turning point for the church, as well.

Reconciling God, how can we ever thank You enough for coming in the Person of Christ to reconcile us to Yourself? We know we could never reconcile ourselves to You! I live and trust in that reconciling power every day, from this second on.

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:10, NIV

For several years prior to the 1888 conference in Minneapolis, a controversy had been brewing. A. T. Jones, E. J. Waggoner, and others were arguing strongly that our salvation is *by faith in God's grace alone*. Others, G. I. Butler in particular, insisted that if we said that, then people would think it was no longer necessary to keep God's law at all.

When the conference came, Elder Butler sent letters and did not come himself. Mrs. White, who had come from California despite her own growing weakness, said the atmosphere was angry and confrontational from the start. She said that Waggoner and Jones presented their studies and conclusions "as Christian gentlemen," and begged conference-goers to be Christ-like in their attitudes and not get angry or divisive just because they didn't all agree. She said God is always leading and we should be neither surprised nor upset when we learn new things, but should study them out together, prayerfully.

Some accused Jones and Waggoner of being against all that Adventists had always taught, but Mrs. White said, "Elder E. J. Waggoner had the privilege granted him of speaking plainly and presenting his views upon justification by faith and the righteousness of Christ in relation to the law. This was no new light, but it was old light placed where it should be in the third angel's message . . . This was not new light to me for it had come to me from higher authority for the last forty-four years, and I had presented it to our people by pen and voice in the testimonies of His Spirit" (Ms. 24).

Then the argumentative ones said Mrs. White had been influenced, and they hinted that her prophetic gift was tarnished.

The rift that began at the 1888 conference affects us to this day. Study your Bible for yourself. What do you think it teaches? If we recognize that keeping the law (besides being impossible) cannot save us, does that mean we no longer obey at all? Or does the certainty and trust developed by knowing that we are safe in Jesus make us want to obey more fully, and make us also more able to act and think in ways that are godly?

God of immeasurable grace, thank You for Your gift of salvation! Help me to live and relax in it, and then to cheerfully join You in doing the work You have prepared for me to do.

In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life. John 3:14, 15, The Message

The 1888 Minneapolis conference may have been divisive, but it was also decisive. There were immediate results for the work of God. One of these results showed in the life and ministry of W. W. Prescott.

Prescott's parents had been involved in the early Advent movement, and he had been a preacher for some time. He said that when he first started out in his work, he thought "the thing to do was to prove the doctrines." He thought all a preacher had to do was "simply to demonstrate the truthfulness" of church teachings.

It is worth pointing out that for some minds, this works very well. Logical people, especially those who are already following God to the best of their knowledge, often respond eagerly to an approach that simply says, "Look, this is the Word of God, and here is what it says" about Sabbath, or the state of the dead, or whatever.

However, care must be taken to ensure that the new believer doesn't then think just accepting a truth mentally is the same thing as being converted. Elder Prescott said that after 1888 he had a whole "new vision" of the teachings. From then on, he "cast the whole thing aside and started in the simplest way presenting Christ."

Does this mean not to teach doctrines at all? Certainly not! Prescott said that doctrines could be best understood as "simply the gospel of Christ rightly understood." In other words, once you knew Jesus, and saw what a huge gift He had given to you in salvation, all the rest fell into place. Of course you wanted to love Him and love others! Of course you put Him first in your life and joyfully watched for the promised day of rest and honored your marriage commitments, and all the rest. Of course you would be delighted to learn that He is your advocate in the heavenly judgment and that He's coming back soon.

W. W. Prescott didn't know it, but his work had just begun.

Christ, I lift You up. I want to lift You up in my thoughts, lift You up in my conversation, and lift You up in prayer, but most of all, I want to lift You up in my actions. I want people to feel the kind of love You radiated when they see the things I do.

[Paul speaking] "You'll remember, friends, that when I first came to you to let you in on God's master stroke, I didn't try to impress you with polished speeches and the latest philosophy. I deliberately kept it plain and simple: first Jesus and who he is; then Jesus and what he did—Jesus crucified."

1 Corinthians 2:1, 2, *The Message*

After 1888, the preaching of those who had gained a new, brighter look at Christ took on new urgency and new beauty. Mrs. White wrote that several were preaching in such a way that "heaven's light was shining." Elder Prescott was one of those named. He worked in Australia in the 1880s and 1890s, and he was instrumental in the founding of Avondale College. While there, he preached at various meetings and gatherings, and both Ellen White and her son W. C. White were deeply impressed.

W. C. White wrote that Prescott preached "with a clearness and power that exceeds anything I have ever heard in my life." This was a man who had heard the greatest pioneer speakers of the early Advent movement his whole life! And what was Prescott speaking on so powerfully? Some new truth? No, the Sabbath! White said it had "a freshness and brightness" never seen before.

Ellen White told her son Edson, "Unbelievers turn pale and say, 'that man is inspired.'" She even said he preached "burning words of truth such as [shēd] heard in 1844!" Both mother and son said that this should be the new pattern for the entire church. Instead of finding a doctrine, gathering the texts for that doctrine, and proving it from the Bible, we should all be lifting up Jesus, and then showing how all doctrines find their center and their reason for being, only in Him.

Professor Prescott, as he was called, went on to be Vice President of the General Conference, editor of the *Review*, and college president of Battle Creek College, Union College, and the new Walla Walla College, all at the same time!

Why was he so famous and beloved? Because he devoted his life to lifting up Christ—nothing more, and nothing less.

Jesus who gave Yourself for us, I can never learn enough about You. Show me the same power and beauty of the gospel that You showed to W. W. Prescott and all the rest. Help me, too, to lift You up. Then *You* will draw all to Yourself, and we can stop worrying about trying to do that ourselves!

Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he said.

John 20:22, *The Message*

Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another.

2 Timothy 3:16, *The Message*

W. W. Prescott still had more to learn, however. The majority of Adventists (then and now) believed that, as Ellen White said, God inspired the prophets, and they used their own words to *try* to describe what God showed them. In his earlier years at Battle Creek College, Prescott had read a book called *Theopneustia*, by a Swiss theologian named Gausson. Gausson claimed that the word translated "God-breathed" meant that God literally spoke the words of Scripture and the prophet was really just a secretary.

As you may imagine, this view leads to difficulties, since the exact words of Scripture vary according to the personality and memories of the writer. Unless we are willing to acknowledge that humans vary because God likes variety, and that our varieties don't mean that God is changeable, we'll be pretty confused!

But Prescott forcefully tried to get the college to accept that God directly dictated every word of the Bible, not to mention Mrs. White's writings. Willie White said his attitude caused "perplexities without end."

So you can imagine the crisis of faith Prescott faced when Mrs. White asked him to help edit *The Great Controversy*. At first, he said absolutely not. It horrified him to think of choosing to change or even cut some words. Weren't they God's words? Perhaps this is why Mrs. White wrote such a long explanation of how inspiration worked (and she ought to know) in the introduction of *The Great Controversy*.

Prescott prayed earnestly and finally agreed to help, but it wasn't easy to change his mind on something he'd been so sure of. He said, "I have had to adjust my view of things. I will say to you, as a matter of fact, that the relation of those writings to this movement and to our work is clearer and more consistent in my mind than it was then."

Once again, W. W. Prescott had let God lead him into new light, and he had seen the benefit to his life.

God Who is the same today, yesterday, and tomorrow, don't let me get confused because we humans change every other second! I know that Your truths and words are so far beyond our understanding that the best we can do is relate what You have done for us and hope it resonates with someone else. I know that the *whole* Bible, taken together, is Your Word. And I want to be able to see how my understanding of that can be deepened by seeing the different ways that different people try to describe Your awesome work.

In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, since you are Christ's family, then you are Abraham's famous "descendant," heirs according to the covenant promises. Galatians 3:28, 29, The Message

In 1855, a baby boy was born in Virginia. His name was Charles Kinny, and he was as cute and wrinkled as any other baby, but this tiny boy was a slave. His mother was treated as a piece of property, with no rights, and so was Charles. His fate was to work his whole life at the whim of his owners.

Except for one thing—God had called on the people of this nation to get rid of slavery once and for all. In 1865, when Charles was ten years old, the Civil War was over, and he was free!

As a young man, Kinny worked his way west to a wild and wooly frontier town called Reno, Nevada. We don't know much about his education, but he must have been able to read and write, at the very least, and his intelligence must have shown, given what was soon to happen to him.

Adventist evangelism, in the hands of J. N. Loughborough, had reached all the way out to the desert, and Kinny heard a series about Bible truth that changed his life. Not only that, Mrs. White herself preached, and Charles Kinny never forgot that sermon. A tiny, seven-member church was chartered, and Kinny, age 23, was a member, and promptly became church clerk and secretary of the grandly named Nevada Tract and Missionary Society.

He was so good at his job, keeping meticulous records and writing articulate and convincing essays and articles about his new faith, that local members, along with the California conference, sent him to Healdsburg College (now Pacific Union College) for higher education. He was blessed to hear Mrs. White speak many times, since she was living and working in that area during this time.

Charles Kinny had risen a long way in the world from his unpromising beginning. But God had only begun.

God of hope, You watched over Your people as they suffered through centuries of slavery and oppression, and at last, You freed them. You bless all who live, but You can only work closely with those who turn to You. Help me never to let unpromising beginnings or apparent barriers make me think I can't work for You.

I, Paul, am a devoted slave of Jesus Christ on assignment, authorized as an apostle to proclaim God's words and acts. Romans 1:1, The Message

The Greek word *apostolos* means "delegate, messenger, one sent forth with orders." It is usually only applied to the twelve apostles of Jesus, but the gift is still active today as God calls people to go forth and set up new churches, just as Paul and Peter did. Charles Kinny did just that.

Paul, probably the most preeminent apostle of New Testament times, far from taking credit or being proud of being an apostle, called himself a "slave to Jesus." Kinny could have said that, too. He had personal experience of what it meant to belong, body and soul, to someone, and he would tell you that there's a world of difference between being owned by a human, against your will, and giving yourself to God in love, to be used as He chooses.

As soon as he finished college, Kinny was sent by the conference to work especially among black people in Topeka, Kansas, which he did with great dedication, and then later, in St. Louis. Here, for what appears to be the first time, Kinny discovered, to his sorrow, that even Christians, even Adventists who were supposed to be getting ready for Jesus to come, could be prejudiced and cruel. He was encouraged by the General Conference secretary, and Mrs. White, too, as they pointed out the problem and rebuked those responsible for it.

Kinny began to work among the people in the border south, organizing churches, encouraging families, debating local ministers. He reported weekly, directly to the General Conference.

In 1891, Mrs. White made an appeal to the General Conference Committee for more faithful work among people of all races, especially those who had been so devastated by the recent war. Kinny spoke, too, outlining methods he thought would be helpful in reaching southern black people. He organized more churches in Kentucky and Tennessee. He also called for a fulltime white minister to be sent to work in the south.

Today, Kinny is thought of as the "founder of Black Adventism."

God of the lonely, the oppressed, the left out, I have felt lonely, oppressed, and left out. I have seen prejudice and injustice, from one side or the other. Convict my heart, if I have contributed to it, in any way whatsoever, and help me to be open and loving to all people.

"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star." Revelation 22:16, NIV

The second of Elder and Mrs. White's three surviving sons was James Edson, called Edson his whole life. By the time he was 15 years old, he was working in the Review and Herald publishing office, and he soon became an expert. In 1877, the newer Pacific Press Publishing Association called Edson to be their secretary and printing plant manager. For the rest of the 19th century, he worked in publishing, also writing many books of his own, including *Song Anchor* and *Temperance Songs*.

But around the turn of the century, Edson White was in a spiritual slump. I'm sure you know the feeling. It's not that you don't believe anymore, but the spice has gone out of things. Sometimes new work is what's required.

In 1893, Edson came across a tract that had been made of an address his mother gave at GC in 1891, entitled, *Our Duty to the Colored People*. ("Colored" was the courteous term for people of color in those days.) What he read inspired White anew. Elder Kinny had called for a white minister to work for the black people in the south, and White wanted to be that person. He designed a river boat, named it "Morning Star," and had it built at Allegan, Michigan. He collected some brave missionaries and began to travel up and down the Yazoo River in Mississippi, setting up schools and missionary outposts.

Some white people were so angry about the very idea of black people being educated, or of both races having anything to do with each other, that the missionaries' lives were actually in danger more than once. But encouraged by the Holy Spirit, they persisted, and within a few years, fifty educational centers had been established, many, many people had been taught to read and write and to have marketable work skills, and scores of black denominational workers were emerging.

Mrs. White encouraged her son throughout his work, and to this day, many black southern Adventist members can trace their family's roots to Edson White's courage and evangelism.

God who made of one blood all the nations of the earth, thank You for the enormous strides we have made in racial relations, but I know there is more to accomplish. Help me to see every person as Your child, no matter what they look like, and whether it is my official "calling" or not, let me come down firmly on the side of love for all.

In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, since you are Christ's family, then you are Abraham's famous "descendant," heirs according to the covenant promises. Galatians 3:28, 29, The Message

In the Bible, the apostles' main work was evangelizing. That is, instead of settling down to pastor one church, they traveled from place to place, delivering lectures, telling the stories of Jesus and of what the Holy Spirit had been accomplishing since Jesus' death and resurrection. Generally, a new church would be raised up in the place where the apostle had preached. Then the apostle would leave that church to appoint its own leaders while he traveled on to seed the work in new places.

Lulu Wightman was a young woman who did this very work. We do not have her birth and death dates, so we don't know how young she was when she first felt God calling her to fulltime ministry, but her husband, John, encouraged her from the first, and she had been preaching some time when her first baby was born, so she must have been young.

At first, the conference was uncertain as to how young Mrs. Wightman should carry out her call. There seems to have been little doubt that she did have a call, although not everyone was comfortable with the idea of a young woman preaching.

An established New York minister, Elder Raymond, agreed to have her on his evangelism team, but was lukewarm about it. He said she would receive a small stipend, but her husband, even though he helped, would get no pay. Meanwhile, Elder Raymond urged the conference to pay travel expenses for another minister's wife. He didn't seem to see the inconsistency.

However, while he was making up his mind, Lulu and John Wightman were already holding meetings in a nearby town, and were met with such success that Elder Raymond was called in to organize a twenty-six-member company with the interests Mrs. Wightman's preaching had raised.

Creator of male and female, You said You would pour out Your Spirit on young and old, male and female, people of all kinds and colors and measures of experience. The truth is, You send Your Spirit where You will, and we don't have any say about it except "yes" or "no." I'll say "yes." I promise.

People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved. Acts 2:47, The Message

Lulu Wightman's preaching was powerful and well-received everywhere she went. Her husband's expertise was in newspaper writing and editing, and his specialty was to promote her series through newspapers and handbills. They would come into a town, John would advertise, and people would pack the halls, sometimes standing outside because the inside was too full to get in. A new church would nearly always be the result. The conference would send a pastor, and the Wightmans would move on to the next area.

One reason for this is that Lulu Wightman didn't want the people to think too much of her personally. She knew that from the time of Paul and Apollos to recent times, there is always a human tendency to idolize evangelists, and she didn't want to encourage that attitude.

By 1897, Pastor Cobb, of the New York conference, wrote to the conference president about the work of women Bible workers. As an example, he added: "Look at Sr. Lulu W's work. She has accomplished more in the last two years than any minister in the state, and yet the conference has held her off at arms length, and refused to recognize her as a suitable person to present the truth: when in fact she was out of sight of the very ones that opposed her, in point of ability. (You know who I mean). I am ... in favor of giving license to Sr. Lulu Wightman to preach, and if Bro. W is a man of ability and works with his wife and promises to make a successful laborer, I am in favor of giving him license also."

Lulu got her license that year, and seven years later, John was given a ministerial license, too. Wightmans' ministry was so successful that she ranks as the most outstanding evangelist in New York during her time and among the most successful Adventist evangelists of any time. She established new churches in New York at Hornellsville, Gas Springs, Wallace, Silver Creek, Geneva, Angola, Gorham, Fredonia, Avoca, Rushville, Canandaigua, and Penn Yan.

It's a good thing she said "yes" when God called her!

Master of all the evangelists, I'd like to make a special prayer for all of them, wherever they are in the world right now. They work on the front lines of Your final push to spread the gospel to all nations. Show me how I am to evangelize, too—whether You call me to official fulltime work, or whether I spread the word only to my own family and friends.

"I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down. I want you to get up and enter the city. In the city you'll be told what to do next." Acts 9:6, The Message

Like Saul of Tarsus, Anna Knight was a strong, determined, and brilliant person. There was just one problem—neither of them was following God. But God knows how to get hold of stubborn people, too, thank the Lord!

Anna was born in Mississippi in 1874 to her mother, a slave, and her mother's white employer, and she seems to have come out with a chip on her shoulder. She was fiercely determined and courageous. Her life was often in danger, so she carried a revolver and was an expert shot.

However, Anna had a desire for better things. Her mother worked diligently and saved every penny to buy eighty acres of her own. Besides that, the family homesteaded eighty more acres next door. Anna was determined to learn to read and write, although she was not allowed to go to school with white children. Friends loaned her books, and she practiced hard.

She became a passionate reader, and in the course of time, was able to get her hands on some mail-order magazines and catalogues. She even picked up some pen pals. One of them was a Seventh-day Adventist who began to send her Adventist literature, as well as letters. Anna began to keep the Sabbath, which made her family think too much reading had made her crazy.

Anna and her brother, through much work, owned a bale of cotton between them, and she used the proceeds from her share of the sale to move to Chattanooga for more instruction. She stayed with an Adventist family, and while there, was baptized herself.

When she went home and refused to plow on Sabbath, doing her best to explain to her mother why she wanted to do it on Sunday instead, her mother was furious, and told her she had to either give up this seventh day foolishness or leave home.

Anna didn't know what to do, but she prayed hard, believing that God would guide.

Guide and Protector, You have Your hand over those who are in the painful position of having to go against family in order to follow You. You know what it feels like, since Your family didn't understand You when You were here. Help me to be compassionate to people I know who are in that position, and bless me, too, if I face such difficulties. Help me to honor You and my family, even if those two duties seem to conflict.

Jesus said, “Mark my words, no one who sacrifices house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, land—whatever—because of me and the Message will lose out. They’ll get it all back, but multiplied many times in homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and land—but also in troubles. And then the bonus of eternal life! This is once again the Great Reversal: Many who are first will end up last, and the last first.” Mark 10:29-31, The Message

Sorrowfully, Anna decided she would have to leave home. She was able to attend Mount Vernon Academy in Ohio for one year, and then Battle Creek College, working under Dr. Kellogg, and graduated in 1898 as a missionary nurse.

She knew of a very needy mission field—her home state of Mississippi. She taught an 8-grade school, two outreach classes on Sundays, as well as teaching adults reading, writing, practical arithmetic, and healthful cooking and living. Her temperance work upset local moonshiners, but they soon figured out they’d met their match in Anna.

Dr. Kellogg was so impressed with Miss Knight that he arranged for her to be a representative at the 1901 Battle Creek General Conference. At this conference, Knight responded to a call to be a missionary to India.

She went to Calcutta, the second black Adventist foreign missionary, first black female missionary, and first African American to do missionary work in India. Here, her youthful experience in plowing stood her in good stead. The Indians had never used an American-style plow, but there was one there, and Anna hitched up water buffaloes and taught them to use it, bringing local fame on herself and encouraging the people to grow their own food.

Back in the states, Knight established a school and a hospital, administered another hospital in Atlanta, and became the first president of the National Colored Teachers Association of Seventh-day Adventists. She led this association for nearly fifty years, helping to fund scholarships, starting dozens of schools, improving Oakwood College, and speaking all over the place.

Anna Knight lived until 1970, and to this day is a beloved memory in the south. The elementary school at Oakwood University is named for her.

Lord, let me be as faithful as Anna Knight was—overcoming all odds and seeking only to serve You and help fellow men, women, and children.

“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:19, NIV

You could say that James Humphrey was a missionary to the United States. He was born, raised, and educated in Jamaica, where he gained honors as a gifted student and speaker. He was married and became a Baptist minister.

Humphrey had a commanding presence. For one thing, he was well over six feet tall and slender enough that he drew attention wherever he went. For another thing, he wore his hair in something of a “pompadour,” parting it on the left and heaping it up on the right. As he aged, his hair became salt and pepper and then pure white, so that this, too, drew attention. None of that was important, though. What mattered was his charismatic and convincing speaking ability, whether in public or one-on-one.

He was concerned his entire life about the problems of those who, like him, were of African heritage, so as a young man in 1901 he set out to visit Africa itself. The trip made a stop at New York City, where Humphrey’s life was drastically altered.

In New York, a man named Carroll had been converted to Adventism as a result of S. N. Haskell’s labors. Now Carroll was holding house meetings, and Humphrey somehow heard of them and attended one.

Well, he thought what he heard made simple good sense. So he left the Baptist ministry and became a Seventh-day Adventist. He could see that the people right there in New York needed him, so he decided not to go to Africa after all. He sent for his wife to join him from Jamaica, and he was chosen to lead the company that had been formed as a result of Carroll’s efforts.

It was only ten people, but they mattered to God—and to James Humphrey.

God of all nations, sometimes we get the idea that to be a missionary we have to travel afar to share Your Word. Let us realize that we can serve You right in our own countries, even in our own neighborhood. Help us to pray for discernment, guidance, and direction to see where we can serve You best.

This is the kind of fast day I'm after: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed. . . sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad . . . Do this . . . and your lives will turn around at once . . . Then when you pray, God will answer. Selections from Isaiah 58:6-9, The Message

James Humphrey rose rapidly in the church between 1903 and 1913, working as a pastor, then being ordained, serving on the Conference Executive Committee, and then on the newly formed North American Negro Department.

He was never blind to the ways that race still played a negative role, even in the church. In fact, one friend told him he ought to leave the denomination because of the way black people were treated.

Humphrey said, "I flatly refused to do it."

He wanted to stay inside and try to change things. He used the gifts he had—persuasive leadership and excellent speaking and organizational skills. He held tent revivals and began raising large churches all over New York. By 1922 he had four mostly black churches under his leadership.

His first one, First Harlem Church, was growing so rapidly that its building couldn't contain it, so in 1924, he began Harlem Number Two, pastoring both. Between 1920 and 1927 he baptized over 200 persons.

But Humphrey also took seriously the Bible's consistent injunction to work against poverty and injustice. He planned the Utopia Park Benevolent Association project, where African Americans could obtain health, educational, and recreation facilities, and to finance it, he would sell lots to any black person "of good moral standing."

The conference tried to stop or gain control of this project, but Humphrey said it wasn't denominational, but local, and belonged to the black people themselves. Eventually, this led to a break with the church, and was one reason for the later formation of separate regional conferences for African Americans. We struggle with this issue to this day. No conference is segregated; there are people of all races in all of them, but there is a definite sense of separation, and varied opinions exist as to whether the concept helps or hinders.

Lord of all peoples, You prayed that we might be one, and that is our prayer, too. There are those who would stand in the way, but most of us really want Your will. Show us how to accomplish it in visible, positive ways that will bring hearts together rather than divide them.

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. Matthew 24:14, NIV

As the 20th century moved along, the pace of life became faster and faster. The world had gone to war in a "war to end all wars," which definitely did not accomplish that goal. A whole generation of young men had died or been wounded, and those who were left, along with people of all ages and both genders, were sinking into depression and a sense of futility.

The message of God's grace and Jesus' soon coming was more essential than ever before, and there was new technology to help get the message out.

In 1919, a young man with a long name, Harold Marshall Sylvester Richards, graduated from Washington Missionary College (now Washington Adventist University). He worked as an evangelist, and he had a way of speaking that drew interest and drew crowds.

He was making a new experiment. Instead of just print advertising, handbills, and personal invitations, what if we bought radio announcements? He had radio ads for his series, and it worked quite well. In fact, it gained interest in its own right.

In 1929, Richards began regular radio broadcasts—evangelism in its own right—in Los Angeles. People could listen in the privacy of their own homes and make up their own minds, without what some might feel to be the pressure of a public meeting and altar call.

Richards called it *The Tabernacle of the Air*, and it was so successful that it eventually grew into two programs, one weekly and one daily.

By 1937, Elder Richards' radio presence was felt on a network of several stations of the Don Lee Broadcasting System.

God was just getting started.

God of the airwaves, we have always wondered how "this gospel of the kingdom" was going to go to the *whole world!* Today, of course, I have access Elder Richards could not have dreamed of. Help me to use it well, and to use it for You.

"I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises."
Hebrews 2:12, NIV

In the late 1930s more exciting things were happening. A male quartet called the Lone Star Four had come to stay temporarily at the Glendale Sanitarium and hospital, where they met Elder Richards, of local radio fame. At that time, he was also chaplain of the hospital.

These four young men, three of them brothers, Louis, Waldo, and Wesley Crane, plus the bass, Raymond Turner, loved singing so much that they had all taken nursing so they could find jobs at the same places and keep singing together. Their wives were nurses, too, and at the moment, the only way the Lone Star Four (plus wives) were eating was by the women taking cases and the men gathering wild turnip greens!

H. M. S. Richards thought this quartet was just what he needed. He helped as much as he could from the small evangelism budget while he worked it out for the four to work permanently with him and get on the payroll.

In 1937, two important things took place. The name of the radio show was changed to the *Voice of Prophecy*, and the quartet, already getting popular, was renamed by radio contest as the "King's Heralds."

This combination was destined to be a long-running one, to say the least.

In January of 1942, for the first time, Elder Richards and the King's Heralds were first heard coast-to-coast over the eighty-nine stations of the Mutual Broadcasting System.

For many, many years, the broadcasts always began with the King's Heralds singing "Lift Up the Trumpet," and ended with Richards' poem, "Have Faith in God," for which he wrote a new verse every week.

In the past, we were always able to more or less count the "parishioners" of a certain pastor. But only God knows how many lives were (and are) touched by Elder Richards, the *Voice of Prophecy*, and the King's Heralds.

God of even the cyberworld, remind me that I can use my facebook, twitter, email, and all the rest, not to preach or push, but to simply be a living witness for You. Go with me to reread my posts from Your point of view. Have I been unchristian? Have I been an in-your-face Christian? Show me ways to use my influence, which reaches wider spans than early believers could have believed, only for You and Your love.

[Paul to Timothy] "So keep at your work, this faith and love rooted in Christ, exactly as I set it out for you. It's as sound as the day you first heard it from me. Guard this precious thing placed in your custody by the Holy Spirit who works in us." 2 Timothy 1:13, 14, The Message

Just six days after H. M. S. Richards founded his radio ministry in 1929, his first son was born. He and his wife named the tiny infant Harold Marshall Sylvester Richards, Jr. And so, a destiny was set in place.

Of course, Harold Jr. could have made a different choice than following in his father's footsteps, and throughout his childhood and youth he was determined that he would. He was very musical, and he was set on being a big band leader. He sang with his friends and also played in what we would call "garage bands."

But God had His hand on young Richards, and He wouldn't let go. Though he continued to sing and play, he also went into the ministry in the early 1950s. Then, in 1960, he caught his "big break"—the invitation to join his father at *Voice of Prophecy*. Not all sons would think this was a good thing, to have to work with dad, and it probably didn't always go perfectly. We all know what family relationships can be like! But Richards Jr. considered it an immense honor to work with his father for their heavenly Father.

After 1969, their roles were switched—Jr. became the leader, and Sr. the helper and advisor. It was a great loss to Richards Jr., and to the world, when H. M. S. Richards, Sr. passed away.

Still, Richards Jr. carried on. Under his leadership there was never a dull moment. He started fifteen-minute daily broadcasts, the Wayout program for youth, weekend Harvest Festivals of Praise, and the West Point of Evangelism. Besides all that, Richards had many hobbies, including scuba diving, crossword puzzles, magic tricks, fishing, sailing, and ham radio. And of course, there was always the music!

H. M. S. Richards died in the hope of meeting Jesus, his father, and other Adventist and Bible pioneers of the faith.

Lord God, You, too, love activity, variety, and never a dull moment! I know You gave both Richards their varied interests, and You've given me some as well. Help me to see that even just-for-fun time can glorify You and bring Your children closer together.

[Solomon] followed the practice of his father David in setting up groups of priests carrying out the work of worship, with the Levites assigned to lead the sacred music for praising God and to assist the priests in the daily worship. 2 Chronicles 8:14, The Message

The vast majority of the material we have covered in looking at the lives of Adventist pioneers has had to do with written, spoken, and printed words. However, it is clear from the beginning to the end of the Bible that God takes music just as seriously. In fact, the Old Testament tabernacle service didn't even include preaching at all—only the sacrificial system and music!

In the summer of 1947, with *Voice of Prophecy* and the King's Heralds going strong, a new young woman was asked to join. She had a lovely, rich contralto voice and had been singing for WWII United Service Organization functions. Recently, she had joined the church through the outreach of Quiet Hour broadcasts and had sung for them, but she kept turning down a job with *Voice of Prophecy*. Why?

"I have no training! I can't even read music!"

No one cared. Her singing praised God, and that was what mattered. Finally, in 1947, Del Delker agreed to join the *Voice of Prophecy* family, and another incredibly long-running combination was born. Del Delker's name became a household word, and not only in Adventist circles, either.

At first, she worked mostly as the secretary and sang now and then, but in 1950 she began to sing regularly. She also worked to obtain her bachelor's degree in religion during the early years.

She traveled hundreds of thousands of miles, sang in fifteen languages, and today her music is on at least seventy CDs and records. Her signature song, as familiar to many as the King's Heralds singing "Lift Up the Trumpet," was "The Love of God," and it's the love of God that she still sings of to this day.

Loving God, "how rich and pure" Your love is, indeed! No matter what gift or talent You have bestowed on me, help me to use it for You as faithfully as these better-known names. I have no need of fame. I just want to serve You.

When he saw the man's condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. Luke 10:33, 34, The Message

The plight of a person who refuses to engage in war, called a "conscientious objector," used to be a harsh one. During World War I, conscientious objectors were allowed to serve in non-combatant positions, but some people believe it is wrong to have anything to do with war at all. "Why even heal bodies, just to have them sent back to shoot and be shot at?" they reason. Men who held this pacifist belief were imprisoned, mistreated, and sometimes tortured, even to the point of death in two instances. It wasn't until after World War II, in 1948, that clear guidelines were offered by the United Nations.

So when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States entered WWII, young Desmond Doss had a choice to make. He wanted to serve his country in this emergency, but he refused to carry a gun or to kill. He decided he would be willing to serve in the army as a medic.

However, he still had to go through Basic Training, and it wasn't going to be fun. Doss wouldn't carry a gun or bayonet, wouldn't eat meat, wouldn't train on Saturday, and perhaps worst of all, carried a Bible everywhere, reading it whenever he had free time!

His commanding officers didn't know what to make of him.

The problem was, Doss was just about the perfect soldier in every other way. He did his duties as conscientiously as he objected to killing. He even did extra work to make up for his Saturdays off.

His commander tried putting him out as a misfit, with a Section 8 discharge. Doss objected to that, too. "I'd be a very poor Christian if I accepted a discharge implying that I was mentally off because of my religion. I'm sorry gentlemen, but I can't accept that kind of a discharge."

King of heaven's armies, we know that Your armies are not about fighting flesh and blood, but about defending Your children against "rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."* Help me to remember to always trust You to fight whatever battles I may face.

*Eph. 6:12, NIV

When I was desperate, I called out, and GOD got me out of a tight spot. GOD's angel sets up a circle of protection around us while we pray. Psalm 34:6, 7, The Message

Desmond Doss' problems weren't limited to his commanding officers. The other men had a high time, jeering at him, playing pranks on him, and calling him names—especially one name: “coward!” Doss didn't let it get under his skin. He knew differently, and God knew differently, and that's what mattered. It took strong courage to take the stand he took, day after day.

Then came one never-to-be-forgotten month: May, 1945. During that month, Doss' company learned once and for all just how courageous their medic was. Here are just a few snippets from his Medal of Honor citation, available online:

“... 1st Battalion assaulted a jagged escarpment 400 feet high ... machine gun fire crashed into them ... Private Doss refused to seek cover and remained ... carrying [wounded] one by one to the edge of the escarpment and there lowering them on a rope-supported litter down the face of a cliff to friendly hands ... [Several more reports of incredible bravery, including some done on Sabbath, May 5] On 21 May he was himself seriously wounded ... Rather than call another aid man from cover, he cared for his own injuries and waited 5 hours ... Through his outstanding bravery and unflinching determination in the face of desperately dangerous conditions, Private Doss saved the lives of many soldiers. His name became a symbol throughout the 77th Infantry Division for outstanding gallantry far above and beyond the call of duty.”

During that battle, Doss lost his only weapon—the Bible his wife had given him. He didn't learn it until later, but the men went back and found that Bible for him.

Desmond Doss spent the rest of his life bravely battling health conditions brought on by his service, yet he remained active in his church and in community services. He was the first conscientious objector to receive the Medal of Honor, one of only three to do so.

High King of Heaven, we honor Desmond Doss and men like him, but let me not forget that the other men there on that island, both American and Japanese, were also important to You, and that only You know how these events may have shaped their lives ever after, leading some to look to You as Doss did. May my life, as well, point always to You.

Hallelujah! Praise God in his holy house of worship, praise him under the open skies; praise him with cymbals and a big bass drum, praise him with fiddles and mandolin. Let every living, breathing creature praise GOD! Hallelujah! Psalm 150:1, 6, The Message

Naturally, the King's Heralds, though it has continued through the years, has had a number of different men in it over the decades. Beginning in 1943, Wayne Hooper, musician, academy music teacher, and singing evangelist, sang baritone with the Heralds for a while. Then he went to Union College to complete his bachelor's degree in music.

In 1949, he returned to *Voice of Prophecy* as part of a quartet consisting of himself, Bob Edwards, Bob Seamount, and Jerry Dill. This group sang together all the way until 1962.

After that, Hooper was the musical director at *Voice of Prophecy* until his retirement in 1980. However, he never really retired from music. He is probably best known for his composition and arranging, especially for his song, “We Have This Hope,” written for the 1962 GC, and sung for many conferences since.

He and his wife ran the Key Music Company, which provided arrangements and music books worldwide. He produced nine books of musical arrangements, in addition to many solo and choral arrangements.

He earned a master's degree in composition, choral conducting, and radio broadcasting at Occidental College Los Angeles and was awarded honorary doctor of music degrees by Andrews University and La Sierra University.

Hooper was musical co-editor of the 1985 Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal. He also co-edited a companion volume that tells the history of the 695 selections and composers in the hymnal. In recent years, before his death in 2007, he spent many months restoring original reel-to-reel recordings of music by the King's Heralds, Del Delker, and other *Voice of Prophecy* musicians, and transferring them all to CDs, which will keep this special music alive for generations to come, if Jesus doesn't come first.

His last special project was setting Bible verses to music. It is known that music makes things much easier to memorize, and these are now available for both children and adults.

More than 100 of Wayne Hooper's songs are now in the public domain and are available online. His life is an inspiration to us all, especially for those of us with musical talent.

God of music, it all comes from You—it should all go back to You. Go through my music with me, and help me to make sure it glorifies Your name.

It's common knowledge that "God goes against the willful proud; God gives grace to the willing humble." James 4:6, The Message

Sometime in the first decade of the 20th century, a little African American boy named Theodore lost both of his parents. It must have been a terrible time for him. Details of his childhood are not known, but I'm sure that if you'd asked him, he wouldn't have thought God was going to use this early trial for the good of many.

Yet Theodore grew strong and capable, and had both a willingness to make do with little, and also a compassion for those whose lives were tragic or difficult, too. At 16, he moved to Wisconsin and lived with an Adventist family. They helped him to see that God had a plan for him. Later, he would say that conversion "turned him rightside up."

He traveled to Los Angeles, where he met the woman who would be his partner and helper for life, Lila Thrasher. They had four children and moved to Loma Linda for two reasons: so their children could have a good, Christian education, and so that they could have a base for a ministry that would help others. They didn't much care what it was, so long as it helped others and led people to Christ.

In the 1940s, Dawson worked in the pharmacy and bakery at what is now Loma Linda University. Then he was the director of custodial services for Loma Linda Academy and "Deacon at Large" for the 4,750 member Loma Linda University church.

These might seem like humble beginnings to some, and so they were—humble labors for a fundamentally humble man. Dawson wouldn't have put it this way, but can you imagine getting along without the people who run bakeries, pharmacies, and above all, custodians?

Still, as he worked at these schools, Dawson was beginning to see a very important way he and his wife could put their helping skills to work.

Lord of the humble souls, You listed humility as one of the fruits of Your Holy Spirit. You also listed "helps" as one of the spiritual gifts. Above all, You humbled Yourself as a man, and came to live in poverty and trial. So I guess I don't need to be worried about whatever humble beginnings I might have!

He threw himself in with them, got behind them, urging them to stay with it the rest of their lives. He was a good man that way, enthusiastic and confident in the Holy Spirit's ways. The community grew large and strong in the Master. Acts 11:23, 24, The Message

As Theodore Dawson worked and helped, he began to see that one of the most important tasks on earth is to help young people get a good education. The young are the future of the church, the country, the very earth. If they are not prepared to take on the roles that older people lay down, what will happen?

He knew from his own childhood and youth that people want to be able to help themselves. It isn't helpful to just get handouts; in fact, it can be embarrassing and demoralizing. So he found ways to help students work to put themselves through school, from student labor and yard work to literature evangelism.

Everyone loved him and knew he was there to help. He was energetic and helpful, humble and patient. He began to pick up nicknames like Deacon Ted and Brother D.

Still, some students needed more help. Education was expensive and getting more so. Dawson helped to get churches and schools built, bought school buses, and networked contacts with doctors, pastors, and teachers at Loma Linda and in the area. He began to raise funds for worthy students who were already working as hard as they could. At one point, Dawson himself was paying for thirty students to stay in school!

It's amazing what one man can do. In his lifetime, it is estimated that Dawson helped up to 1500 young people and raised approximately \$250,000 for Loma Linda Academy, La Sierra University, Oakwood University, Walla Walla University, and even other schools around the world.

When he died at the age of 95, still faithfully serving his Lord, his funeral was an event. The main message, agreed on by all from the speaker to the attendees was, "This was a good man."

Dawson would have disagreed. He always refused credit for his good deeds, giving it all to God. He would have said, "God is good, not me! Look to God."

God of the faithful shepherds and undershepherds, only You know how many silent, faithful workers You have, helping people, young and old, rich or poor, any color on earth, to see Your face more clearly. Sometimes, we can catch just a glimpse of Your loving countenance in the faces of someone who is helping us. I want to be like that. I want people not to notice me—just You.

First thing in the morning, she dresses for work, rolls up her sleeves, eager to get started. She senses the worth of her work, is in no hurry to call it quits for the day. Proverbs 31:17, 18, The Message

In the early 20th century, people were finally beginning to set aside old ideas about what women could and could not do. As we have seen, our denomination called women as pastors as early as the 1870s, for instance. By the 1910s, equality was on the way. Equality for the races was lagging behind, however, so a woman who was also of an ethnic minority labored under a double disadvantage.

This did not seem to slow down Eva Dykes! She got into Harvard and graduated summa cum laude. She then went to Radcliffe for another bachelor's (magna cum laude) and a master's. In 1921 she received her Ph. D. from Radcliffe, specializing in English, Latin, German, and Greek. She was the first African American woman to successfully complete the requirements for a doctorate in the United States, but I would guess that wasn't her motivation, and that it didn't particularly impress her.

Dr. Dykes taught at several schools and universities and was voted "best all-around teacher" by her colleagues at Howard University. Then, in 1944, she joined the Oakwood faculty, and there she stayed for the rest of her career. Her main goal was not just to teach and impress her students with the need for excellence, but to build faith that would withstand whatever life threw at them.

The fact that Oakwood had succeeded in attracting Dr. Dykes from prestigious Howard University was a factor in the small school's gaining accreditation. She authored many books, including one called *The Negro in English Romantic Thought*. She was also an accomplished pianist and organist and founded and named the Aolians.

For nearly forty years Dr. Dykes, who received several outstanding awards, worked at Oakwood, leaving a memory there that will never fade. All because she went after her goals and never gave up.

Oh, God who created the entire universe and all things in it, what must it have been like when it was new! When I see what people in this degenerate earth can still accomplish, I feel a sense of awe, and also doubt as to whether I can do it as well. Help me to set the goals You have for me, and to never give up until we reach them together, You and I.

Because they were getting close to Jerusalem by this time and expectation was building that God's kingdom would appear any minute, [Jesus] told this story: "There was once a man descended from a royal house who needed to make a long trip back to headquarters to get authorization for his rule and then return. But first he called ten servants together, gave them each a sum of money, and instructed them, 'Operate with this until I return.'" Luke 19:11-13, The Message

As the 20th century rolled on, the hope that Jesus would come soon began to fade. Every generation of Adventists told each other (and still does) "Any time now—keep the faith! Remember, to God, this isn't any time at all!" But it was and is hard to keep from becoming discouraged. The way to do it successfully is to keep hold of the above passage and occupy ourselves with building up God's kingdom until He does return. One man who did this was Eric Ward, a man who was destined by God to do mighty work for Him.

His early work included pastoring, traveling, evangelizing in several states, and writing a set of twenty-one Bible lessons called the *Go Tell* series, over a million copies of which have sold worldwide. He also served as secretary for the Southern California Conference.

In 1973 he was called to be the pastor of the Oakwood College Church and to lead in building the college's first church building. This became today's Oakwood University Church, with its awe-inspiring stained glass windows depicting the entire Bible story, from Creation through the Second Advent.

Pastor Ward served at Oakwood Church for twenty-one years, and during that time the membership of his church grew from 348 to more than 2,000.

As if that weren't enough, Pastor Ward also built the Mt. Calvary church in Huntsville, pastored both at once, and oversaw the founding of many satellite churches in the area.

But that still wasn't enough for Ward! He wrote weekly newspaper columns, did radio ministry, held a weekly baptismal class, and oversaw the first stage of the new Oakwood Adventist Academy elementary school. In all, he baptized more than 5,000 people.

Son of God, Ruler of all, I know that You did, in fact, "get authorization" from Your Father, ratifying Your earthly work. I know that "soon" doesn't mean to You what it means to me. But I also know You have given me means with which to operate until You return. May I be faithful!

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Ephesians 6:10-12, NIV

During the first half of the 20th century, relations between the races, particularly African and white European ones, grew ever more heated and strained in the United States, especially in the south. The General Conference, with the best of intentions, trying both to protect all members from deep-seated prejudices that still reared their ugly heads and also to give black members room to build the church their own way, organized regional conferences in the east, south, and middle parts of the country. The rest of the country, however, simply seethed, and violence became more common.

In 1944, nearly a decade before the famous Rosa Parks case, an Adventist woman named Irene Morgan refused to give up her bus seat to a white person. She had worked at a factory all day, and she was worn out.

A sheriff's deputy tried to remove her from the bus, and she fought and kicked. So when her case went to court, she pled guilty to resisting arrest and paid the \$100 fine for that. However, she refused to pay the ten dollar fine for violating the Virginia segregation laws.

Instead, she appealed all the way to the Supreme Court. Thurgood Marshall, who would later be the first black Supreme Court Justice, argued her case and won. On June 3, 1946, the court ruled that segregation on buses was unconstitutional.

But southern states ignored the ruling. And that kind of attitude is what led to the horrifying racial violence of the 1950s and 60s. Had people been willing to listen to the highest court in the land, whose attention was brought to the trouble by young mother Irene Morgan (later Kirkaldy), many lives could have been saved, among them Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Father of us all, how it must break Your loving heart to see Your children fight, argue, and even kill each other! Please root out the tiniest speck of prejudice You see in me, whether against race, ethnicity, gender, financial status, or just different attitudes and beliefs. Cultivate in me a deep-seated certainty that all are Yours and loved enough to die for.

I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for. When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen. Jeremiah 29:11, 12, The Message

You couldn't say Arthur *wanted* to be a Seventh-day Adventist. You couldn't even say he wanted to be a Christian at all! His mother had decorated the whole house with a big map of the British Empire, framed portraits of Roman emperors, and the motto "Learn to think imperially." So Arthur did. All his boyhood, he wanted to be in the navy, and in 1910 when he was 13, it looked as if his dream would come true. His mother was beginning the plans to get him onto a ship as midshipman.

Then came two tragedies. The first was the loss of his father, a terrible thing for any family to face. The second was his mother's sudden interest in prophecies and conversion to, of all things, Seventh-day Adventism! Arthur was horrified, and so determined not to go the same way that he spent three years resisting any attempt on her part to lead him down the same path. Once, he even climbed out his bedroom window to escape when he knew the pastor was coming!

He finally gave into her persuasions and entered Stanborough College, an Adventist school that had opened in 1902. Then came a much bigger tragedy: the Great War, known today as World War I. Not only was it a horrifying period of time, which left its mark on Arthur Maxwell and millions of others, but the ship he was to have served on was sunk in combat.

Perhaps that's when Arthur first began to think seriously of another kind of empire. God's empire was larger than the Roman or British Empires had ever thought of being, and was spread by love, not by force. Despite how some of His self-declared children think and act, there are no wars (except spiritual ones) in God's kingdom. Arthur Maxwell did some intense study on the last day prophecies in Matthew 24 and made a major U-turn. He would serve God, not the Royal Navy.

Great Emperor, You own all that is, yet You do not work by force to regain Your territories that the enemy claims. And yet, I know You will win—*have* won! All that remains is the mopping up, and the liberation of all captives who still desire to live in Your empire of love. Show me my part.

*Reach down your hand from on high; deliver me and rescue me from the mighty waters.
Psalm 144:7, NIV*

At 16, Arthur Maxwell had made his U-turn and was selling religious books door-to-door. Once, he was walking between two islands that had a causeway between them when the tide was low. But the tide came back in more quickly than he realized, and he was caught. He believed God saved him miraculously, and from that point, began to think God must have a special destiny for him.

That destiny included years of being editor for *Present Truth* and *Signs of the Times*, manager and treasurer of Stanborough Press, and important work in religious liberty. For example, in 1931 he went with a group to the League of Nations to oppose a new calendar that would have made Sabbath-keeping extremely difficult. His presentation was so persuasive that some of the rabbis present hugged him in thanks.

He wrote some books for adults, the best known of which is *Your Bible and You*. But “Uncle Arthur” is best known all around the world for his children’s stories. He began to tell them as bedtime stories to his children as early as 1924. Then he decided to put some into a book. The Stanborough Press didn’t think they would sell well, but reluctantly agreed to print a limited number. They sold wildly and continue to do so. By the time of Arthur Maxwell’s death there were forty-eight books, and they had sold nearly 35,000,000 copies!

He also wrote a ten-volume *The Bible Story*, which is beloved by families of many different denominations and has also sold millions of copies.

When Maxwell set out on his last European tour to encourage the distribution of gospel literature, he was nearly 75 years old, and his friends were concerned. He said cheerfully, “Destiny will preserve me until my job is done!” Destiny, of course, means God, and God did. Uncle Arthur died peacefully the following year, having given all his life to God’s work and faithfully completing the jobs God gave him.

Lord God, You are God of stubborn young people, too. Of course I know You would never have forced Arthur Maxwell to follow You, and he could have made a different choice, but how different the world would have been! I’m glad he chose You. I choose You, too. Preserve me until my job is done, whatever that job for You may be.

*I’m announcing the new salvation work. Before it bursts on the scene, I’m telling you all about it.
Sing to God a brand-new song, sing his praises all over the world! Isaiah 42:9, 10, The Message*

Like H. M. S. Richards before him, George Vandeman was a pioneer in new media. He had begun, at only 21, with a radio job while he was at school at Emmanuel Missionary College, now Andrews University. After his second year of college, Vandeman began working as a full-time evangelist.

One of the things he became known for was his gentle voice, speaking as if he and you were good friends, sitting together in your living room, opening the pages of your Bibles to see what was written there. He was successful and knew he had found his place in God’s work, so he went to the University of Michigan for a master’s degree in speech and communication.

He worked in leadership positions in the church, but he most wanted to evangelize the large cities, and during the 1950s, he and other evangelists, such as Fordyce Detamore, began large campaigns to do just that.

It was around this time that Vandeman began his pioneering work. Just as Elder Richards had realized that the rising medium of radio was a way to broaden the impact of God’s work, Vandeman thought television could do the same. It hadn’t been many years since detractors of television had said it was a fad and would soon burn itself out. However, in 1956 nearly seven million sets were sold in the United States.

So Vandeman tried out some experimental TV programs as warm-ups for local evangelistic efforts. At first, he wasn’t able to get funding and had to put the project on hold, but in the spring of 1956, the first black and white *It Is Written* program aired in Washington, D. C.

God had, once again, begun “a new thing.”

God of new things, You make people new in Your Son, You give us new hearts and new attitudes, You give humans the creativity to come up with new inventions all the time. Not all our bright ideas are dedicated to You. I want all my bright ideas to be Yours alone. I want to use new technology as a way to love You with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, and others as myself.

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Matthew 4:4, NIV

For nearly a century, Seventh-day Adventists, “the people of the Book,” had been known as those who studied their Bibles thoroughly, believed it should *all* be taken together as the united Word of God, instead of pulling texts out of context and arguing twisted theologies from them, and had “It is written,” or “Thus saith the Lord” as their answer to all questions.

In 1956, when George Vandeman began televising Bible studies, giving all the texts on the air so people could follow along with him in their own Bibles, this phrase was given new life and an even more central setting in evangelism. At first, the series was broadcasted in Washington, Fresno, Detroit, Philadelphia, and other cities, but by the mid-1960s it was being broadcast internationally every week.

Elder Vandeman also wrote many books. His most popular series was one called *What I Like About . . .* in which he investigated shared beliefs between Seventh-day Adventists and Baptists, Catholics, charismatics, Methodists and others. He was known as a friendly and kind person who made people feel that he cared personally. Paul Harvey, possibly the most famous American radio personality, was touched particularly by Vandeman’s book, *Planet in Rebellion*, and became a lifelong friend of Vandeman.

His successor at *It Is Written* said this: “George Vandeman . . . had the ability to communicate to people at all levels, but he especially ministered to people who are highly educated, affluent, and in upper echelons of society. He seemed to understand their heartaches, their longings, and their basic human needs.”

It is Written was the first religious program to air in color. What matters, though, is the color and light and truth it brings to people’s lives. Millions of viewers around the globe testify that *It Is Written* has begun or transformed their devotional lives.

Again, only God knows how many people began their journey to His kingdom with the steps they found on this program, because one man was willing to try something new and different.

God of the new and different, give me holy boldness to try new and different things, courage to stand in the face of disagreement, and humility to change or stop if You show me that a particular method is not helping You.

Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn’t know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can’t know him if you don’t love. 1 John 4:7, 8, *The Message*

We’ve spent a whole quarter learning to know our Adventist pioneers, people (most of them young) who loved God with all their hearts, minds, souls, and strength, and sought to learn the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth. We’ve seen how God led them into the creation of a new denomination, and how God has continued to lead through the years since then.

One of the things we’ve learned is that we, not just Adventists, but all God’s true followers, have certain core values, those things which define us, which not only identify us, but make us who we are, and which God can use to draw others to Himself. Now, for the third quarter, we will be studying some of those core values, trying to find ways to make them more our *own*.

The frame we will use to organize our study of these values is God’s “short list” of eternal values, the Ten Commandments. We tend to think of these only as a list of do’s and don’ts, but in fact, these seventeen verses are God’s description of who He really is, and a prescription of who He means for us to be. If we will take the first one seriously—*Make Me first in your life*—we will find that all the others are things God will miraculously begin to build into us. This will, in fact, become the description of who we really are. Amazing!

Jesus said that all the commandments, not just the Ten, but the whole Law and the Prophets (His way of saying, all the Bible they had in His time), could be wrapped up in two: Love God, love others. Those two can be further refined to just one: LOVE! Love all the time, love all the people, love without limits or reasons or conditions. His disciple, John, was one of the ones who most clearly learned this principle from his time with the Master. He said simply that God is love, and if you refuse to love you don’t know God. Be clear—he didn’t say the failure to love well meant that you don’t love God! We who love God still often fail to love well, never love as perfectly as God does, and are always learning to love better. It’s those who won’t love, those who find excuses for not loving *this* time, or *that* person, who are in danger of not knowing God at all.

Let’s not be that person!

Great Lover of all Your children all the time, I want to be like that! Help me to live in Your love, soak in Your love, see and feel and taste Your love. Fill me up to overflowing with Your love, so that it leaks out all over everybody, especially through the cracks and holes I am so aware of. Show me some new, practical ways to love, as I read on.

"I am GOD, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a life of slavery. No other gods, only me." Exodus 20:2, 3, The Message

Our first, most central core value is pretty simple and plain. "No other gods, only Me." Period. If there were just one commandment and nothing else at all, this would be it. In a sense, you could say this was the only one, back before Lucifer started thinking he'd make a pretty good god, too.

Angels put God first. It didn't occur to them to do otherwise. (Until . . . well, you know.) He was the center of their every thought and action—for Adam and Eve, too. Their life was one of beauty and peace, overflowing with love they took for granted because they'd never seen or known anything different.

If you put God first, you'll pay attention to Him, and if you pay any attention to Him at all, you'll recognize His incredible, overflowing love for you. If you really see the *real* God, that is. Plenty of people, now that it's all messed up, have been taught about a god who bears no resemblance to reality. They are right to turn away from an angry, vindictive god, or a distant, uncaring god. Those are not *God*. Yahweh. The One who is. The One who sees. The One who thinks you, personally, are wonderfully made. If you look at *that* God, you'll see the love.

And if you see God's love, then you'll love Him back. Loving Him back will make you put Him in the center even more.

When you see His love and start to return it, you'll love others, too. You'll suddenly start to see that the people in your life are surrounded by a new light. You'll see that they, too, are seen and known, and God thinks *they're* fabulous, also.

If you put God first, the fear will fade. The fear that you're not good enough. The fear that you aren't loved, or that you can't love. Warning: If getting close to God is making you more fearful instead of less fearful, **THAT'S THE WRONG GOD!** No matter what pastor or teacher or parent or friend tells you it's the right one. God's love casts out fear. It doesn't build it up.

If you put God first, the guilt will fade. Oh, yes, you'll begin to see how messed up and broken you really are. You'll realize you're even more sinful than you thought! But the guilt, the shame, the blame, those can't live for long in the presence of the true and living God.

If you put God first, you'll start to live. Really.

Living, Delivering God, You have brought me out of Satan's realm, out of a life of slavery. Show me Your true self. The one You told Moses is full of goodness and patience. I want to live in the light of Your love, and I want to pass it on.

"I'm the only God there is—the only God who does things right and knows how to help. So turn to me and be helped—saved!—everyone, whoever and wherever you are. I am God, the only God there is, the one and only. I promise in my own name: Every word out of my mouth does what it says. I never take back what I say." Isaiah 45:21-23, The Message

If you put God first, you take it for granted that of course there's only one God. Of course we, in our enlightened age, would not worship idols of metal or wood! Of course we don't think there is an entire pantheon of gods up there that we have to figure out how to appease, or figure out which one to ask which favor of. Right . . . ?

When you really start trying to put God first in every day of your life, you'll start to figure out pretty quickly that there are about a zillion different things that try to horn in and take over your thoughts. Let's put it plain and simple again: if it's trying to take the place of God in your heart and mind, that's an idol.

If fear is still ruling, if you're still making decisions on the basis of what feels fun, if you spend your time thinking about anger or revenge, then there are still some thrones that need to be cast down.

DO NOT start trying to depose them so you can put God in their place! It will not work, has never worked, and cannot be humanly done. Give it up.

Just keep putting God first. And keep putting God first. And keep . . . Tell God about the fear. Don't pretend it's not there, it knows where all the back entries are anyway. Tell God what you think is fun, and ask if that's okay, or if He has some other fun ideas He'd like to teach you. Tell Him all about the anger and revenge. Yes, really. He already knows your innermost thoughts. Tell Him exactly how you feel and why. David did. Maybe God has some ideas about how to deal with the situation that you haven't thought of.

Here's another definition of an idol: an idol is whatever you do to make yourself feel better without recourse to God. Wow, that brings some interesting thoughts, doesn't it? It might be something as obvious as drugs or food or caffeine. It might be less obvious, like relationships, escapism, TV, video games, Facebook. It might be something good for you, like exercise or sports or gardening. It could even be religion!

Here's an important clarification: Doing things to feel better is good, as long as the thing you're doing is a good thing to do to begin with. The question is, are you doing them *with* God, or *instead* of Him?

Most High God, Creator and Ruler of the universe, You are the only One. You are all I need. I choose You. Show me today how You want me to live, what You want us to do together.

The Master, God, has given me a well-taught tongue, so I know how to encourage tired people. He wakes me up in the morning, wakes me up, opens my ears to listen as one ready to take orders. The Master, God, opened my ears, and I didn't go back to sleep, didn't pull the covers back over my head.
Isaiah 50:4, 5, *The Message*

One of the very best ways to learn to put God first in your life is to put Him first in the morning. It sets the whole day on a better footing if the very first thoughts when we awake are along the lines of, "Good morning, Lord! Thanks for the good sleep." Or "Thanks for being with me even though I couldn't sleep." Or even, "Oh, God, why couldn't I sleep? How am I going to face this day?" Don't stop there, of course; complaining prayer will hinder instead of helping. But you can express your true feelings and then ask God for faith and strength.

The point is, God is your first appointment.

If you are a morning person (most people are probably more morning people than they think in this rushing, late-night age), it's wonderful to begin the day with prayer and study, taking notes, keeping a prayer journal, writing verses on 3x5 cards to carry with you; whatever makes your relationship with God real and alive to you.

But what if you're not? You can waste years trying to make yourself be something you really are not, just to try to do what everyone says is the "right thing," the Christian thing, to do. The fact is, if you're not a morning person, then you need even more to have your first conversation be with God. It might be, "Oh, Lord, mumble, mumble, please help me get up and get—yawn!—going, mumble mumble." But you started with Him. That's what matters.

And then you can have a lunch hour Bible study, or an evening one on the porch swing, or whatever time makes sense to you. The brain has to be awake, after all, before Bible study will make much sense! And God likes diversity. If you doubt that, you really need to get out more!

The thing is, get your talk with Jesus in before the day starts to go haywire. Before the toast burns and you can't find a shirt without a stain on it and you're late to work or school. Before Satan has a chance to whisper, *You're not really a Christian. You're a fake. Give it up . . .*

If you miss your appointment, what then? Talk to Him now. He's still listening.

Lord of the morning, walk with me today. If I'm reading this in the evening, remind me that originally, days began at sundown. Walk with me tomorrow, and the next day, too. Help me keep on putting You first, last, and always.

"So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all." Mark 9:35, The Message

This is quite a story. Let's look at the whole thing as it's given in *The Message*:

They came to Capernaum. When he was safe at home, he asked them, "What were you discussing on the road?" The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest. He sat down and summoned the Twelve. "So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all." He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me."

Another core value, humility, fits well into the first commandment, too. Once we truly start putting God first, we start to realize how BIG He really is. And that reminds us of how *not* so big we are . . .

Like most things, humility can go wrong in two opposite directions. We're going to look at both of them in the next two lessons.

Many people equate being humble with being a pushover or putting themselves down. Someone thanks them for something and instead of saying "You're welcome," they say, "Oh, it was nothing," or even get embarrassed. Jesus, you may notice, was no pushover. When the Pharisees were wrong, for instance, He let them know it, though always in love.

The other way to go wrong with humility is to be so perfect at being humble that you're proud of your humility. What's wrong with this picture?

Jesus knew we had these difficulties. So He didn't just give us words, He gave us a picture—a little child—perhaps a preschooler. He picked the child up and cuddled it. You know what a 3-year-old looks like being cuddled, right? There's a certainty there, a sense of safety and comfort. The loved child trusts that he or she will be cared for, so they simply don't worry about it. They're unaware of their humility!

That's Jesus' idea of humility. The hangdog expression we might put on is more like the expression of a child who has been abused and doesn't know if he can trust this hug or not. That's a tragedy. And the truth is, we've all been abused by this old world. None of us is really certain about trusting the hug. So it's up to us to snuggle up together and pass the love along, because Jesus says, "When you hug this little one, you're hugging Me."

Awesome.

God of the little ones, be Father and Mother to me. Show me what Your hugs look and feel like so I can learn to pass them on. Don't let me get caught up in either pride or belittling, whether of myself or others. Help me trust the hug.

*"How much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?"
Luke 18:8, The Message*

We said we'd look at both the right and wrong ways to be humble. Today we're going to look at a mistaken idea that can be difficult to catch—false humility.

Everyone knows a Christian is supposed to be humble. All too often, this leads to putting ourselves down, belittling our accomplishments, taking whatever is dished out, and never standing up for ourselves. The falsely humble person's heart is usually in the right place. We're so afraid of pride. We try hard to be meek and to please God.

What is humility, anyway?

Jesus told two stories, right together in Luke 18, that exemplify the two opposites. The first story is in the first eight verses.

A widow who is being treated unfairly goes to the judge and asks for justice. A harsh, uncaring man, he ignores her. But she stands up for her rights. She keeps going back, insisting that the right thing be done. Jesus says she will finally get what she wants, and then defines this as "persistent faith!" But what about turning the other cheek? What about loving your enemies?

The fact is, like many other things, humility is not cut and dried. It's rarely simple to figure out exactly what the right thing to do is in a given situation. That's why we are spending time morning, noon, and night *putting God first in every moment*. That way, when we face difficulties, we will ask Him, "What is the right thing to do? What is the loving thing to do? If I bow my head and submit to harsh treatment, will that help this person to see You? Or does this particular person need to see an example of persistent insistence on justice?

Do you see how the prayers are molded by time with God? Instead of praying all about our own needs, wishes, and hurt feelings (and yes, we will pray about those, too), we ask God to show us how to be wise and loving to His other children, in *this* case. Every case will be different.

Jesus was perfectly humble when He stood before His accusers as silent as a helpless sheep being sheared. He was also perfectly humble when He made a whip and chased the money-changers out of the temple. Remember, He told them not to make "My Father's house" a den of thieves. He could just as truthfully have said "My house," but He was out to defend God, not Himself.

"Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild," help me to stick with You moment by moment. Teach me how to be truly humble without belittling myself or anyone else. Teach me to be zealous for Your rights, and to love even my enemies.

"God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner." Luke 18:13, The Message

There's an old song that says, "Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way!" Pretty silly, huh? It seems so, until someone acts that way. Then it's not so silly. It's tragic.

The other way to go wrong with humility is to get proud of it. Mistake! That's called self-righteousness. Jesus shows this in His second story, in Luke 18:9-14. Two men, Jesus said, went to the temple to pray.

Imagine the Pharisee, strutting, posing, putting on an oh-so-holy face, folding his hands or raising them high, looking around to be sure he was noticed, and praying in a loud, fake-humble tone, "Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income" (Vs. 12).

Don't you just want to say, "Well! Aren't *you* the high mucky-muck!"

Humility will likely recognize itself, though. Last week, remember the look I gave that homeless person? Remember what I said to my best friend, in total secrecy, about so-and-so? Oh, Lord, help me *not* to be like that Pharisee! Forgive me when I am!

The tax man, in contrast, didn't even dare to raise his face out of his hands. He *knew* he was a sinner. What he didn't know was that Jesus could hear his prayer. "Oh, God," he whispered, probably with tears, "Have mercy! Forgive me!"

When you put God first in every moment, in every corner of your life, there will be no room for self-righteousness. One of the most instructive things about this parable is, to whom did Jesus tell it? "To some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people" (Vs. 9).

A humble person who is learning to put God first won't even think of feeling complacent or looking down at the common folk. That person will remember that the one commandment is *love*, and will want to reach out to others, reassuring them, "God forgives. Don't worry! You wouldn't believe what He's forgiven and changed in me! He'll do the same for you, I promise."

In *The Message*, Jesus ends the story this way: "If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

That's a great promise.

Teacher of the humble, teach me. Take away pride and self-sufficiency, and every hint of self-righteousness. Show me my true self—nothing compared to You—and show me my true worth to You—worth everything, even Your life! Thank You!

“When you help someone out, don’t think about how it looks. Just do it—quietly and unobtrusively. That is the way your God, who conceived you in love, working behind the scenes, helps you out.”

Matthew 6:4, The Message

We have an expression today—“people pleaser.” You’ll hear it talked about in support groups, see it used in self-help books, maybe hear it tossed about in gossip. “She’s a real people pleaser!”

More to the point, you may see it in action in yourself.

We all want to please those around us. God made us that way, after all. He created us to belong—first to Him, then to families of various kinds, from birth families to church families, and then to the larger community. I think He is pleased that we are beginning to see the whole world as one community, and especially pleased when we try to love each other no matter what differences we see in looks, beliefs, or actions.

What, then, is wrong with people pleasing? Well, remember that first commandment? Put God first? Worship Him only? So if you make a choice (especially a moral choice) based on what you think will please the people watching, instead of on what you know will please God, you’ve just broken that commandment. Worse yet, you’ve just made those people your false gods.

And here’s the kicker—you probably won’t succeed in pleasing them anyway! They won’t be satisfied no matter what you do, and you’ll go around miserable and afraid of what people are thinking of you. The fact is, if you put God first and do what He wants you to do, you’ll act in loving ways that will draw others to you much better than pandering to what you think they think you think they think you should . . . well, you get the point!

And what if you do what pleases God and is the loving thing, and it *doesn’t* please the people you were hoping to please? Well, let’s admit it. That hurts! You’ll go to God and maybe cry a little, and He’ll hug you and say, “That’s all right, I’m proud of you. And they did the same to Me, you know.”

And it’ll be okay.

In *The Message*, this passage begins with: “Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don’t make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won’t be applauding” (Vs. 1).

God who made me, show me how to please *You*. Show me how to truly love others, so that if they can be drawn to You, they will be. Help me to get over it when I don’t please them and to be willing to admit my mistakes if I really did do something wrong, and not just something someone doesn’t like. Remind me to keep You front and center, and not to be afraid.

Peter and the apostles answered, “It’s necessary to obey God rather than men.”

Acts 5:29, The Message

What’s even worse than being a people pleaser is being a self pleaser. Peter ought to know.

Simon bar Jonah was a fairly impulsive person, wouldn’t you say, by what we know of him? And people who live by impulse tend to be self pleasers. Well, okay, let’s admit that *every* human tends to be a self pleaser!

So Peter knew what he was talking about when, in 2 Peter 2:10, 11 he said: “God is especially incensed against these ‘teachers’ who live by lust, addicted to a filthy existence. They despise interference from true authority, preferring to indulge in self-rule.”

The Greek word Peter used, here translated “self-rule,” in other Bibles translated “arrogant” or “willful,” literally means “self-pleasing.” It comes from the same root that “hedonist” does—that is, a person who deliberately chooses to live by the principle of doing whatever feels good.

Peter used to be, maybe not that extreme, but impulsive enough to scold Jesus Himself on a few occasions. He tended to think he was right, and just go with it, without really thinking it through.

But he did that one time too many. He denied his Lord at the trial, swearing that he didn’t know Him. Why? Because he was afraid of what might happen to him, and pleasing or saving himself seemed more important at the moment than standing up for Jesus.

Peter fled to the garden where Jesus had wept and prayed for him, and he wept and prayed for himself. From that time on, Peter strove to put God first, in the center of every moment of his life, and even when that life was threatened, he stood calmly before a court of law and said, “Sorry. We have to obey God, not people.”

Do we have that same struggle? Do we want to please ourselves first, and God if it’s convenient? In fact, when we are trying to please people, is it really just to please, protect, or save face for ourselves?

God can deliver us if we put Him first. And keep putting Him first. And ask forgiveness, and put Him first again, and again . . .

Heavenly Ruler, above all earthly authority, in my heart I know that pleasing You will, in the end, be the only way that I will really be pleased. In the end, the real me, the me You created me to be, will be beyond pleased—thrilled—by the life that comes from pleasing You. Teach me through experience that denying self is really just denying the wrong self—the self Satan wants me to be—and becoming my *true* self, the one You meant me to be all along.

And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people.

Luke 2:52, The Message

...until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.

Ephesians 4:12, 13, The Message

Some Christians seem to think that the Christian life is all about one event. Once upon a time, at a certain hour, on a certain day, they said a certain prayer in a certain way, and now they are saved, and everything else is gravy.

The Bible doesn't teach that.

Other Christians seem to think that the Christian life is all about measuring. You put a chart on the doorpost of your heart, and you lay out all the rules and regulations, and every day you stand yourself up against that chart and check to see how close you are. Done yet? Perfect, like Jesus? Rats, not yet! Better keep trying . . .

The Bible doesn't teach that, either.

Here's what the Bible says: Growing is slow, like corn. First the leaf, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear (Mark 4:28).

Growing is easy, like a baby. Jesus lived at home, obeyed, and grew up in body and spirit (Luke 2:51, 52).

Growing is hard, like work! "No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything" (Eph 4:14, 15, *The Message*).

Growing comes from God—nowhere else! "We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love" (Vs. 15, 16).

This is the end of our consideration of the core values to be found in the first commandment. When we keep God front and center, first, last, and always, we will grow spiritually. We just can't help it.

God of the wheat field and the nursery, grow me up in You. Slowly, sometimes imperceptibly (especially to me); easily, like a child; hard, like work—be my Source. Let Your breath and blood flow through me and nourish me so that I will grow up healthy in You, robust in love! Let me be blessed by God and by people.

"No carved gods of any size, shape, or form of anything whatever, whether of things that fly or walk or swim. Don't bow down to them and don't serve them because I am GOD, your God."

Exodus 20:4, 5, The Message

We've talked already about the way that idolatry can trip us up even if we don't carve out gods. But this commandment has three interesting divisions that are not often considered. The KJV describes them as "the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth." It's worth thinking about why God might have mentioned those three areas in particular.

In the time when the commandments were given, people tended to look to the earthly heavens instead of the heavenly heavens, you might say. That is, they worshiped the sun, moon, or stars which they could see, instead of the Creator they couldn't see. We don't do that today, but what are some of the heavenly gifts and blessings God gives us that we might be tricked into venerating instead of Him?

In those days, people also worshiped trees, animals, even insects, merely parts of the earth God had made, instead of looking to the Maker. Are there earthly beings we look up to and "hero worship," instead of their Maker?

The "waters under the earth" were seen as the jurisdiction of demons. Most people believed that each area had its own god or gods—Israel had Yahweh, for instance, and had a hard time thinking of Him as being the one and only God of everyone and everything. But the ocean, or even the relatively small Mediterranean, was under the sway of "the chaos monster," or evil gods. And some people even worshiped them, in the hopes that it might please the demons enough that they would leave the people alone.

We know better today. But there are still things under the earth, minerals that we dig up, polish, and then live our lives for, and what is that, if not worship?

Over the next eight devotionals, we will consider what some of these modern idols are, and how our core values might be shaped by our relationships with the heavens, earth, and the things under the earth's crust.

Maker of all, one and only God, keep my eyes on You. When I look to the heavens that You have made, let me think of how high Your thoughts and dreams for me are. When I consider the earth and all its beauty, may I remember You and Your detailed care for everyone and everything on the planet, large and small. When I watch the waves of the oceans, help me remember that You set their bounds, and You are setting bounds, too, for the waves of trouble or confusion that sometimes threaten to engulf me. I love You.

Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth; all the stages of my life were spread out before you, the days of my life all prepared before I'd even lived one day.
Psalm 139:14, The Message

One of our essential core values as Christians is the use of one of the most important gifts God has given us—time. It's invisible, it comes from above, it can't be seen, touched, controlled, or changed, and every single human has the same supply, rationed out at the same rate, though no one knows when his or hers is going to run out. That's why it seems to fit well into the "heavens above" section of the second commandment.

According to Psalm 139, God planned us, and planned our days, before we were ever born. This is confusing to try to understand, because if you take it too literally, it seems to take away all personal choice and make us "fated" to live out a predetermined number of days in a predetermined way. We know that's not right! Freedom of the will is so important to God that He risked the fate of the entire universe on it, and Jesus ended up giving His life and His omnipresence so that you and I could choose, not just what to do, but even whether or not to believe in Him!

Still, in our humanity, we can't begin to comprehend that God is eternal; He exists outside of time and can see our choices and our lives, and responds to them all in terms of His infinite wisdom..

So our time, all of it, is a gift of God. He didn't have to give us any, and He didn't have to give us freedom concerning what to do with it either, but He did. That's why it's so vital that we not let it take over our lives as if it were our god. But that's not easy. Satan knows that if he can get control of our time, he can get control of us, and he leaves no stone unturned to harry us with the urgent, the details, the emergencies that pop up every other minute, the commitments and over-commitments, or even letting other people have too much say over our time.

Obviously our families, our teachers, or our bosses have some say—sometimes a lot of say—over how we spend our time, but God must always come first. Let's look at two ways to make sure that happens.

Maker, Planner, Scheduler, You live on a schedule, too. A thousand of our years may be like a day to You, but You know when You plan to do things, and You can't be rushed or delayed. Help me to live in the comfort and security that thought brings, and thank You for the gift of the days of my life. May they all honor You.

Oh, let me rise in the morning and live always with you! Psalm 139:18, The Message

Time is something that is easy to worship, although not usually in a positive way. It can become one of those overwhelming forces that want to control our lives, and if we're not careful, we end up bowing to it.

Like everything else in life, the best way to keep time under control is to *put God first*. The same Psalm we looked at yesterday has some good advice on this subject. If we read carefully, we see there are two parts to it.

1. "Rise in the morning . . ." The first and foremost way to give our time to God is to schedule our appointment with Him first thing in our day. As we've already discussed, not everyone needs to do their deep studying first thing, but we all need to talk first to God, before anything else, and definitely before Tyrant Time gets a hold on our throats! I hate to say it, but as difficult as this sometimes is, it's the easy part.

2. ". . . and live always with [God]." The second and hardest way to give our allegiance to God instead of to time, is to keep Him first all day. This is way harder! It means that when the deadline looms, instead of giving in to panic, we give in to prayer. It means that when three things demand our immediate attention, we decide which one comes first by consulting with God. It means that when eighteen things, half of them overdue, demand our immediate attention, but God taps our shoulder to sit with a sick friend, or listen to a lonely church member, or stop putting off an apology we owe, we'll take a deep breath, let go of our "to do" lists, and choose God's way.

We are not to idolize the things from the "heavens above," and time is one of those. It is a constant gift from God, and this minute is the only one we know for sure we have, anyway, so let's be faithful to give it back to Him every minute, too. As the old adage says, "Plan as if you will live forever, but live every day as if it were your last."

If you knew you were going to die tonight, what would you do today?

Master of Time, I choose to give my time, all of my time, to You. You knew the days of my life before I came, You give them to me daily with such generosity and love, and I know that if I give them back to You, they will be richer and more blessed for me than I could imagine.

*Become wise by walking with the wise; hang out with fools and watch your life fall to pieces.
Proverbs 13:20, The Message*

The second category God warns us about in the second commandment is idolizing those things that are “on the earth.” In the case of the things of heaven and the things under the earth, we have to adapt the application of the commandment to our time. We don’t literally make idols of wood or metal (most of us). We don’t worship demons (most of us). But in this second category, we have a custom on our planet, at least in the more “developed” nations, that is precisely what the commandment warns against.

We do worship people.

You would think we’d be more enlightened, wouldn’t you? Especially as Christians. Yet, how many obsessively watch the latest high profile trial, or the latest major sports contest? How many of us would never miss (fill in the country) Idol, or Mr. Movie Star’s blog or twitter, and know every detail of Ms. Diva’s wardrobe?

What your mind spends its time on is what its god is.

The Bible didn’t know about the kind of celebrity heroes we have today, but it had its share of hero-worship just the same. People, if you read between the lines of Proverbs, hung out with fools and criminals just because they were “cool,” and some of this “coolness” might possibly be supposed to rub off on those who hung around with them.

Solomon ought to know. He even picked his wives by whom it would impress if he married them! He married the daughters of kings, so those kings wouldn’t go to war against him. He clearly idolized, not so much any one woman, (that might have gone better for him!) but women in general. He collected them like dolls to keep in glass-fronted cabinets.

He figured it out, though. Some of us take awhile.

“If you want to be wise,” said the man to whom God gave the greatest wisdom the world had seen, but squandered it on bad company and bad decisions, “hang out with the wise.”

Who are your heroes?

God of Wisdom, I don’t want to be a fool. I want to have compassion on foolish people and love them anyway, just as You do, but I want to choose my closest companions among the wisest people I know. I don’t want to get carried away in the idolatry of shows and stars and sports heroes. I want to watch You and Your quiet heroes.

The stuck-up fall flat on their faces, but down-to-earth people stand firm. The integrity of the honest keeps them on track; the deviousness of crooks brings them to ruin. A thick bankroll is no help when life falls apart, but a principled life can stand up to the worst. Moral character makes for smooth traveling; an evil life is a hard life . . . Proverbs 11:2-5, The Message

So, if we want to be wise, and to keep our eyes on God, does that mean we don’t look up to earthly humans at all? No, it doesn’t mean that. We can learn a lot from each other, and in fact, it can be as dangerous to avoid human community and try to figure things out, “just God and you,” as it is to lean too hard on faulty people.

There are lots of people in our lives that we naturally look up to: parents, teachers, pastors, older siblings and friends, and others. If we are consciously putting God first all the time, we’ll recognize when those people are weak and frail enough that perhaps we should just love them, leave them in God’s hands, and not look up to them too much. Sad to say, but people in all these categories can be very poor role models, so we do have to be careful.

How do you choose a good role model? Again, Proverbs gives some guidance. (There’s a lot more than these few verses, too.)

The above verses give four guidelines:

Vs. 2: “down-to-earth people.” Are your heroes down-to-earth, or do they think they’re God’s gift to you? If they think so, they probably aren’t!

Vs. 3: honest people, with integrity. Have you been let down by someone you respected and trusted, only to discover he/she was devious and crooked? That hurts! Tell God. Tell a godly friend. But don’t let them bring you to ruin, too!

Vs. 4: “principled” people. This proverb specifically contrasts a principled life, that is, one lived by God’s core values, with people who think a thick bankroll is what makes them valuable. Don’t fall for that! Your bottom line is *not*, (no matter what the tax code says) “your net worth!”

Vs. 5: “Moral character.” That says it all, doesn’t it? If you want to know what moral character looks like, read Psalm 15, and notice that one of the strongest tests is that this person is the same when alone or when people are watching.

Who are your heroes?

King of Heaven, You are my Hero! You are the One I measure by. Of course, we all fall short, and I don’t expect my friends to compare to You, but I do want to choose ones who, like me, want to follow and imitate You.

I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven. Matthew 5:16, The Message
And don't let anyone put you down because you're young. Teach believers with your life: by word, by demeanor, by love, by faith, by integrity. 1 Timothy 4:12, The Message

Now here's a scary thought: While we are studying the second commandment and setting our core values by it, while we are seeking to be wise in choosing our role models and heroes, *somebody is looking up to US!*

You mean to tell me that while I'm trying to pick wise and godly role models, there are people watching to see if I am down-to-earth, honest, principled, and moral?

You mean to tell me that some people know nothing of God except what they see in me, because I use His name by calling myself a Christian?

This would be truly (and rightfully) terrifying, if we thought we had to drum up all this righteousness. Or worse yet, if we think we *do* have enough righteousness. We don't. Let's just lay that to rest right away.

So how do we become good role models? Easy—*put God first. All the time.* You knew I was going to say that, right? Okay, not so easy. But if we are consciously waking up with God, living with God, talking with God, confessing our sins to God and to whomever we have sinned against, He will shine through. Honest. He promises. People will amaze you by telling you how blessed they were by that thing you did or said that you don't even remember doing or saying. That was the Holy Spirit.

So don't let anyone put you down because you are young. Don't let anyone put you up, either, on a pedestal of great expectations you'll be sure to dash. Jesus says He is the one who put you up on that lampstand. So shine! The light is all His! And people will know it.

Who is looking up to you? What are you showing them?

Oh, Jesus, sometimes I really don't like being up here on a stand. I'm just a kid. Thank God I know it's *You* who has the light. It's *You* who has the "word, demeanor, love, faith, and integrity." Luckily, I have plenty of holes! Live in me, and shine through, please. And thank *You* for making the goal clear: that "they'll praise my Father in heaven," and not me.

A devout life does bring wealth, but it's the rich simplicity of being yourself before God. Since we entered the world penniless and will leave it penniless, if we have bread on the table and shoes on our feet, that's enough. But if it's only money these leaders are after, they'll self-destruct in no time. Lust for money brings trouble and nothing but trouble. Going down that path, some lose their footing in the faith completely and live to regret it bitterly ever after. 1 Timothy 6:6-10, The Message

It's time to look at the third category of idolatry mentioned in the second commandment. God says not to idolize the things "under the earth." Most of us no longer think there are demons or gods down there, or an "underworld" to fear or venerate. But there are some very real dangers in what we dig up from the dirt of this planet.

Thousands, maybe millions, have lost their lives just because of a gold rush or diamond discovery or mine war, or in trying to dig out or polish or steal the biggest, shiniest sapphire or ruby or emerald. Why? They're pretty, that much is true. We've decided they are "worth a lot." What exactly does that mean, "worth a lot"? Worth blood? Worth a life? Worth a soul?

It's easy for most of us to point fingers, because most of us aren't rich. Few of those reading this book have giant diamonds or rubies in their safes. Few of us even have safes! But we do have a little thing called money. We have that almighty paycheck.

Are we really satisfied with "bread on the table and shoes on our feet"? Or are we working ourselves to death and neglecting our families to get the next HDTV or the biggest car or the smallest phone or computer? Are we begging our parents for more allowance, or deciding what to major in, based on how much income we hope to "make"?

Hint: Nobody "makes" money. The mint makes money. It does it by stamping certain designs on certain metal or special paper. It's just a code we've all decided on.

It's the work we do that matters. Is it work that helps others? That glorifies God? That makes the best use of the gifts we've been given? Is it work that makes us feel content and satisfied and in-tune with our true selves?

Because, funny thing, that word "wealth"—it means "wellness." "Wholeness." Really. Listen to it. Then look it up.

Creator God, You are the One who hid pretty things in the earth's crust. You left things just as pretty but less lasting right on top, in the meadows and lanes. I enjoy them all. But it's not money I'm after, it's real *wealth*. Help me pass it on.

The people kept on bringing in their freewill offerings, morning after morning. All the artisans who were at work making everything involved in constructing the Sanctuary came, one after another, to Moses, saying, "The people are bringing more than enough for doing this work that GOD has commanded us to do!" So Moses sent out orders through the camp: "Men! Women! No more offerings for the building of the Sanctuary!" Exodus 36:3-6, The Message

Our first problem is, we think it's our money. Our second problem is, we think the stuff we get with it is our stuff. Our third problem is, especially if we live in the western world, we have no idea how far short our money comes in paying the actual price of that stuff.

Let's remind ourselves of some home truths we all really know, but tend to forget:

It's God's money.

It's God's stuff.

It's God's planet.

They're God's resources.

WE'RE GOD'S PEOPLE. Yep, all of us. Including the child in Asia who was locked in a tin building to make the pretty red, white, and blue jacket for which her family got a pittance. Including the Kentucky man who is dying of black lung because Americans like cheap electricity.

These realities alone will help keep us straight on our priorities, if we just choose to be open-eyed about them.

God asks for ten percent of "our money" that we got for doing "our work" to be repaid into His own, personal treasuries. He also asks us to care about what we do with the rest of it. Just to care. And to make our decisions accordingly. Each of us will make different decisions, and that's fine, as long as we're making them open-eyed, and because we care.

The above isn't the only Bible story that shows that when God's people care, there is more than enough.

Maker, Holder, Watcher, make me care as You do. Show me the faces of those who make the things I need. Help me to somehow, using my own callings, make or do things others need, too. Hold us all in the palm of Your hand and guide us. I'm ready to listen and learn.

They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak God's Word with fearless confidence.

The whole congregation of believers was united as one—one heart, one mind! They didn't even claim ownership of their own possessions. No one said, "That's mine; you can't have it." They shared everything. The apostles gave powerful witness to the resurrection of the Master Jesus, and grace was on all of them. And so it turned out that not a person among them was needy. Those who owned fields or houses sold them and brought the price of the sale to the apostles and made an offering of it. The apostles then distributed it according to each person's need. Acts 4:31-35, The Message

We talk all the time about the "early church." How great they were, how we wish we were like that. We talk about the "early and latter rain," too. Come, Holy Spirit, come! We sing it, but we're not sure we really want it.

This will be our last look at not idolizing the things from "under the earth." We'll end with a true story.

Years ago, a young man came to an academy. He wasn't "official," not a speaker or anything. He just came to visit. He had a guitar over his shoulder and a small backpack. The teachers let him eat in the cafeteria and visit with the students.

As the students talked with him, it turned out he had felt called to take Luke 18:22 seriously. He had sold *all* he had, given it to the poor, and now owned only what he carried with him: two suits of clothes, a Bible, and the guitar. He traveled and sang and talked about God. People took him in and fed him, or they didn't. Sometimes they gave him rides. Mostly he walked.

An earnest young girl asked him, "Do you think Jesus meant for *everyone* to sell everything?"

"No," said the young man. "He wants us to give *Him* everything, including ourselves and the guitar and Bible and clothes. Not everyone is called to this life. Just think what the country would be like! But everyone is called to give Him *everything*. And be willing to do with it whatever He says."

The young girl never forgot. But she's still not sure she would be willing to give up all her possessions, or to refrain from saying, "That's mine; you can't have it."

She's just not sure. What do you think?

Giver of all good gifts, I am Yours. My money is Yours. My stuff is Yours. Do with it, and with me, what You will.

No using the name of GOD, your God, in curses or silly banter; GOD won't put up with the irreverent use of his name. Exodus 20:7, The Message

We are ready to discover some of the Christian core values that can be found in the third commandment. This commandment has two meanings, both of them important, and we are going to look at one of them today and the other tomorrow.

The most common meaning that most people think of is well stated in *The Message* translation, above. This is an important part of keeping God first in our daily lives. One essential value Christians need is a sense of how important their speech is. Words create and destroy. The old nursery rhyme that says “words can never hurt me,” is, of course, patently false. Words can hurt far more than sticks or stones.

God used THE WORD to create the whole universe, and since He created us in His image, our (much smaller) words have a spark of that power, too. What you say is often what you get, especially to children and other vulnerable people. If you tell them they're good, they may believe you and act like it. If you tell them they're bad, don't be surprised if they act that way. We can do the same thing to ourselves, too, with our inner “self-talk.”

Above all silliness, frivolity, unkindness, and vain speech in general, though, the worst is using God's holy name in cursing or irreverence. Perhaps it's for the very reasons above. Our words express our reality, and even, in some ways, shape our reality, or at least our perception of it. So what does the casual use of OMG, to use just one example, do for your sense of the reality and presence of the all-powerful Godhead?

What might it do for the perception of another person, perhaps just learning about God, and looking to you, the avowed Christian, for guidance and values?

Colossians 3:17 says, “Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.”

What would Jesus say? He lives in you, if you've asked Him, so let Him speak through you, and you'll find out.

Holy One, it's an amazing privilege to say Your name at all, let alone to speak to You in person! Help us to remember and value that amazing blessing as it deserves to be valued. Help us to use the gift of speech to sing Your praises, as angels do.

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. Exodus 20:7, NKJV

For the second even more essential meaning of this commandment, it is useful to look back at a more familiar translation, above. We're going to take a second look at two phrases: what else might it mean to “take a name in vain,” and what does “hold him guiltless” mean?

To “take a name” is familiar to everyone. An adopted child takes the name of her new family. A newly married wife takes her husband's name or a couple takes each other's names. Some people change their birth names and take new ones. Usually, in this case, the person chooses a name with a special meaning that is important to him or her.

Do we take God's name in this way? Yes, we do. Every time we call ourselves Christians, we take the name of Christ. We tell the world we are His child and are trying to follow His way.

So what would it mean to take that name, Christian, in vain? “In vain” just means useless, without meaning. Opens up a whole new world, doesn't it? Every time we do or say anything unChristlike, we have taken His name in vain! It moves this commandment, which might be seen as a simple one, into the realm of, well, something that needs Jesus' righteousness to keep. Amazing!

Then there's that odd phrase, “hold him guiltless.” Our English word for that is “acquit.” declare to be innocent of any crime.

If we take the name of Christian, but deny the power of it in our lives, take it for nothing, take it in vain, then we haven't really taken it. We've just used a popular word for our own purposes. And that's not faith, and it's not salvation, and the person who does it will hear Jesus say when He comes back, “I don't know you.”

God forbid!

On the other hand, a person who takes the name of God for all it's worth and *means it*, lives by it, holds to it, will be proclaimed, by the blood of Jesus and the grace of God, acquitted.

Declared Not Guilty.

Held guiltless.

Amen!

Yahweh, Great I AM, I am running to You. Forgive me for every time I've taken Your name in vain and made my profession of Christianity useless and meaningless. Let me run into You and hide and be safe forever. And help me tell others they can do the same.

*GOD's name is a place of protection—good people can run there and be safe.
Proverbs 18:10, The Message*

There are other vital values we can dig out of the third commandment. Like all Bible passages, there is a lot more there than meets the eye. It's like mining for jewels—keep digging and keep exploring—you never know what's around the next corner!

When you start thinking about the name of God, other passages come to mind. In fact, it's a really interesting concordance study to look up all the places that use that phrase.

Here's one, in Proverbs. Other Bibles say God's name is a "strong tower." It's a cool image, but then you really start thinking—what, exactly, does it mean? Does it mean that saying God's name is a magic charm, like in a vampire story? Just say it, and all your troubles are gone? Poof! Not exactly . . .

Well, then, does it mean you never have to feel afraid again once you're a Christian? Yes and no . . . There's fear and then there's *fear*. By far the most often-stated command in the Bible is, "Don't be afraid." God says it, angels say it, people say it to each other. If we weren't scared a lot, it wouldn't be repeated a lot.

People get scared. Even Jesus begged His Father to rescue Him from what He would have to go through. He was afraid, and He had more reason to be than any other person on the face of the planet. But He didn't let the fear win.

That's the thing. He turned His face toward faith. How? He ran into the "strong tower" of God. "Thy will be done." That is the ultimate statement of trust, and Jesus said it when He didn't feel it. Then He said it again. Then He looked for encouragement from His friends (sometimes we get it, sometimes we don't—He didn't), turned back to God and said it again. And gained the victory.

For you. For me. Forever.

And now . . . we're safe.

When scary things happen, or even threaten, smart people get scared. The smartest ones then run straight to God, and state their trust in His will and His ways, as many times as it takes.

Strong Tower, keep me safe. I'd love it if You kept me so safe that I'd never feel scared again . . . but I know that's not going to happen while on this earth. So keep reminding me to put You first, last, and always, and to keep stating my trust. Send me godly friends to help me do that, and I'll do it for them, too. And we will be, ultimately, safe.

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. . . Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace.
Ephesians 6:10, 11, 13-15, NASB*

Wouldn't it be nice if all we had to do was run into the strong tower of God and never come out, never have to fight, just sit back and let God do it all? Instead, the Bible is forever talking about things like "fighting the good fight" and wearing "God's armor." Thank God, it is *His* armor! When we enlist in His army, He supplies us with all we need, free of charge. He even trains us in how to use it.

Ephesians 6:10-20 lists all the armor, weapons, and supplies the Christian warrior needs. Today we'll look at the first three.

Belt of Truth: "Gird your loins" is an ancient expression for "get ready for work." When everyone wore robes of one kind or another, they had to hike them up and belt them so they were out of the way. Think about the ways that knowing and understanding Truth can wrap you up and hold you firm for God's work.

Breastplate of Righteousness: The breastplate was the most important defensive piece of the armor. If you didn't have armor at all, you at least had a shield to hold in front of you for protection. Whose righteousness gives you protection from the devil's sharpshooting straight for your heart?

Shoes of Peace: This comes from Isaiah 52:7, which says the feet of those who bring good news of peace are beautiful. Where do you walk with the Good News of God's rescue plan for all human beings?

When a Christian has taken the name of God, signed up in His battalion, and is taking it seriously, that person will be in constant, careful training in how to fight God's battles and not the devil's. That Christian warrior will never wrap himself up in falsehood, will not claim to have her own righteousness or no need of protection, but will put on shoes of peace, not strife, every morning.

Mighty Commander of heaven's armies, sign me up! I want to fight Your battles, though I don't know how. I want to be wrapped in Your truth instead of my lies and pretences, be protected by Your righteousness instead of my own self-righteousness, and wear shoes of peace to take the message to everyone I meet.

In addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit.
Ephesians 6:16-18, NASB

Shield of Faith: This is a pretty cool shield. It doesn't just get between you and the fiery arrows, like the leather or metal armor the people were used to. It extinguishes them! All of them! It would be like driving a tank that neutralized the missiles shot at it.

Can faith do that? If you remember to use it in the heat of battle, yes, it can. If you forget and leave it hanging on your back, you'll be an easy target for the devil, who has missiles of temptation with your name on them.

Helmet of Salvation: Acceptance and knowledge of the truth that Jesus is the only One who can save you is the best protection you can have for your mind and spirit. Exodus 39:30, in describing the priests' vestments, says that on the front of the turban was a seal or medallion inscribed, "Holiness to the Lord." It was a constant reminder that the priests, and the rituals, and the sacrifices, and the laws, and even the Sabbaths, were *not* what made people holy. It was God alone who could do that. Your helmet of salvation does the same for you.

That's the end of the defensive armor. There are only two weapons.

Sword of the Spirit: If we had to guess, we might come up with all kinds of definitions for this sword, but God puts it right in there so we won't get confused. The sword is the Word of God—the Bible. Like any other sword, it takes training and practice, lots of both, to learn to use it well. New soldiers, excited with their shiny new weapons, can lop the arms, legs, even heads right off other soldiers on their own side! Sign up for basic training (or advanced officer's training, once you reach that point) and learn all you can.

Many people stop right there in this inventory of armor, but there's another, vitally important weapon: the communicator!

Once upon a time, commanders called orders to others, who called them down the lines. Later, they used SOS, Morse Code, and radio. Today it's cell phones and satellites. I'll bet military commanders wish they could be in constant communication with each and every soldier without ever getting confused. Our Commander can and does. But half His soldiers aren't listening, because they've forgotten to "*pray at all times in the Spirit.*"

Commander of heaven, take away my civilian clothes and attitudes, and suit me up for Your battles. Continue my training in the use of Your Sword, and remind me to remain in constant communication with You today.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.
Ephesians 6:12, NASB

Of all the horrible things in all the horrible wars of all time, so-called "friendly fire" has got to be one of the most horrible. Imagine being injured or killed by someone on your own side! Who on earth decided to call this sickening mistake "friendly"?!

Does it happen in God's armies? All the time. And it makes the Commander weep.

How many times, in your own life, has someone shown you how to use some certain passage of the Bible against someone else? We sometimes even have classes in it! This is not how God desires us to use His Word.

Right here in our armor passage, God clearly states through Paul that "our struggle is *NOT against flesh and blood!*" Paul ought to know if anyone does. He used to be on the other side, believing with all his heart he was fighting *for* God. He knew God had forgiven him, but he had a hard time right to the end of his life, thinking of the people who had been hurt, even killed, physically, spiritually, or both, by him or with his collusion and assistance.

"But she's so wrong! You wouldn't believe what she thinks about [whatever]. I have to correct her!" It's a temptation. It's from that old infiltrator, the devil. Don't give in to it. Our battle is against the forces of darkness, and if we really love our friends as God does, we will search for every way to show them love and compassion, fighting against the darkness, the pain, the loneliness in their lives, and holding up the brightness of the standard of Jesus' love to draw them to a better way.

When she asks, pray hard, and respond carefully. Ask her some questions yourself. Ask her to show you in the Bible why she believes what she does. Never, never, never shoot at her! That will only give God more work to do in His heavenly tents, filled with people who were wounded in the name of God and His truth.

What if you've already shot wildly? Ask forgiveness, and get more training. God knows our weaknesses, how small and faulty we are inside our heavenly armor. He understands. And He does have medics.

Thank God!

Mighty Medic, forgive me for the times I've committed "friendly fire" against another of Your children. If I think about it, I have to admit, it was often myself and my way of thinking I was defending, not You. Please, do some "sword" practice with me every day. And may I help bandage some of those who've been hurt in Your name?

Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense? James 2:14-17, The Message

There is, as we've already seen, more than one way to take God's name in vain—uselessly, meaninglessly. This leads us to another set of core values that come directly from the choice to take the name of God and take it seriously: helping the needy, and seeking peace with justice.

James didn't think much of people who talked the talk but didn't walk the walk. He might not think much, if He were here, of some of the "missionary" programs that go on in the world.

As Adventists, we believe that the body, mind, and emotions, the *being* of a person is the soul. We don't think there is a body walking around with a whole separate, immortal ghost living in it, possessing it, so to speak, until the body dies. So we usually (not always) have succeeded in working to reach and help the whole person, rather than just seeking to convert them to a new understanding of God and leaving them in whatever sordid circumstances their lives were already bound by.

We have medical programs, food assistance programs, disaster relief, assistance with starving micro-businesses . . . only God can count the ways Adventist Christians and others are reaching out to help the whole person.

But we need to be sure to have this attitude in our own daily lives, too. Perhaps we work in some area like this already. Or perhaps we say to a sorrowing friend, "I'll pray for you," and go on our way. Perhaps we share our lunch with the homeless person we pass, or perhaps we rationalize, "If I give him money, he'll just drink it away." Perhaps we offer potlucks to our neighborhood, but we only think it counts if we get them to listen to a seminar or evangelistic series. "If you feed them, they only come for the food!"

Something to consider: in the sheep and goats story, Jesus never once mentions evangelistic series, seminars, or even teaching (though teaching is in the Great Commission). He watches for those who feed, clothe, nurture . . . those who *love*.

The way He does.

Teacher, Healer, Toucher, give me Your eyes. Give me Your hands and Your ideas and Your love. Show me how to spread it everywhere I go.

You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family. Matthew 5:9, The Message

An alarming number of Christians, often very earnest ones, really seem to believe that the Great Commission is all about fighting. They read Ephesians 5, perhaps, and miss the part about the fight *not* being against flesh and blood. They set out to argue everyone they know into "accepting the truth," by which they mean giving agreement to a certain set, or list, of facts. When their family and friends argue back, or begin to avoid them, they mourn that "they don't care about God."

Sometimes Christians even advocate literal fighting in wars. There was once a little-known (thank God) campaign to "kill a Commie (Communist) for Christ." Some people today think all Muslims should be killed, or at least banished "to live with their own kind."

This kind of attitude is as far from Christian as it is possible to get. Jesus defined Christianity as love. "They'll know you've been with Me by your love."

Another essential core value, a sign that a person is taking the name of God seriously and trying to put God into the center of every moment, is the seeking of peace in all the ways it is possible to seek it.

That doesn't mean being a pushover or seeking to end or avoid conflict at all costs. Peace is not always accompanied by tranquility. The early Adventists who risked reputation, safety, and perhaps life in a determined battle against slavery caused dissension and division. Jesus Himself caused dissension and division among the Jews of His day. But for one reason only: to bring them closer to the God who loved them—not to knowledge about God, or a list of truths, or even a list of core values, but closer to God Himself.

If you can find ways to do that, if you can "show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight," then you'll be a true peacemaker, and you'll be closer to God yourself. "That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family." Or, as the more familiar Bible versions have it, you'll "be called a child of God."

Father God, bringer of peace, but also of uncomfortable truths, sometimes, I admit, I do find myself in a battle even against You, not to mention against my own true self that You meant me to be. Show me Your peace—not the kind the world gives, but the kind that passes human understanding and brings Your children closer together.

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8, NASB

The problem with peacemaking is that it's so hard. The easiest thing, at least for some people, is to fight for whatever they want. Christians who are taking the name Christian seriously do their fighting against the devil and their own worse natures instead.

The easiest thing for other people is to just give in. Get along. Live and let live. Avoid all conflict and difficulty and call it "peace."

Here's God's definition:

Do justice. That means stand up for the oppressed, *help* the needy, *see* the invisible ones on the fringes of society, *hear* the silent cries of the hungry and the disenfranchised. It might mean taking some unpopular stands. It might mean being called names or ridiculed. It might even mean going to jail, like Martin Luther King, Jr.

Love kindness. Kindness to friends and family, even when the friends are annoying or the family members drive you nuts. Kindness to the uncool kids at school. Kindness to the oddballs at work. Kindness to . . . would you believe . . . yourself?

Walk humbly with your God. We have come full circle in our consideration of the core values inherent in the third commandment. God doesn't want us to make silly jokes with His name, or use it to curse His children, no matter how frustrating they may be. He doesn't want us to just go to church and warm a pew and sing nice songs and call ourselves Christians if it doesn't mean anything. In fact, He said He'd spit people like that out of His mouth (Rev. 3:16).

What He wants is for us to fully recognize—well, as fully as we can, anyway—the astonishing power and glory and goodness in His name. He wants us to live as His sons and daughters, in full awareness of His love and delight in us. He wants us to walk humbly with Him, neither hanging our heads and putting on martyr complexes, nor holding up our noses and acting as if we have all the answers.

"It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously—take God seriously" (Micah 6:8, *The Message*).

Great I Am, keep me simple in Your love, doing what You wish, being as kind to others as You are to me, confident but not proud, humble but not self-defeating. I want to take Your name for all the power and love that it's worth!

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Work six days and do everything you need to do. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to GOD, your God. Don't do any work—not you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servant, nor your maid, nor your animals, not even the foreign guest visiting in your town. For in six days GOD made Heaven, Earth, and sea, and everything in them; he rested on the seventh day. Therefore GOD blessed the Sabbath day; he set it apart as a holy day.

Exodus 20:8-11, The Message

It's the strangest thing. All Christians believe we should keep the Ten Commandments. Most people of other faiths (and moral people of any belief or no belief at all) agree that they are, at the very least, a good idea. Some people, trying hard to be "good enough" to please God, are downright rigid and legalistic about them: "We definitely need all those 'Thou Shalt Nots,' shouted as loudly and sternly as possible," they say.

Well, almost. All except that one in the middle—the one that's not a commandment, but a *present*, all wrapped up and tied with a bow, delivered unfailingly on time to every single human (and non-human, for that matter) on the planet. "We want to obey You, God. We want to feel guilty when we don't, and especially make others feel guilty when they don't. But, thanks anyway, we don't need a present."

Huh??

You *don't want* a guaranteed day off every week for the rest of your life? You *don't want* time to unwind, time for God, time for others, time for yourself? Time for beauty, time for love? You *don't want a break??*

Weird!

Maybe it's because the devil knows that if all of us really accepted the gift of the Sabbath with a rousing thank You, and truly steeped ourselves in it every week, we wouldn't fall for most of his ploys. We wouldn't, for instance, get all caught up in obeying the rules just right. We wouldn't think God was mad at us all the time. We wouldn't forget He even existed. We wouldn't mistreat ourselves, others, animals, or our planet.

I, for one, love the present best of all. How about you? Let's see what core values we can find wrapped up with this awesome gift.

Lord of the Sabbath, thank You so much for the gift of the Sabbath day! It's the best possible present—never too big, never too small, always the right color, and just what I need this week!

"I also gave them my weekly holy rest days, my 'Sabbaths,' a kind of signpost erected between me and them to show them that I, God, am in the business of making them holy."

Ezekiel 20:11, 12, The Message

"Keep my Sabbaths as holy rest days, signposts between me and you, signaling that I am God, your God." Ezekiel 20:20, The Message

One of the core values that marks a Christian is the use of time. God made it, God gives it, and God has His own ideas about what it should be used for. Christians who know that and really want to please God find it all too easy to get caught up in a sort of "religio-holicism," working themselves to death (sometimes literally) to try to help all the people all the time, do all the church work, do all the community service work, and use all their gifts (and a few of their neighbors') at once. You know about idle hands, right? Worse still, we may try hard to do all this in the hopes that we'll impress God enough to get Him to save us. Maybe, if we do enough good deeds, they'll outweigh our bad ones. There are quite a few religions based on that very philosophy.

CHRISTIANITY IS NOT ONE OF THEM.

Maybe the worst thing of all is Adventists and other Sabbath-keepers who make keeping Sabbath "just right" into a work to try to buy God's favor!

The best-kept secret truth about the fourth commandment is that it's the one that's put in there, not just as a Happy Creation Day gift for everyone, whether we deserve it or not, but as the built-in safety *against* legalism. You see, God already told us—twice—in the same chapter!—what the Sabbath is there for. And then, in case there was any doubt, Jesus acted it out for us, and the writer of Hebrews expounded on it (See Hebrews 4).

The Sabbath, says God, is the sign that *I Am God*, and *I Am the One sanctifying you!* You can't buy salvation, you can't sell salvation, you can't work for salvation. So let's do this: Let's take a whole day—the seventh day—out of every week, and not buy, sell, or work, just to remind you who you are and Who I Am.

Afraid you're not good enough? Shhh, I've got you. I said that what I made is good, remember? Rest in Me.

Afraid of losing your job, or afraid you can't find one? Shhh, I've got you. I'm taking care of it, I promise. Rest in Me.

Afraid for your friends, your family, your children? Shhh, leave them to me. Just rest. Enjoy the day!

Creator God, I wish I'd been there for that very first Sabbath! I'm looking forward to the first one in a newly recreated earth. Between now and then, no matter how sideways I get during the week, even if I forget You (God forbid!) bring me back to home base on Sabbath. Remind me who I am and who You are. And . . . thank You.

Light, space, zest— that's GOD! So, with him on my side I'm fearless, afraid of no one and nothing. Psalm 27:1, The Message

Two of Satan's core values are fear and distrust. That's because he knows if he can get us scared he can keep us from thinking clearly, and get us on the run from God.

God's major core value after love, though, is fearless trust. And the Sabbath, right in the heart of the Ten Commandments, is one place to develop that kind of trust.

When a person first learns that the seventh-day Sabbath is still in force and still expected of God's children, the first response may be fearfulness. After all, it's a major reordering of life and its routines. What will happen? What will my friends think? What if I lose my job? What other ways might my life change? It sometimes takes a person quite awhile to grow close enough to trust God with this issue, and those of us who are used to Sabbath should not be too quick to condemn.

Because people who are familiar with Sabbath, perhaps even grew up with it, can get scared, too. The other side of the road has just as many pitfalls. What if I don't keep it *right*? What if I "trample its edges"? What will my Adventist friends think if I don't do exactly as they do? What will my non-Adventist friends think if my witness isn't strong enough?

Stop a minute. Look a little more closely. Under all these fears, on both sides, there is a far more potent and dangerous fear: *Is God mad at me?*

Look again at our text. God is "light, space, zest," the psalmist says. "My light and my salvation," say other Bibles. It's a present! Sabbath is a gift of God! Jesus says it was made for us. We weren't made for it.

If we're afraid, there are deeper issues we need to dig up and get rid of. But we can't do that without God, and His gift of the Sabbath and the fearless trust it encourages is a very good place to start.

Gift Giver, thank You so much for this present. Whether I've just now learned of it or known it all my life, I know I haven't succeeded in totally unwrapping its every secret. I want to dive into life with You, to enjoy Your light and freedom. I want to fear nothing and no one because I know You are on my side.

God blessed them: "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth." Genesis 1:28, The Message

If only the Bible were always in our language. What I mean by that is, it seems that almost each and every human has his or her own dialect, using words and ideas in slightly different ways, and so we are always getting messed up and having to regroup and figure out what we're really talking about. Since God used humans to write His Word, the same thing happens with the Bible. Those who translated Genesis into English from the ancient language lived in feudal societies in which the lord owned his serfs' bodies and souls and could treat them as he pleased, so that's what they thought dominion was.

Of course, long before that, even before he was Satan, Lucifer had different ideas about dominion than God did, so he's actively trying to propagate the idea of conquest and domination as a godly thing. Among people who don't respond well to that idea, he works on the other extreme—no responsibility at all. Let nature take its course! Everything is getting better and better, so if we leave land to its own devices, it will be exactly as it should be, and if we leave children to their own devices, they'll naturally grow up wonderfully, and we don't really need to control ourselves, either, or take responsibility for our choices and actions . . .

The Message translation, above, uses that word, "responsible." It's a better picture of how God does things. He gave Adam and Eve the job of stewarding the planet—keeping it, taking care of it, ordering things well, for Him. They slipped up, but He still left them the planet and the work, even warning them in advance that under Satan's temporary domination, it was going to be a lot harder. But He would still be there, He would still help, and to those who are faithful in little, He gives more responsibility (See Luke 19:12-27).

One core value that the Sabbath reminds us of is the concept of responsibility versus domination. False understandings, which make Sabbath dominate us as if we were made for *it*, and not vice versa, don't help, but a true understanding of that day as a reminder of Creation helps us remember the job God gave humans—taking care of His world for Him.

Lord of the earth, Master of the universe, give me ongoing lessons in Your kind of Lordship. Show me how to walk the line of responsible stewardship between the two extremes of just letting things go as they will and seeking to dominate them. Show me my small part in the human work of caring for the world and everyone and everything on it for You.

Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill on my holy mountain. The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive, a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.

Isaiah 11:9, The Message

"What's the price of a pet canary? Some loose change, right? And God cares what happens to it even more than you do." Matthew 10:29, The Message

A Christian woman once asked me, "If God didn't want us to eat all the animals, why did He make them?"

It boggles the mind. I had no idea how to answer. Where does one start, when somebody has such a shockingly foreign way of looking at things? The term "animal rights" is pretty controversial today. Some people accuse others of thinking animals are above human creation; others retort that some think animals are just things, to use and use up for whatever people wish. Given that, could we safely say, somewhere in the middle, that God made animals for *their own sake*, and they have a right to live, too?

Clearly, He gave us the care of them. Jesus made it clear that God cared about every little bird that falls from a nest. It's my own speculation, but I like to think that if Jesus as a boy found a nest of baby birds, He'd try to save it—give it back to the mother if possible, and if not, feed them Himself.

Psalms 145:15 (and lots of other places) says God gives the animals their food already. That is to say, He places them in habitats that meet their needs. The question is, what do we do to those habitats?

Do we assume they are as "mother nature" or evolution intended them to be and we should leave them entirely alone?

Do we bulldoze them and take them for our own habitats (like lovely, healthy strip malls and factories and housing developments)?

Do we seek to learn as much as we can, at least about our own pocket of the world and its habitats, and try to find ways for both animals and people to have as many as possible of their needs met? That's *hard*! But it does seem to be what God wanted when He put us in charge here.

Adventists have always believed God made the physical reality. We never believed physical was bad and disembodied spirituality was good. If we are serious about God's clearly-given core values, how shall we live on the earth?

Creator and Overseer, forgive me for my part in the environmental disasters tearing the world apart around me. Help me to find ways that I can help and heal instead of widening the wounds. I know the earth is growing old and You are on Your way, and I can't wait—but in the meantime, help me to live gently in Your world.

“And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to reward Your bond-servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth.”

Revelation 11:18, NASB

“Destroy the destroyers of the earth.” That verse surprises some people. They don’t know it’s in there. They believe the Christian’s only God-given work is to change people’s minds, teach them to believe in God, and work to help them depend on Him to then change their hearts. The whole world will soon be destroyed by fire, anyway, so it’s a waste of time to worry about things like climate change and ever-growing endangered species lists, right?

But in fact, the way of life God set up for Israel had a surprising amount of instruction for caring for the earth. For instance, every seven years the land got a whole year of rest as its Sabbath, and every fifty years another year’s worth, too. When the people went into the Babylonian captivity, one of the reasons God gave is that the land had missed its Sabbaths for generations, and would now get a whole seventy year’s worth to make it up (See 2 Chronicles 36:21 and others).

God has cared about the planet from the moment of its creation by His Word, and it was declared good.

Our last text, from Isaiah 11: 9, spoke of a time when “the whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive, a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.” I really like that translation. Right now, what we have is ocean-deep, ocean-wide disaster. Given oil spills, overfishing, irresponsible tourism, garbage dumping, and unnumbered other results of unbridled greed and carelessness, it’s no wonder the earth is “groaning” (Rom. 8:22) and longing for God to come and rescue it.

If we have the tongues of angels and give all our money to the poor, pay our tithe and keep the Sabbath, but still ignore and destroy the earth, which side will we really be on when He comes?

What can we do instead to contribute to that brimming knowledge of God? What did my choices do to the ocean today, just this one day? Do I even know?

Do I care?

Loving Keeper, Earthmaker, Worldwalker, open my eyes. Show me that when You gave us this earth and the Sabbath to celebrate it, You had in mind all its needs, as well as mine. Show me that something as small as my energy choices can and does affect Your world, and in so doing, can lift the Sabbath higher, or trample it.

Search high and low, scan skies and land, you’ll find nothing and no one quite like GOD. The holy angels are in awe before him; he looms immense and august over everyone around him. GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, who is like you, powerful and faithful from every angle?

Psalms 89:7, The Message

Of all the values hidden in the Sabbath commandment like jewels, one of the most obvious is worship. One of our favorite passages as Adventists is Revelation 14:6-13, the three angels’ messages, and they’re all about worship. In fact, they reference the fourth commandment directly, speaking of the One who made heavens, earth, and seas.

We have talked a lot about a relationship with God—how to make it close and personal, meaningful to one’s own life. We say He is our Friend and end every devotional with a brief prayer that takes the principle from the page into the heart. We say Jesus (through the Holy Spirit) walks besides us every day and that nothing that concerns us is too small for Him to care about.

All these things are true and vitally important to living a godly life. However, it is just as true that if we suddenly *saw* God with our physical eyes, our first reaction would most likely be one of an awe bordering on fear. It’s not that we are afraid of God (at least I hope you aren’t!), it’s just that He’s so *big*! So mighty, and powerful, and awe-inspiring, and unimaginable to us.

Every angel who appeared to people as an angel and not looking like a human had to say “Don’t be afraid!” before saying anything else. Just seeing an angel, a created being like us, is frightening. And this passage in Psalm 89 says *they’re* in awe of God! So just imagine—well, you can’t, but it’s fun to try!

Worship comes naturally to the heart that is beginning to know what it means to put God in the center of every moment. That doesn’t mean a certain kind of song, or a certain kind of prayer, or a certain kind of silence or sound. It doesn’t mean a certain body position, though bowing would probably be our first instinct if we really saw God.

It means a heart-stirring sense of God’s greatness and one’s own smallness. It means humility, and widened eyes, and mouths that have forgotten easy religious phrases. It’s often called “fear” in the Bible, and there really is a connection. A loving relationship with God will not be fearful, but will be deeply respectful. We can only take Him for granted for so long. Then something happens to remind us. The Christian response is worship.

God of the angel armies, I wish I could peek through the cracks of heaven’s gates and just catch a glimpse of You. Save me from familiarity that leads to contempt, and also from an awe or reverence that sets you at a distance. You *are* my Friend.

Keep my Sabbaths and revere my Sanctuary: I am GOD. Leviticus 19:30, The Message
Keep my Sabbaths; treat my Sanctuary with reverence. I am GOD. Leviticus 26:2, The Message

When God repeats Himself with that kind of particularity, we should probably pay attention. Sabbath, says God, is connected with reverence and with the sanctuary.

Today's sanctuaries are nothing like the one God is speaking of in these passages. A sanctuary is a special, set-apart place where something is kept safe, like a wildlife sanctuary. In this case, it was a repository for the ark and other symbols of God's presence. There was both a sense of caring for and keeping safe the furniture God had given patterns for, and a sense of keeping the people on the outside safe from God.

That's an odd concept to us, but God's undiluted and unshielded presence would kill us in a nanosecond. He doesn't want that to happen. So He had the people create this place, the Tabernacle, or Tent, and people didn't go in. The priests, after special ceremonial cleansing, went into the Holy Place, but only the high priest, and only once a year, after even more elaborate ritual cleansings, went into the Most Holy.

Today's churches are more like the synagogues that arose in Israel after the Temple fell for the last time. We go in and we talk about meeting God there, but sometimes we don't seem to have much sense of that holy Presence.

Different people have been raised with different ways to show reverence, so some think the only appropriate attitude in the sanctuary is silence, others think raising hands in prayer or singing certain kinds of songs are the only way to show reverence. An important part of reverence is respecting others' conscience on this matter.

But there is no one way to show reverence. It's about being conscious, aware, paying attention. As one pastor says every week, "We are always in the presence of God, no matter where we are, but here, for a few minutes, let's practice a clearer awareness of that." In other words, as Solomon said 3,000 years ago, God doesn't live in a house. Paul pointed out, 1,000 years later, that *we live in Him* (1 Kings 8:22-53, Acts 17:28).

When we're visiting the place we've made to remind ourselves of Him, how can we demonstrate awareness of His holy Presence?

Most Holy and Most High God, I don't want to take You for granted. I want to show and feel reverence. Remind me of Your grandeur and power, and help me to find ways to make Your earthly house show that grandeur and power to those who enter.

God's Message: "Heaven's my throne, earth is my footstool. Isaiah 66:1, The Message
O my soul, bless God! God, my God, how great you are! Beautifully, gloriously robed, dressed up in sunshine, and all heaven stretched out for your tent. You built your palace on the ocean deeps, made a chariot out of clouds and took off on wind-wings. Psalm 104:1-3, The Message

We've already talked about caring for God's earth, but perhaps it's worth another look. We know we were given the care of the earth and its creatures. We know Jesus is watching to see what care we take. We know that when He comes back, those who destroyed the earth will face Him in judgment and explain why.

Would it help us if we thought of earth as God's "other house"? If it's true that a house built by human hands won't hold God (or His little finger, for that matter), and if it's also true that we live and move and have our being in Him, then it's true that He walks the earth with us. This insignificant, not to mention rebellious, little planet, God says, is His footstool.

Jesus called the earth God's footstool, too, in Matthew 5:43, 35: "But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet."

There are a couple of possible ways to look at this: 1. The earth is under the feet of God and therefore not very important—which doesn't work, because He gave His only Son to ransom everyone on it! 2. Beloved children of earthly kings have sometimes snuggled up to their fathers' knees on low hassocks or footstools.

What would it do for our attitude toward this lovely, fading world if we really thought we were snuggling up to the Creator's knees on it? What if we imagined Him really "dressed up in the sunshine," or setting up His tent in the sky, and building His palace on the ocean deeps? Naturally, we'd be careful not to then think the sunshine, or the sky, or the ocean were themselves holy!

But we would watch for His presence. And *that's* holy!

And we'd take better care of our Father's footstool.

Abba, Daddy, Father God, I love the idea of snuggling up to Your knees, maybe to say my prayers or tell You about my day, sitting on a little footstool at Your side. Help me to see the beauty You made and never venerate *it*, but to worship and revere *You*, and respect and care for the one world You gave us.

Honor your father and mother so that you'll live a long time in the land that God, your God, is giving you. Exodus 20:12, The Message

It's time to take a look at the core values we can find in the fifth commandment, which, like all the others, has a lot more in it than meets the eye.

First of all, what does it mean to "honor" someone?

Most commonly, we think of this commandment as requiring the kind of respect that leads to obedience and submission to authority, and as long as obeying and submitting to your parents is obeying and submitting to God, as it should be, then that's true.

God says it leads to a long life, and there is medical research that indicates that healthy family relationships are good for everyone involved, possibly even lengthening life. Certainly it will help lead to eternal life!

But what if your mother or father is dishonorable? Then this commandment gets trickier. What if they were or are abusive? [Step one: Get help. Find one godly person to tell, and go from there.]

There's something special and different about the honoring that you learn from putting God in the center of every moment, though. It is possible, even imperative, to honor human beings simply *as* human beings, created in the image of God. We can honor every person on earth for that, from infants to aged, from ill to criminally insane, from disabled (mentally or physically) to genius, from gentle child to powerful tyrant. The plain fact is, for some of those whose choices have most defaced that image, the only way they may possibly change is if one person has the courage to search for and honor whatever spark of godliness remains.

That doesn't necessarily mean we look up to that person, imitate them in any way, or obey them. Though there is often, if you look, something you can look up to, admire, and imitate. That, too, can help a hurting and wandering person back to a healthier sense of self, and back to God, who has high dreams for them.

We can't change another, though. Not even by love, the most powerful force in the universe. Ultimately, the choice is theirs. If they continue to make choices that are hurtful, you can still honor them within God, but keep yourself safe from them at the same time.

And keep praying!

Father of all humankind, we know You love all Your children, even the wandering ones. Thank You for those in my life who show Your love to me, and help me to honor, respect, and obey them within Your will. For the rest, show me Your way of honoring and loving anyway. And save them!

Take care of widows who are destitute. If a widow has family members to take care of her, let them learn that religion begins at their own doorstep and that they should pay back with gratitude some of what they have received. This pleases God immensely . . . Tell these things to the people so that they will do the right thing in their extended family. Anyone who neglects to care for family members in need repudiates the faith. That's worse than refusing to believe in the first place.

1 Timothy 5:3-8, The Message

Wow, that's pretty strong! If we don't care for our family members who are in need, we are repudiating our faith! Paul says it's even worse than not believing in the first place!

Remember that this was written in the context of the early church, where they *all* saw themselves as one family and shared everything they had. If you read the rest of the chapter, you will see that it goes on to talk about how older widows who no longer have children to care for can "give back" by working with the church doing the distributing.

Remember, too, that this doesn't just mean literal widows, whose husbands have died. Divorced women, single mothers, and so on, would fit in this category today. Single dads, too. Anyone who is struggling to get the basic necessities of life.

A young woman once sat in church listening to a man declaim that we shouldn't even have welfare, but the church should take care of their own. She wondered silently, "So am I supposed to stand up and announce in church the difficulties I'm having? It's not that easy!"

Question: Do you and I *know* the members of our churches and communities (or even our families) well enough to know who needs help and how to best give it according to their needs and personalities, without causing pain and embarrassment? Couldn't we figure out some method that's like the biblical practice of gleaning, where poor people were able to work and keep their self-respect while living off the leftovers of the more affluent around them?

Think about it.

God who sees, open my eyes. Help me to remember that charity (selfless love) begins at home, and to know how to help while allowing a person to maintain their self respect. And help me to receive graciously, too.

One day children were brought to Jesus in the hope that he would lay hands on them and pray over them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus intervened: "Let the children alone, don't prevent them from coming to me. God's kingdom is made up of people like these." After laying hands on them, he left. Matthew 19:13-15, The Message

The fifth commandment speaks only of honoring parents, but if you put God in the center of every moment it will immediately become clear that one of His core values is the respect and care of all family members. This time we'll look at children.

Little children are one of God's most blessed gifts to the human race. He could have designed some sort of procreation that made adults. He didn't have to make the system the way it is now, but aren't you glad He did? First there's tiny babies who need constant care and don't even know they're being cared for, let alone show any gratitude for it. Then they grow into toddlers and preschoolers whose faces light up when they see you, and grade schoolers who run to jump on your back the second you arrive home from work. Then, well, let's admit it, teens and young adults need care, too, just not the same kind.

If we are parents, we know all about caring for the young, and we are starting to see what Jesus meant when He said God's kingdom was made up of people like this—people who think you're a superhero just because you fixed their bike—who run to you for help, ask you for stories, and brag about you to their friends.

If we're not parents ourselves, but elder siblings, those little ones may drive us nuts sometimes (well, yeah, okay, they drive parents nuts, too!) but we also can see some of the joy and blessing, and need to cultivate that, rather than encouraging in ourselves the annoyance, frustration, belittling, and other negative attitudes that the devil would rather see in us.

But if we don't have much to do with children, we may be missing out on a lot. You might want to try volunteering at a school or library story hour, or in a playground, or just get to know the kids on your block. What you see that reminds you of Jesus—imitate that! That's God's kingdom of little ones, and we all want in on that!

Jesus who blessed and blesses little ones, bless me, too! Let me climb on Your lap and hear You say You love me. Then let me pass on that blessing to every child I meet. Show me my part of the work of bringing the little ones to You. And keep my eyes open to the needy "little child" inside every adult, as well, and if I can share Your blessing with them, let me do it.

*Show respect to the aged; honor the presence of an elder; fear your God. I am GOD.
Leviticus 19:32, The Message*
*Listen with respect to the father who raised you, and when your mother grows old, don't neglect her.
Proverbs 23:22, The Message*

If the central value of the fifth commandment is to respect family members and all human beings, then that goes double for elders. One thing we've largely lost in our modern cultures, which worship youth and speed and "progress" and the latest innovation, is something that was very central to biblical cultures. Respect of elders is still deeply important to many societies, including those of the Middle East, Asia, and much of Africa.

Within our First Nations in the Americas, it is also still alive. In some Native churches the term "elder" doesn't denote an ordained member of the church board, but one who is old and experienced, and they go first at potluck, not the children.

Is it true that just living longer makes you wiser? Well, not necessarily. But even foolish older people have gained some experience that younger ones have not, and you might be amazed what you'd learn if you took the time to listen to them. Just surviving all the trials and troubles of a long life is worth some respect beyond that which a true Christian gives to every human, just because they are children of God.

The easiest age to fall from this respect and end up somewhere you don't want to be is right at the threshold between childhood and adulthood—right where you are. By early teens it may be tempting to think parents are old and out of touch. During the teens and early 20s, while you are trying to forge your own identity, you could get in the habit of ignoring them. If you aren't careful, you'll begin your own adulthood without help and counsel you will later wish you'd had. If you've already gone partway down that path, it's not too late to turn around.

Listen to the elders. Ask their advice. You may not always follow it—most elders would be the first to say you should live your own life—but you can take it into consideration, and perhaps avoid a few pitfalls they fell into and want to save you from.

That would be a good thing!

Lord, from Revelation 1 it looks almost as if we humans have given You white hair with all our bratty childishness! Forgive us. Help me to listen to the older and wiser heads in my life. Help me, whenever possible, to learn from their mistakes and not make the same ones. Thank You for their love and influence and prayers in my life.

Energize the limp hands, strengthen the rubbery knees. Tell fearful souls, "Courage! Take heart! God is here, right here, on his way to put things right and redress all wrongs. He's on his way! He'll save you!"
Isaiah 35:3, 4, *The Message*

As we live longer and longer in our societies, more and more elderly are cared for by their families. This can be a tremendous burden, but also a tremendous blessing, *if* we all work together at it. To have the 24/7 care of a frail, perhaps mentally confused older person is one of the most crushing burdens one can have. If this person is a beloved parent, grandparent, or even spouse, the actual difficulty of the care is compounded by the grief of loss of companionship, guidance, and the wisdom we just talked about, and have come to rely on.

The elderly person may come to the point where the care is as constant and exacting as that of an infant, needing to be fed, clothed, bathed, and protected from harm, only it's a lot harder because the person is much larger than any infant.

Our text is not referring directly to eldercare, but it certainly applies. God says that when any one of us feels frail and weak or frightened and confused, we are to be there for each other. In fact, Jesus' sermon to the sheep and goats is applicable (Matt. 25:31-46). When we feed or change an elderly loved one, we are feeding and changing Jesus!

Do you know someone who has this kind of burden of care? Can you find some ways to help? Sitting and reading to the person, taking them for a walk if they can, or even doing some housework or yard work would be beyond welcome! You may, yourself, if Jesus doesn't come, or if you have an unexpected disease or accident, someday need this kind of care. Treat the person as you would wish to be treated in those circumstances, and you will draw closer to Jesus than you could have imagined.

Remember—from the point of view of immortal angels, we all die in childhood! Grandma, at 99, wouldn't even be old enough to have children in pre-Flood times. And one of these days, Grandma will be young again, on the Sea of Glass. Watch for that day, and in the meantime, let's hold each other up.

God of the limp hands and rubbery knees, there are times when I feel this verse applies to me! You've often sent me comfort and help when I've needed them. Please show me how to do the same for others. Help me to patiently and lovingly care for those You have entrusted to me as if when I touch their faces, I touch Yours.

*Boaz answered her, "I've heard all about you—heard about the way you treated your mother-in-law after the death of her husband, and how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and have come to live among a bunch of total strangers. GOD reward you well for what you've done—and with a generous bonus besides from GOD, to whom you've come seeking protection under his wings." Ruth 2:11, 12, *The Message**

As we look more deeply into the fifth commandment, we've found core Christian values in respecting all members of the family, caring for children, even caring for frail elderly. But there's another kind of ordinary, daily, garden variety family respect that is exemplified by the story of Ruth and Naomi.

First of all, it's a story of in-laws. In our society, the relationship of in-laws is more often mocked and ridiculed than held up as a good example of self-sacrificing love, but many, many times, love is found in these relationships that wasn't found in blood ones.

Secondly, it's a story that shows that many of our relationships are not so much about one taking care of another, as they are about both taking care of each other.

Naomi is the one returning to her homeland after ten long years away. She knows the customs, the rituals, the people. She is the one who gives Ruth advice and guidance and helps her find her way in a strange land.

Ruth must feel quite nervous and out of her element. (How can you have a harvest without praying to fertility idols, to begin with?) She follows what Naomi tells her, even when it seems really strange (see Ruth 4 for examples), and she, the one who is young and strong, goes out to work for both, literally bringing home their daily sustenance.

And it gets around. When Boaz asks who that young woman is, someone immediately tells him all about Ruth. When he sees her continuing faithfulness to her part of the job of survival, it draws him to her, and he ends up speaking to her with admiration and respect, as we see above.

We don't have to be told that once Naomi and Ruth become part of the family of the local well-to-do landowner, they continue their faithfulness, hard work, and care for each other and the other needy gleaners who come from all around to work in Boaz' fields, because they know they'll be safe there.

That's the kind of honoring God likes!

Faithful God of the faithful people, I want to be faithful, too. I want to see myself as essential to the survival and health of my family in some way. Show me what You want me to do, and please help me do it.

"Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature."

Genesis 1:26, The Message

In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female.

Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:28, The Message

Once we begin putting God at the center of every moment of our lives, once we see that we are all family and need to respect, honor, and care for one another, we start noticing all the ways humans tend to divide and build walls. In the next three devotionals, we'll look at three ungodly "isms" that divide our society and are responsible for violence and death, both physical and spiritual, all over the world.

We'll begin with racism.

The Bible is clear from beginning to end that every person born on the planet is created in the image of God, is His beloved child, was died for by Jesus, and has equal opportunity to reign in heaven with Him. Where, then, do supposedly Christian people get the devilish idea that some people aren't quite, well . . . *people*? It's one thing for those who have no belief in a God of any kind, let alone faith. But for those who claim to follow Jesus to partake in the slightest way in the racial profiling, belittling, and dehumanizing practices that are rampant on this world is appalling and absolutely sinful.

Yes, those who enter the Kingdom will live next door to "them," so if we plan on going, we'd better root out every sign of "us-them" mentality we can find and give it to God to get rid of!

Even in first century Palestine, where life was bounded by slavery, oppression, and looking down at everyone else—(I'm a Roman citizen, I'm better! I'm a Pharisee, I'm better! Thank God I'm not a woman or a Samaritan!) one of the very first things that happened when the Holy Spirit blasted through in a cleansing wind was that prejudice had to go. Yes, you had to feed Greek widows, too. Yes, you had to let Roman soldiers and even priests and Levites join the movement. Yes, you even had to let *Saul of Tarsus* in! Ananias wasn't sure God knew what He was doing, but he obeyed, and half the New Testament got written!

I'm a child of God! So are you! Pass it on!

God who made of one blood all the nations of the earth, (Acts 17:26), show me if I have any taint of racism in me. Help me reach out to make friends of every color and kind of person, so I can learn the truth through love, as You wish me to. Help me to start in my own neighborhood.

God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God's nature. He created them male and female. Genesis 1:27, The Message

In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female.

Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:28, The Message

The second "ism" we'll look at doesn't really have a name, but we'll call it "genderism." It's the idea that one sex is somehow better than the other. For a long time, in many societies, men were better. They are generally bigger and stronger, so obviously they must be smarter, too. Anyway, everyone knows Eve got us all into this mess, so women must be not only dumb, but also dangerous!

Then there were those societies who believed women were better. They could "create" life through child-bearing, and had all kinds of wisdom about food and medicines and herbs, so they must be way smarter than those big, brutish men! (Hint: Which sex do you most often see depicted as idiots on TV these days?)

News flash: God created both! God said they were both "very good!" God said they were made in the image of God and were to stick together and help each other!

And once again, one of the first things to go in the early church was the persistent notion that women were somehow "less-than." Jesus talked to women—He even touched them! In public! Women had already been prophets and judges in the Old Testament—even queens. The Proverbs 31 woman is in business for herself. Women supported Jesus' ministry out of their own purses. Now, in the early church, women are having church in their houses, and at least one is named as a deacon (Romans 16:1).

Today, as women gain professional and societal equality, we need to remember that this can't be gained by putting men down. God made us both. Neither is better or more important.

And both are blessed.

What kind of jokes have you told or listened to lately about the opposite sex? How can you help to maintain the dignity and respect of both?

God who holds both male and female within "the image of God," I'm glad You made me what I am. Show me if I am disrespectful either to my own gender or to the other one. Show me how, not only to keep my own attitude straight, but to be an example to those around me.

*The servant [Jesus] grew up before God—a scrawny seedling, a scrubby plant in a parched field.
There was nothing attractive about him, nothing to cause us to take a second look.
Isaiah 53:2, The Message*

For our third “ism” and our last look into the fifth commandment for core values, we’ll coin another term. You’ve heard of the other two, but you haven’t heard of this one. You’ll recognize it right away, though. I’ll call it “looks-ism.”

You know what I mean—the prettiest girls get the attention in school and the jobs at restaurants. The strongest and nicest-looking men get scholarships and jobs and interviews. Oh, and who gets to decide who’s pretty or handsome? You might think it was in the eye of the beholder. It used to be. But now it’s TV and the Internet. When was the last time you saw a Facebook page (or almost any other webpage, for that matter) without an ad for flatter bellies? You should have perfect skin and perfect hair—there’s some disagreement to whether the hair should be curly or straight. You should definitely be skinny enough to be able to make an ad for Hunger International!

It’s ridiculous! And while it doesn’t get legal attention, and couldn’t because it’s too loosely defined, it does affect the everyday life of millions, and it is just as wrong as the other “isms” we’ve talked about.

The prophet Samuel wasn’t immune. He thought Jesse’s eldest, the tall, handsome one, was definitely king material. God said, “You might notice the outside, but it’s the heart I’m after.”

Jesus Himself was, according to the Bible, nothing special to look at. Wouldn’t you think that if God came to earth, He would automatically be the epitome of beauty? Well, He was! Just not on the outside.

It’s bad when we look at each other and decide how valuable a person’s life is by what he or she looks like. It might be even worse when we look in our own mirrors, and instead of seeing a child God created and redeemed, we see someone who is just not pretty enough, or tall enough, or handsome enough, or thin enough.

When you look at people, look for the soul—that’s where the real beauty lies. And it might surprise you.

God of all beauty, help me to believe that in Your eyes, even I am beautiful. If I can believe that, maybe it would help me to believe that he is, too, and she is, and they are, and even those people over there—all beautiful in Your loving eyes.

No murder. Exodus 20:13, The Message

The Message is short and sweet, isn’t it? No murder. Well, I’ve certainly never murdered anyone, have you? Good, got that one covered! On to the next commandment!

Like all of them, this commandment contains a lot more than meets the eye. Our first clue is that Jesus Himself had some commentary on this commandment in Matthew 5:21, 22: “You’re familiar with the command to the ancients, ‘Do not murder.’ I’m telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother ‘idiot!’ and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell ‘stupid!’ at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill” (*The Message*).

Ouch! Maybe we’re not as clear on the sixth commandment as we’ve thought!

We’ve talked already of the fact that words have power to create and destroy, to heal or make sick. That makes the commandment much deeper already, but there’s still more.

If you turn the commandments around and look at them from the positive point of view, it becomes clear that God doesn’t just want us to avoid dealing death, either with words or actions. He wants us to proactively *seek life*. In other words, not using the dagger is good. Not saying the angry word is better. Not thinking it to begin with is better yet.

But best of all, the Christlike thing is to seek thoughts and words and actions that bring and build life. When your brother or sister has done something that hurts or angers you, what could you do or say that would show love to them? Not just avoid anger. Actually, positively, *show love*.

That’s hard! In fact, impossible—unless you are consciously choosing to live your life by that first, essential commandment and you are putting God first in every moment. If you are quiet, if you listen to the other person, if you take your eyes off your own hurt feelings and look at that brother or sister through the eyes of the Holy Spirit within you, you’ll be simply astonished at the changed attitude, which leads to changed thoughts, words, and actions.

You’ll find yourself seeking *life*. What value is more vital than that?

God of the living, Creator of life, I am grateful for the life You give me, both daily breath and daily *Breath*. I want to see and to seek life—Your life. Show me the image, no matter how defaced, You have planted of Yourself in that hurtful person, and then show me how to encourage and bring it out.

He's not remote; he's near. We live and move in him, can't get away from him! One of your poets said it well: 'We're the God-created.' Acts 17:27-8, The Message
He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' Acts 17:27-8, NASB

No matter what they say in science class, there is only one source of life: God. This is a particularly interesting passage. Many New Age or neo-pagan people would say they believe the same: God is in everything . . . God *is* everything. That's actually precisely opposite to what the text says. God is not in everything, rather *everything owes its existence to God!*

There is a big difference. The Hindu belief holds all life sacred, and rightly so. The reason is skewed, though. If you go through endless reincarnations, and if you might come back as a bug or a cow, then I'd better not kill any bugs or cows! If God is in all things, then we should pray to the tree before we cut it to make our house, right?

Fundamentalists, both Christian and others, fight that notion, and rightly so. Their reason is skewed, too: God is above and outside. He's not here at all and is only close to those who follow the Right Rules the Right Way. So we can kill with impunity, use up the earth as our possession, and even kill those who don't agree with us, especially if they live by a different set of rules.

Here in Acts, Paul cuts to the heart of the matter, and in this one text we have safety from both extremes. *We live in Him.* He is "not far." He cares. Therefore, life is sacred not because you might accidentally kill God, but because you will kill something God cares about.

The Christian who is putting God in the center of every moment will learn to care about that which God cares about, from the planet to the animals to every human, including the sick, the dying, and the embryo He is "knitting together in its mother's womb" (Psalm 139:13). The decisions made might differ, but they'll be made because the person is honestly seeking to please God and love what He loves. And if mistakes are made, then we can be comforted by the forgiveness of this nearby God.

God above me, below me, beside me, within me, show me Your love. I long to see as You see, to love and care as You love and care. I want to see life as a sacred gift, even when it doesn't look pretty on this messed up world. I want to *know* in my inmost being that I am living, loving, moving in You—in Your will.

Oh yes, you shaped me first inside, then out; you formed me in my mother's womb. . . You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit, how I was sculpted from nothing into something. Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth; all the stages of my life were spread out before you. Psalm 139:13, 15, 16, The Message

We hinted briefly at the subject of abortion at the end of the last devotional. It's important to state that one of the guiding core values of the Seventh-day Adventist church is the freedom of individual conscience. Therefore the church has not made a statement of arbitrary right and wrong concerning this thorny subject. There is very interesting and informative material on this at <http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/guidelines/main-guide1.html>.

It is worth quoting one statement here, though:

Seventh-day Adventists want to relate to the question of abortion in ways that reveal faith in God as the Creator and Sustainer of all life and in ways that reflect Christian responsibility and freedom. Though honest differences on the question of abortion exist among Seventh-day Adventists, the following represents an attempt to provide guidelines on a number of principles and issues. The guidelines are based on broad biblical principles that are presented for study at the end of the document.

The core value which we are studying, based on the sixth commandment, is the sanctity of all life. Clearly, every Christian who is seeking to put God into the center of every moment will see life as sacred and not to be ended for any whim. So, for example, in the guidelines above, there is one on birth control, and it states categorically that abortion for the purpose of birth control is not morally acceptable.

We do not, as a church, give arbitrary lists of rules and then test each other's devotion by them. We believe that God gives each person the responsibility of using her or his mind, studying the Bible closely, praying, consulting with godly friends, and deciding. We also believe only God can judge.

So, within the brevity of this devotional, the principles we wish to express are that all life is given by God and is sacred, God says not to murder, or even to act in hateful ways to each other, and He expects us to seek life in all the decisions that we make.

What would Jesus do?

Giver of life and of minds for thinking, help me not to be hasty, either about my own decisions, or in judging those that others around me make. Help me to remember that the number one core value of all is love of You, and second only to that, love of each other. No matter what I may think of another's beliefs or decisions, may I act lovingly at all times.

My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love.

1 John 4:7, 8, The Message

A pastor once made this memorable pair of statements: “You cannot continue to hurt what you continue to love. You cannot continue to love what you continue to hurt.”

Think about it—We hurt the ones we love, certainly, in part because they care more. It won't particularly damage you if someone whose opinion means nothing you says something hateful. But if it's someone who matters, it matters! So we don't *continue* to hurt, or as John puts it, “practice sin.” One of two things must and will happen—either we will stop hurting the person, or *we will stop loving him or her.*

We are reaching the heart of the sixth commandment. If you don't kill, if you seek life, you will find love. And if you love, you will start to realize that you must love, not just those who love you, but *all*. As Jesus said, even your enemies! (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27).

This takes us to another core value that identifies Christians—respect for every human being. A true Christian doesn't pick and choose whom to love or whom to respect. They are all children of God, Jesus died for every one of them, and they are no more sinful and irritating than I am.

This is easier on days when we are honestly practicing putting God in the center of every moment. It's impossible the rest of the time, though with practice we can *look* good at it. That's good, as far as it goes. At least we won't openly disrespect and wound people. But God, as we know, looks at the heart. And if He's living there and in control, He likes what He sees.

Because, you see, Jesus loves that dirty alcoholic in the gutter. Jesus loves the snotty kid in your class. Jesus loves the irritating co-worker who keeps making dirty jokes. Jesus loves the snobbish rich and the proud poor. Jesus loves the self-righteous elder on your church board.

Jesus even loves me!

Imagine.

God of love, give me some of Yours, please. I don't have any of my own. Help me to find a way to show respect to every single person who comes my way. Help me to love them for You—to be Your hands, Your feet, Your smile.

And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king's table; he was lame in both feet. 2 Samuel 9:13, NIV

If we have placed God in the center and are learning to respect and seek life for all, we will have a new attitude toward those who are fighting some kind of physical or mental challenge that is different from our own.

There's a great story about this in 2 Samuel. King Saul had died, and to David's great sorrow, Jonathan had died, too. David had his kingdom, which God had anointed him for long ago, but there was sorrow in his heart.

One day he decided that if he could no longer show kindness to Jonathan, his dear friend, he could at least do something kind for his family. Since Jonathan should, by human calculation, have been the crown prince and next king, his family scattered when Saul's reign came to an end. They were probably afraid of the new king, particularly if they had heard Saul tell lies about how David was always trying to steal the kingdom.

So when a servant told David that Jonathan had left a son, David's heart must have leapt for joy. Jonathan's own son! Perhaps they would become friends, as David and Jonathan had been. But this son was lame in both feet due to a terrible accident in his childhood.

In those days, perhaps even more than now, strength and fitness were admired, and disability of any kind was looked down on. People tended to believe God had stricken the disabled person, and therefore they were shunned from society. David was strong and able himself. He'd been called a “mighty man” since he was young. He could have said, “Oh, never mind, then.”

But he didn't. He sent for the son, a man named Mephibosheth, and took him into his own family. Mephibosheth sat at the king's own table—a high honor!

Do you know someone who carries an extra physical or mental burden? Perhaps you do, yourself. If so, God's love is for you, too. And you can find ways to show love and respect for those who carry these burdens, if you make the effort to look at life from their point of view and see how to make it easier for them.

Lord God, Creator of all, we know You don't make junk. We also know this world is decidedly not the way You planned it. While we wait for You to make all things right and new, show me how to share Your love and respect with those who face a different life than I do. Help me to see things through their eyes and to work to make things equitable and accessible for all.

A leper came to him, begging on his knees, "If you want to, you can cleanse me." Deeply moved, Jesus put out his hand, touched him, and said, "I want to. Be clean." Then and there the leprosy was gone, his skin smooth and healthy. Mark 1:40, 41, The Message

Untouchables live. We can point our finger at other societies, but they live in ours, too. If you look, with God's eyes, you can see them in your neighborhood, in your school, in your workplace, maybe even in your own family.

In Jesus' day skin diseases were the most feared of all. If God caused illness because you or your family was sinful, what awful thing must you or they have done to be stricken so horribly? Real leprosy, incurable until the mid-twentieth century, was horrifying. You could catch it. And then you'd look like that!

Imagine what it would be like never to be touched. At all. By anyone. Imagine what it would be like to be feared. To have people run when you appear. To have to carry a bell and call, "Unclean! Unclean!"

This leper had a tremendous amount of courage to actually accost Jesus on the street. Was he afraid Jesus would curse him, throw something at him? He must have seen and heard enough to know that Jesus was different, because he came right up to Him.

Jesus could have healed the man with a word. He often did. But He also always knew what the person *really* longed for. He forgave the paralytic before He healed him. And this man, Jesus put out His holy hand and touched.

Mother Teresa said when you touch the face of an untouchable, you touch the face of God. That wasn't original with her. Jesus told us that very thing. "I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me" (Matthew 25:39, 40, *The Message*).

Overlooked. Ignored. Do you ever feel that way? Then you've got a head start on knowing how God wants you to treat those untouchables you meet. And that's a core value. That's part of seeking life instead of death.

That's the touch of God.

God who touches our inmost need. You see me. Really SEE me. Help me to really see others, too. Help me to turn and pass on the hugs You give me to those who feel overlooked and ignored.

Is this not the fast which I choose, . . . to . . . loosen bonds, . . . undo . . . the yoke, . . . let the oppressed go free . . . not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth. Isaiah 58:6-8, NASB

I have drastically shortened the above passage to fit here, so I highly recommend getting a Bible and having it in front of you. As our final look at the core values hidden in the sixth commandment, we're going to spend three days on seeking inner life, as well as outer life, using this text as our home base.

Today, we will look at a significantly different interpretation of the obvious one for the words "your own flesh." What if we saw God, through Isaiah, as speaking about not just others, but your own self? Is it possible to hide yourself from yourself?

Not only possible, almost unavoidable. None of us knows *everything* about what's in our own hearts. Only God does, and that's one reason He asks us to let Him in. Don't worry, He brings His own flashlight!

If we are putting God at the center of every moment and seeking life, that will include seeking a true, godly life and health in the centers of our own beings. So think about it (prayerfully):

What are some bonds your heart needs loosened?

Are there yokes in there that Jesus never gave you? Hint: His are easy and well-fitting . . .

Are you oppressed by old hurts, twisted beliefs about God and yourself?

How can you undo all this and set yourself free?

The short answer is, you can't. But God can, and the long answer is (usually years and years long!) *He can't do it without you*. Sure, He could speak a word, work an instant miracle, give you all new attitudes and beliefs, but they wouldn't be *yours*, and they wouldn't do you any good until He grew you into them, anyway. So He brings His flashlight, and the two of you go on a quest. It generally takes the length of your life. But you will come to whole new plateaus that really do affect your life and the way you live it *now*. It's a promise.

"Your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth." Speedily might be in God's time, not ours, but it doesn't mean we'll have to wait for the New Earth for all of it. Some of it will happen here, and then we'll be able to more compassionately and wisely help others find God and His flashlight.

God of light and truth, bring Your flashlight. I know I hide from my own flesh. I don't want to see all the ugliness in my soul's cellar! But I *do* want You to free me. So . . . let's hold hands as we walk together.

Is this not the fast which I choose, . . . to . . . loosen bonds of wickedness, . . . undo . . . the yoke, . . . let the oppressed go free and break every yoke . . . not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth. Isaiah 58:6-8, NASB

The most common interpretation of this passage, of course, is that “your own flesh” is your family. We have talked, in the last commandment, about taking care of and respecting our families. But this passage goes deeper. It says there might be bonds of wickedness in our families. There might be yokes not of Christ’s making.

It also says we hide from each other. If we hide from our own inner selves, it certainly goes without saying that we hide from those who can sometimes see us most clearly. It’s not a comfortable thing when, in the middle of a fight, a home truth comes out of a sibling’s mouth, or when a spouse points out something you know is true but don’t want to think about.

It’s also true that we often hide from each other’s needs. “The cobbler’s children go barefoot,” goes the old saw, and the preacher’s kids are stereotypically neglected. We hide in more insidious ways, too, like making only small talk at the table, if we even meet at the table, getting by on verbal Facebook status updates and Twitters. “How was your day?” “Fine, yours?” “Fine.”

If we are putting God in the center and seeking His life and light, we will watch for yokes and bondage in our own families, and that doesn’t mean pointing out each other’s wickedness! We will offer to help with overburdening homework or housework. We will go above and beyond the chore chart. We will see when someone seems oppressed or depressed, and we will do something about it. We will ask questions, and we will listen. We will listen harder to what is not said than to what is.

If we find that someone needs more help than we can give, we will encourage and support them as they seek that help.

And the light will break out like the dawn; the recovery of our families will speedily spring forth.

Amen!

Brother Immanuel, Who came to join the human family forever, You did not, and do not, hide Yourself. You took our yokes and made new, lighter ones for us. You went through and still go through with us, the darkest and deepest places of human pain. Show me how my family is bound, and show me what to do about it. But You are the only One who can really break the yokes and let us go free.

Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth. Isaiah 58:7, 8, NASB

The actual context of Isaiah 58 is the family of Israel. “Your own flesh” was likely meant to be seen as all humanity. Earlier in the passage, God is rebuking Israel because they go through all the religious rituals, including fasting, supposedly seeking God’s will, and all the while oppress the poor, ignore the hungry, and look out only for “Number One” and the bottom line.

God is as angry as He always gets at this sort of attitude. “Do you think you’re impressing Me?” He thunders.

If we are truly seeking the life that the sixth commandment holds within it, if we are serious about living by the core values we find there, then the attitude we have toward ourselves as children of God seeking the light will be the attitude we have toward our families, and it will leak out (light always does) all over the whole human family, or at least the slice of it that intersects with our daily lives.

When did we last actually divide our own bread with the hungry, whether physically or spiritually?

When did we last bring a homeless person home to live, whether in our homes or in the heart of the family that is our local congregation?

When did we cover the naked, whether by sharing our clothes or by putting a stop to a gossip session and giving those involved a more loving way to see the subject of their judgment?

Are we triple-locking our doors and turning on the TV and hiding ourselves from our own flesh? Do we even see them as our own flesh? Or are “those people” somebody else’s brothers and sisters, not ours?

Jesus left the Center of Life Eternal, life we can’t even begin to imagine, and stepped into our dirty, blink-of-an-eye existence. He claimed us. He loved us enough to become one of us. He said He came to give life—abundant life. That’s the essence of the sixth commandment and one of the most vital core values a Christian can have. Don’t kill, not even with words. Don’t destroy, not even with a joke. Grab hold of God’s life and share it!

Lord of Life, I can’t even imagine actually *living* this passage! But I want to be like You, and this is You. I recognize Your face. Take my hand and show me how. I will follow.

No adultery. Exodus 20:14, The Message

We are ready to look into the seventh commandment. Like the rest, it looks simple on the surface. Contemporary society generally defines adultery as sex with a person who is married to someone else, so as long as we don't do that, we're safe, right? That's what Jesus' disciples thought. Then He told them they could commit adultery with their minds alone, no one the wiser. Except God . . .

In fact, the sacredness of sexuality is one of the most major core values in the Christian life. There are only three heavenly things still left to us from before the gate to Eden was closed: Sabbath, work, and the marriage/family relationship. All three have redemptive power, and all three have been twisted and misused by the devil and our own wayward hearts, but perhaps the most instantly, inflammably dangerous of the three is sexuality.

Sex is sacred. It is meant to be one of the most powerful and deeply moving ways for us to recapture at least a glimpse of the kind of oneness the Godhead wanted to recreate in us and the kind of unity that God and humanity once enjoyed. Impurity and immorality of any kind is absolutely corrosive to the soul and must be fled as if it were the devil incarnate.

It's like electricity. That, too, is an almost supernatural power of nature. Without boundaries, kept with infinite care, it will kill on contact. People who deal with power lines and wires and volts and amps and all that know that a moment's carelessness can kill not only themselves, but others as well if electrical fires get started.

Yet, think of all the amazing blessings brought to your daily life by electricity, kept flowing within its insulated wires! It's possible to live without it. Millions of people do. It doesn't buy happiness. But it sure is nice to have, and we can thank God for it.

Think of God's commands as insulated wires, within which flow His best blessings, and outside of which is danger, even with intrinsically good things. For the next week and a little more, we'll dig into this commandment for some core values for life that you may never have considered as living within this simple conduit—"No adultery!"

Powerful God, You let us have a tiny spark of Your creative ability when You said, "multiply and fill the earth." We are deeply grateful for Your gift, but also a little nervous about its use, because we've seen so many wildfires started by it. Teach us to see sexuality issues as You do—as issues of love. Not hazy romantic fantasies, but true, strong, godly Love.

Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and embraces his wife. They become one flesh. The two of them, the Man and his Wife, were naked, but they felt no shame.

Genesis 2:24, 25, The Message

The obvious first place to start when looking into the seventh commandment is with marriage. It was the first gift God gave Adam and Eve. "You two can be one, just as We Three are One. Stick together, and you'll find blessings you can't yet imagine."

It's kind of odd, don't you think, that the very next phrase after the famous description of leaving home and clinging to each other to start a new home is "they were naked, but not ashamed." Why should they be? They were perfect, the earth was perfect, life was perfect! They'd never heard of shame. Or of clothing, for that matter. Why would they be ashamed?

There is clearly more to this clothing issue in the garden than first meets the eye.

Is it possible that one of the main deterrents to happy marriages to this day is the sense of needing to hide from each other? Of feeling ashamed? It might not show itself physically. The couple may be fine with making love, after a little initial embarrassment. But that doesn't mean they are completely open with each other on a soul level. They may still hide from each other, may still feel shame about various parts of themselves, may keep showing only a partial face to each other. They may be pretending that what you see is what there really is, but if it isn't true, it can and often does destroy a good marriage.

It's even possible to keep up this kind of hiding and pretense for the entire length of a long marriage. People may come to the 50th anniversary and say admiringly, "How did you do it?" And one or both of the couple may think—or even say openly—"Never tell the whole truth!"

This is not to say there should be *no* secrets. There may be things one only shares with God. But there must not be any cover-ups going on. And often, the person doing the hiding is not even conscious of it, because she or he is hiding from him/herself as well. And from God.

Or trying to . . .

If you feel shame, you may need to talk to some godly person, maybe for a long time, to dig out all the reasons why. But don't hide. Come into God's light—together.

God of light, You already know my secrets, including those I don't know, myself. Take my hand, send another person to take my hand if I need it, and help me come into the light where there is no shame—only love.

Troublemakers start fights; gossips break up friendships. Proverbs 16:28, The Message

How, then, can we have the kind of marriage God had in mind? Well, like most relationships, it all begins with plain, not-so-ordinary friendship. First of all, let's take a look at that word, "adultery." It comes from "adulterate," which means to mix in a little of something dishonest. So food could be adulterated with poison, or with any non-food substance.

Flour could be filled out with a little plaster to make it cheaper. Gasoline could be made to go further with, oh, say some kerosene . . . None of this sounds like a good idea to anyone! So why do we allow our love to be adulterated with a little pride, or a little envy, or a little backbiting?

Our text says that fighting and gossiping are two things that destroy friendships. I'm sure you could lengthen the list by a good bit. Selfishness, telling secrets, lying, being two-faced—well, the truth is, anything that doesn't put God in the center of every moment is dangerous.

A person who, at 10 years old, was an untrustworthy friend may or may not grow up to learn better. You may remember someone you used to trust but don't anymore. There is forgiveness, and none of us are unadulterated Christians, but we also have to put our hearts in God's hands and put our minds into learning new ways to be.

If we can learn to have pure, unadulterated love for God, and then learn to have pure, unadulterated friendships, then we have a much better chance of learning to build marriages that will be unadulterated by faithlessness, neglect, judgmentalism, or finger-pointing.

In the meantime, this seventh commandment isn't just for married people. God has ideals for every single relationship we enter into, and purity of purpose and love is the only way of keeping this commandment.

Thank God, we have His Spirit promising to live inside and show us the way!

God, You are so pure and holy that we can't even see You. We can only barely begin to imagine Your pure, unadulterated love by looking as hard as we can at the face of Jesus, and even that is a long time ago from our point of view. Help me to live with Jesus beside me every single day and to look at all relationships through Your eyes. Show me where I've let in some falsity, selfishness, or pride. Root them out! Give me Your true love, always.

Samson went down to Timnah. There in Timnah a woman caught his eye, a Philistine girl. He came back and told his father and mother, "I saw a woman in Timnah, a Philistine girl; get her for me as my wife." Judges 14:1, 2, The Message

In the whole history of the world, there has never, so far as I know, been a system like the one we call "dating," until about twenty to thirty years into the 20th century. There have been quite a few ways to find a mate, from grabbing one and carrying her off, to giving lots of presents and hoping the desired woman would accept them and with them, one's hand. There have sometimes been societies where women did the going and getting, though it's less common.

Most commonly, though, it was the parents who did the choosing. Sometimes the young people had a choice—often they did not. In some countries, the decisions, if not the betrothals or actual marriages, took place while the future bride and groom were babies or children.

It was only as our western society grew more mobile and as the speed of life began to be measured by a car instead of by a horse that people began to go and spend time with first one person and then another and another, in the search for the perfect mate. Today, dating doesn't even necessarily carry with it the idea of mate-seeking. It's just what you do, for ten years or more, before actually "settling down" with just one.

The most essential criterion, especially for the beginning of the dating ritual, is often the one Samson displayed: Someone "caught the eye" of someone else.

We are not, in this brief devotional, going to go so far as to say all dating is wrong. There are some practical things about it. But what are the criteria for choosing whom to date? Who has caught your eye?

Are you putting God in the center of every moment? Are you seeking to make the choices He would make? Are you, like Samson, out to get what you want? If you catch that attitude sneaking around your heart, turn to God to kick it out immediately, because it *will*, unchecked, adulterate your heart, your relationships, and your marriage. Guaranteed.

A core value of Christians, hidden in the heart of the seventh commandment, is to value the other person above one's self, and to act in ways that bring life and health to that loved one. If your dating habits build that quality in you, go with God. If they don't, you might like to consider another way.

God who gave us both genders to begin with, You know what plans You have for my life. I know You value my wishes, dreams, and ideas, but help me not to put them above other people, let alone above Your plans and ways.

Then the servant told Isaac all he had done. Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death. Genesis 24:66, 67, NIV

There's another method of finding a mate. It's often called "courtship." There are quite a few views on this today, some of them fairly extreme, and we are not necessarily advocating any of them. You will have to learn what you can and prayerfully decide for yourself. But there is one biblical example of the most extreme method. It's not even courtship at all in the usual sense.

Abraham wanted a godly wife for his son, and they lived in the midst of idol worshipers. So he sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac. This is amazing, on the face of it. Abraham didn't even go himself, let alone send Isaac! Rebekah and Isaac never met until they were presented to each other as betrothed, and it appears that the marriage followed immediately.

This would likely not work out well today, but it's worth looking at this story anyway for one special reason. What were the criteria that caused Eliezar to choose Rebekah?

All Abraham asked, at least all that's recorded for us, is that the woman be a worshiper of the one true God. Eliezar, though, had been with his master for a very long time. At one time, whether he knew it or not, he was Abraham's choice as heir. He knew what was important to Abraham, and it certainly looks as if it was important to him, too. He prayed, "God, show me the woman who gives unstintingly."

Question: Whether you choose some form of traditional courtship or some form of dating to find a mate, what are the criteria you are looking for? There are many important ones—similar interests, enough differences to make life interesting, a sense of humor. Most essential of all, though, is true godliness, and as Eliezar knew, that doesn't show just by whether a person professes Christianity. It shows in selfless acts of giving.

If you are already married, what are the things that are most important to you in your mate? How can you encourage and enhance those qualities?

Oh, and remember—the relationship goes both ways.

How well do you measure up?

God of our fathers and mothers, You have led Your people through some amazing things. Perhaps even today there are those who find mates chosen by You that they didn't even know. But as I seek a mate, or in my marriage today, help me give unadulterated love, selflessly, as You do.

Pay close attention, friend, to what your father tells you; never forget what you learned at your mother's knee. Wear their counsel like flowers in your hair, like rings on your fingers. Dear friend, if bad companions tempt you, don't go along with them. Proverbs 1:8-10, The Message

One more principle before we leave the subject of marriage and that which leads up to it . . . Maybe you date. Maybe you wait. Maybe you court or plan to court. Maybe you are already married and are thanking God on your knees for a godly spouse. Maybe you are already married and are seeking help for a marriage that is in trouble. There is one thing that can help a person in all these situations: the counsel of godly parents.

Let's agree at the outset that not all parents are godly or able to be of practical help even if they are. If you have parents who love God and love you, you can be sure they have, just by virtue of longer years, experience you don't have. They may have followed God their whole lives and have invaluable guidance for you, or they may have made a lot of mistakes they don't want you to make. Either can be helpful. But if you don't have blood or adoptive parents who can guide you in this way, look within the church family. God has counsel for you, and He often gives it through those who have already gotten tangled up in some of the thorns that are now besetting your path.

Having said that, let's look at godly parental counsel. It's important that you ask for what you want. If you are seeking general advice on principles, say so. If you want to hear their mind on a certain situation, say that. Then *listen*. You will be the one making the decisions for your life, and godly parents know that. They are not trying to live your life for you; they are just trying to help.

And what if they really don't like your special someone? Ask why and listen. They may be wrong. But one thing is certain—you can't see the relationship from outside as they can. If it's at all possible that "bad companions" are tempting you, find a way to get some time and space to yourself and ask God what to do. Then ask Him for the courage to do it.

Because neither God nor your parents are out to make you unhappy. They may know something you don't. Well, God does, anyway, that's for sure! And you are putting Him in the center, right?

God of unity, it can be so hard to listen to my parents! They can be annoying and controlling and I am sometimes very afraid that they are right! Help me to see that the very fear that makes me sometimes avoid their counsel can be my own heart, and the Holy Spirit, telling me that they're right. Thank You for the counsel of older heads. Help me to listen, then to choose wisely.

The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. Psalm 19:8, NASB
I will walk within my house in the integrity of my heart. I will set no worthless thing before my eyes. Psalm 101:2, 3, NASB

There is yet another core value to be sifted out from the glittering ore of the seventh commandment. If we truly want to set God at the center and live unadulterated lives, then we need to take a look at our entertainment choices.

This is an issue that is different now from any time during the history of humanity. There has always been temptation; humans have always been prone to violence, lust, and vanity. But never before has the entire population of earth had such unlimited access to every kind of entertainment, from the divinely sublime to the truly demonic.

Some try to make the choice easier by simply saying all pleasure is a frivolous waste of time and should be denied. But it's patently obvious to the most casual observer that God made us to love innovation, imagination, joy, and just plain fun!

So for the next three devotionals, we shall consider some general principles, and the first is encapsulated in our texts above: Is it enlightening or worthless? Does it have integrity? If it were true, would it be right? These questions can be used on everything from movies to video games.

Ask yourself, did I learn something about the human heart, or the world, or true living? A book or movie doesn't have to be overtly religious to meet these criteria.

The problem is, of course, different people will still have different opinions, some maintaining that they've gained tremendous spiritual blessings from something others insist is either nonsense or outright wrong.

God is the only judge of this! It is up to each of us to determine our own consciences, and we may find we change as we grow and mature, and that is as it should be. We may help each other ask the questions, but it is not our business to judge the conclusions others come to.

God of joy and fun, You made me, but an evil force has had some shaping of me, too. Please help me to keep my eyes on You and show me, as the years pass, where my tastes have been adulterated. Clean them up and make me aware of the blessings and enlightenment that can be found even in good, clean fun.

Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life. Proverbs 4:23, NASB
Keep vigilant watch over your heart; that's where life starts. Proverbs 4:23, The Message

At first sight, it seems that this text would only be true if one has accepted the Holy Spirit. Life doesn't come from us—it comes from Him. Jesus told the woman at the well that if she drank the water He wanted to give her, it would be “an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life” (John 4:14, *The Message*).

However, in James 3:10-12, speaking of the power of speech, we read “Curses and blessings out of the same mouth! My friends, this can't go on. A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it? . . . You're not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you?” So it seems that, even though the springs of life came from God, they can be polluted from a decidedly different source.

That means that one of the principles of living an unadulterated life is to watch carefully over what comes into and goes out of that spring of life within.

Pay attention, the next time you choose something to do “just for fun.” Do you, afterwards, feel fresher and more alive? More your true self? Did you learn something that makes some part of this complex life clearer to you? Did you strengthen a relationship with a friend or friends as you played together? It doesn't have to be deep and serious, but it ought to be good.

Or did you feel a little dirty and polluted? Did your springs get a little muddier? Did you get more confused about something than ever, or compete with your friends in a way that caused, or could have caused, hurt feelings?

Bottom line: Would you have invited Jesus to do/play/see it with you?

This is a lot easier to talk about than to do! Jesus knows your heart and knows if you are trying to honestly learn and put Him in the center. He will guide you. Sometimes He'll use others to guide you. Other times you'll have to stand alone.

But then . . . never *alone*.

Lord of my leisure moments, guard me from the twin dangers of overindulgence and fanaticism. Don't let me pen up my spirits into a corset of restrictions You didn't create. But don't let me break out all over, either, doing anything I feel like doing or that my friends encourage me to do without remembering to invite You. And . . . Thank You for your patience and forgiveness!

Heman and Jeduthun were also well equipped with trumpets, cymbals, and other instruments for accompanying sacred songs. 1 Chronicles 16:42, The Message
The priests were all on duty; the choir and orchestra of Levites that David had provided for singing and playing anthems to the praise and love of GOD were all there; across the courtyard the priests blew trumpets. All Israelites were on their feet. 2 Chronicles 7:6, The Message

It must have been noisy when Israel got together to praise God. Did you know that in the King James Version, instead of speaking of instruments “for accompanying sacred music,” it speaks of “instruments of God”? It’s as if they considered those trumpets, cymbals, tambourines, etc. as belonging directly to God. Perhaps they did. Perhaps, like other things, there were instruments that were sacred, dedicated to use at the temple and nowhere else.

Music must be another thing left to us from before the Fall, because it certainly is powerful. It can enlighten, uplift, terrify, anger, create trances, bring peace, and electrify mobs. Music can put the souls of a whole crowd of people into the hands of a few musicians on a stage.

There have been times and places where all music was seen as sin to be strictly avoided. There have been and still are places where music from “the sacred harp” (the voice) is “good,” but all instruments created by humans are “bad.” There are times and places where any and all music is “good,” no matter what it sounds like or what it says. And, of course, there is, as in all else, an enormous range of taste! People from one country may hate the praise music of another, even if it is truly made for giving glory to the one Creator God.

So it behooves us, in our last devotion on living the unadulterated life, to consider music. We can ask the same questions as we have for entertainment, though music is more than entertainment. We can listen carefully to the words, the mood of the music itself, and the mood it creates in us. We can be aware that music may affect others differently than ourselves and be sensitive to that.

Godly people, those who have chosen to put God in the center of every moment and want to live unadulterated lives, will recognize that people are more important than the things we do and say, and they will seek to bring life and peace, rather than distraction, argument, and disunity. We can agree to disagree when necessary.

And we can all praise God together.

God of all music, it makes me sad to think how Lucifer, once head of the heavenly choir, has polluted Your music. Help me to be one voice that turns that on its head and makes the heavens ring with praise and joy.

No stealing. Exodus 20:15, The Message

As we’ve learned by now, the commandments all contain a great deal more gold than is apparent on the surface. Take this commandment, for instance. As small children, we learn not to take things that are not ours—not from other children, not from mama’s purse, not from the cookie jar, not from stores. By kindergarten, most of us have that one down.

As we grow older, we also learn not to take intangibles that are not ours. We don’t take credit for other people’s work. We don’t take the attention away from someone else when it’s their moment to shine. We don’t steal time from the Sabbath hours or money from God’s tithe. Without necessarily getting proud and self-righteous about it, most of us have good cause to feel reasonably honest most of the time, and we ask forgiveness and make restitution when we discover otherwise.

But there’s still more to this commandment.

Have you ever considered that when God says not to do something, He means He wants us to do the opposite? And the opposite of stealing isn’t *not* stealing—it’s giving! For the next several devotionals, we’ll explore in more detail some of the ways God encourages us to give.

The most important point to bear in mind is that everything we have to give comes from God to begin with. When we give Him our money, our time, our talents, our service, our hearts, we are only giving back what He has already given us. Then, as we develop and grow and have more to give, well, that came not only from Him but from our giving to Him, if you can follow that circular reasoning!

The greatest miracle of all will occur when, because we chose to give instead of take, we will meet people in heaven who say, “I am here because you did ____.”

Amazing!

Generous God, You gave. You give. You will give. All we have, all we are. The planet, and all that is on it. Our bodies and souls. You even gave us the freedom to give back, or not to. I give You myself. I don’t know what You can make of me, but I’m eager to see.

Remember: A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop. I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over, and make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving.
2 Corinthians 9:6, 7, *The Message*

One of the core values that identifies true Christians is their giving hearts. Well-meaning people, wanting to not only identify themselves as Christians, but somehow prove to themselves, others, even God, that they are Christians, take this to extremes all the time. If it's good to give time, I'll give until I drop from exhaustion. If it's good to give my gifts, I'll use all of them, the whole cluster, all the time, until I burn out completely. If it's good to give money, then I'll give it all, and leave myself and my family hungry. That's self-sacrifice, right?

Maybe, sometimes. Remember the young man who felt called to sell everything and keep just the Bible, guitar, and suit of clothes? There are three things to bear in mind. He was young and single. He was not necessarily called to live this way his entire life. And—most important of all—those around him could tell by his quiet peace and joy that he really was where God wanted him in that moment.

Mostly, sadly enough, people who do this kind of extreme giving are far from being at peace about it. They're either afraid all the time—"have I given enough?"—or they're proud of their giving. In either case, it's a twisted form of self-righteousness. They've turned giving into a work that will buy them heaven. It won't.

We all know 1 Cor. 9:7 about the cheerful giver, but we often pass over 9:6. Take time, think it over, pray hard, make up your mind. Watch for times when you talk yourself into being less generous because "God wants you to have fun." Watch also for times when God makes an extra call on your wallet for a special circumstance. If you give more, let it be because He asked you to, not because someone told you a sob story or twisted your arm.

Then, delight in the giving!

The First Giver did!

Giver of life, my money is Yours, my time is Yours, my gifts are Yours, my being is Yours. Make me wise and balanced in the use of them all. I want to be Your trusted steward, signing checks with Your name because You've made it clear to me how You want Your resources used. And thank You so much for delighting in giving to me!

"Every creature in the forest is mine, the wild animals on all the mountains. I know every mountain bird by name; the scampering field mice are my friends. If I get hungry, do you think I'd tell you? All creation and its bounty are mine." Psalm 50:10-12, *The Message*

It's interesting to even consider what it means to steal from God or to give to Him. He already owns everything. Nothing we take from Him is really taken *away* from Him, and we can't give Him anything He doesn't already have. Yet, in Malachi 3:8-10 (among others) God accuses people of robbing Him. How can this be?

If you read the rest of this Psalm, you'll find that it's about attitude. God is speaking to people who think if they do all the right rituals the right way, that will get them what they want. It was common in their times, and in some places it still is, to think that sacrifices are actually feeding the god. Yahweh, the only true God, points out, "I'm not hungry, thanks, and if I were, you couldn't do anything about it." That flawless sacrifice they were bringing to the temple was merely an example to show them the Greatest Gift that would ever be given—to them. To *us*.

So if our attitudes are humble, if we are putting God in the center of our lives, then He will be in the center of our wallets, too. We will say, "It's all Yours, God. What do You want to do with it?"

And He's given us one answer: "I want ten percent of it back, first of all."

That's easy enough. Really. If you aren't tithing, begin, and you'll find it's not as hard as you thought.

Next? "Next," says God, "let's dream together." If you have \$10 to give, you could build a Ten Dollar Church (thetendollarchurch.org). If you have \$1,000 to give, you could give a worthy student a scholarship. If you have \$10,000 to give, you could pay off a building fund, or build *a lot* of Life Guard Centers on the border between Nepal and India to help stop sex trafficking of young girls (giftcatalog.adra.org/catalog/stop-sex-trafficking-india). If you have \$1,000,000 . . . well, you get the picture.

Give to God—then stand back!

God of the open windows, I want to get in on the fun! I want to find out how far my nickels or dollars will go. I wouldn't mind being one of the ones who could give a million to You, but I assume You'll want to train me on the nickels first! What can I give today?

Be generous. Give to the poor. Get yourselves a bank that can't go bankrupt, a bank in heaven far from bankrobbers, safe from embezzlers, a bank you can bank on. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being.
 Luke 12:33, 34, *The Message*

There is one problem with giving to God. You can't do it without giving to people. He says Himself that what we do to others we do to Him. So if You think that *He's* the young girl being smuggled across the Napali border, *He's* the hungry child in New York City, *He's* the woman attacked in Darfur, the man somewhere who longs to know more of the Bible . . . giving becomes more urgent, doesn't it?

And that's the gift God wants to give us—the ability to see others as He sees them—the deep core value that in His economy, money is nothing; people are everything.

There are a million and one ways to give to the poor of the earth, even if you *are* one of the poor of the earth. You surely have two mites, like that widow, right? If not, there are other things to give, and we will look at some of them in the next devotionals.

The most important thing to consider in giving to others is their feelings, their self-respect. If you can't put yourself in the shoes of the one you want to help, it would be better to give the money to some agency with more experience. If you have been hungry yourself, you know the mixed feelings of receiving a food basket. It's a blessing, no doubt about it, but it isn't that easy to take it. That's why the Bible has the practice of gleaning. The poor could still feel they were doing something to help themselves.

Have you thought of using the money you buy with as an offering? If there is someone in your neighborhood struggling to get by, what if you bought what they make, or the service they offer? You might be able to buy a dish towel at a discount store for \$1.50, but if you bought a \$15 one from the one who wove it, God would know why you did that. He is keeping accurate records, and they don't have to do with dollars and cents. They have to do with the smile on the face of both the givers—the one who made, and the one who bought.

Do you know where your dollars go?

God of the needy, I am needy, too. Of course I know You know that. You know my needs that are physical and monetary, and You know the deeper ones that can't be seen and touched. Help me to give, and in so doing, to receive and be blessed.

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.
 Matthew 6:33, 34, NASB

Money is important, but probably the least of the things we can give—or steal, for that matter. Time may be the most important. There are, as always, two directions to go off the road of wise use of the gift of time.

We can and do steal time in a thousand little ways. We can steal from the hours of the Sabbath, and not only rob God, but ourselves of the full blessing we could have received. We can spend work or school time doing other things, steal from our sleep by playing video games late, waste time in obsessing over our looks or our money or what So-and-So said about us or did to us. We could even waste some more time devising revenge.

These are not the actions of a person who has put God in the center of *every* moment. We need to be constantly asking, “What do You want me to do with this minute, this hour, this day?”

Then there's that other direction. We can be so determined to fill every minute of every hour with useful and generous action that we steal from quiet time, from rest, from our own soul's peace. This is far more attractive to most earnest Christians. The fact is, living by a clock is a fairly recent innovation. Until a couple of centuries ago, there was Daytime and Nighttime, perhaps further broken down into Morning, Afternoon, Evening, and Sleep. People living by the agricultural rhythms of Bible times could and did take a whole week off to have a wedding. Not that there wasn't plenty of work being done during that week, but “a change in occupation is as good as a vacation,” as the old proverb says.

If God is in the center of our moments, He'll keep us in the center of His will. He'll help us to be wise about giving our time generously and without measure, but also wise about giving to Him our heart's first and last devotion, and to ourselves the rest and peace that we need in order to be effective.

No stealing—not even from yourself!

God of time, God Who gives work and rest, peace and diligence, keep me balanced. I want to give of my time generously, without feeling or making the other person feel they're rationed. But I also want to guard against overwork, stress, and burnout. Stay in the center of my life, and keep me in the center of Your will.

Attention, Israel! GOD, our God! GOD the one and only! Love GOD, your God, with your whole heart: love him with all that's in you, love him with all you've got! Write these commandments that I've given you today on your hearts. Get them inside of you and then get them inside your children. Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night. Tie them on your hands and foreheads as a reminder; inscribe them on the doorposts of your homes and on your city gates.
Deuteronomy 6:4-9, *The Message*

We've already discussed giving our time to God, but this is probably one that bears revisiting. In the core values that we found in the second commandment we explored worship and discovered that giving God the first time of the day and then staying in a worshipful attitude all day long would help us to keep Him in the center.

For this eighth commandment, "no stealing," we are looking at ways to give instead of steal, and in this context, let's think about how we give time to God aside from direct worship.

A man who has come to be known by the English name of Brother Lawrence, a 17th century French monk, wrote a wonderful book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. In it, on page 22, he writes this: "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament." Brother Lawrence's most important maxim, his core value, if you will, was to give every single thing you had to do to God.

In other words, yes, we give time to God alone in devotions and study. Yes, we spend other times in prayer during our day. But have you given Him the dishes? Have you given Him your homework? Have you given Him your commute time? Have you given Him your cell phone and your Facebook page and your Twitter?

Question: How much time should we give to God?

Answer: 24 hours a day.

God of the 86,400 seconds in my day, You can have them all. Let me share them with You and with others. I want to practice Your presence, and I don't want to steal You from me or me from You. Show me what to give, when to give, and how to give, but first, let me give all to You.

*Three of Job's friends heard of all the trouble that had fallen on him. Each traveled from his own country . . . and went together to Job to keep him company and comfort him . . . They cried out in lament, ripped their robes, and dumped dirt on their heads as a sign of their grief. Then they sat with him on the ground. Seven days and nights they sat there without saying a word. They could see how rotten he felt, how deeply he was suffering. Job 2:11-13, *The Message**

Deciding how much of your time to give to God is easy—all of it. Maintaining the state of mind that actually *gives* it all to Him is hard.

Deciding how much of your time to give to others is trickier. First, we have to maintain a healthy balance for ourselves. Pouring out continually without refilling will help no one. Then we have to help the other person maintain a healthy balance, too. It's all too easy for a person to learn to depend on another person, especially one who has been supportive in some crisis. We need to encourage them to lean on God, not us. There are also those who are unhealthy in their neediness, looking to others in lots of ways, rather than depending on God or even on the things they could do for themselves. It requires the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to discern which is which and how much to give, when.

All of that said, time can be one of the most important gifts we can give another. We may give time to help people in many different ways, but grief is one good example.

The term "Job's comforters" has come to mean people who, instead of comforting, blame you or try to fix you or talk you out of your pain. Job's friends did all of that and more, even calling his faith into question. But first, note that they took the time, trouble, and expense, in a day when travel was not easy, to come and spend time with Job, in silence, just grieving.

We tend to use way too many words. "It was God's will." Unlikely. This world is *not* as God meant it to be. "You must be brave." Not now. Later they can be brave. Now, they need to cry. "I'll pray for you." Pray now. Then just give time. Cry together. Breathe together.

God is there in their pain. Are we with Him in it, or are we crowding Him out with our attempts to fix or escape it?

God of the grieving and the needy, hold my hand and keep me balanced. Help me to help others, not just in tangible ways like housework or homework or a ride somewhere, but also in intangible ways, like encouraging them to be their own true selves and put You in the center of their moments.

All this time Saul was breathing down the necks of the Master's disciples, out for the kill. He went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to take to the meeting places in Damascus so that if he found anyone there belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem. Acts 9:1, 2, The Message

"You'll remember, friends, that when I first came to you to let you in on God's master stroke, I didn't try to impress you with polished speeches and the latest philosophy. I deliberately kept it plain and simple: first Jesus and who he is; then Jesus and what he did—Jesus crucified."
1 Corinthians 2:1, 2, The Message

It's an amazing transformation, isn't it? From leader of the persecution, "breathing threats and murder," to leader of the early church, helping to "turn the whole world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

In our continuing exploration of the core values of giving that we are seeking in the context of the eighth commandment, let's notice what gifts Paul has. It is very clear that already, before he met Jesus on the Damascus road, he had gifts of leadership, initiative, and determination.

Were these spiritual gifts? We are not the ones who judge such things. Certainly these gifts were not being used for God's will. However, it is clear that Saul of Tarsus believed he was doing the right thing. As a Pharisee, perhaps he was trying to be zealous enough to earn his way to heaven. God is the one who gives all talents and gifts. We get to decide whether to use them for Him. Only at the point where we decide for Him do these become spiritual gifts, and at that point, the Spirit gives more gifts, specifically for the building of the kingdom.

Saul was young, the Bible tells us, at the stoning of Stephen in 34 AD (Acts 7:58). He was about to learn some serious lessons. After the Damascus experience, he had three days of darkness to consider his position. And he made the right choice. He turned around (repented) and started going full speed in the right direction.

Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? Have you committed yourself to give the gifts you do have back to God who gave them? Are you exploring more and more as you grow in the spirit, learning what God has for you to do now and in the future?

Have you ever thought about whether it might be stealing if you keep the gifts God gave you for His kingdom, to use them for yourself instead?

Giver of all good gifts, thank You for the abilities You have planted in me. Thank You for giving me special spiritual gifts as well. I dedicate them all to You and Your work.

Bezalel . . . made everything that GOD had commanded Moses. Working with Bezalel was Oholiab . . . an artisan, designer, and embroiderer in blue, purple, and scarlet fabrics and fine linen.

Exodus 38:22, 23, The Message

Down the road a way in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha, "Gazelle" in our language. She was well-known for doing good and helping out.

Acts 9:36, The Message

In our foray into the core values buried under the skin of the eighth commandment, we have found that the heart of keeping this commandment means not stealing, but giving, whether money, time, or gifts. We have also recognized that giving to God always involves giving to people. As our final look at this principle, we will look at two Bible stories of little-known people who used the gifts they had for the good of others and the glory of God.

Bezalel and Oholiab are the artisans named in Exodus as being in charge of the building of the beautiful sanctuary in the wilderness. They probably were quiet, unassuming men. They certainly would not have considered themselves gifted as Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were. But the Bible says God Himself gave them their artistic ability. And just think of the nameless dozens or hundreds more who helped with the smelting and the hammering and the spinning and weaving and sewing. God knows them all, and we'll meet them someday.

If you have artistic ability, thank God and use it to glorify and lift Him up so that others may see and live.

Tabitha, or Dorcas, was "just a housewife," living in the town of Joppa. If you'd asked her, she wouldn't have considered herself particularly gifted. She could sew, that was all. If you asked anyone else, though, what they would have spoken of (while showing you what she made for them), it was her kind heart. She may not have thought her work was very important, but apparently it was important enough to God that her name was added to the few we know of who have been resurrected from death!

If you can work with your hands and have a kind heart, thank God and use both to help others and lift up the name and work of Christ.

Christians have no need to steal. We have access to the greatest treasure trove ever dreamed of. Let's give it all away!

God of the treasure house, You promised to open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings. I ask them, for my friends and neighbors, for my classmates and coworkers, for the homeless on my streets and the stranger in my gates. Show me how to help. I am ready.

No lies about your neighbor. Exodus 20:16, The Message

Some of the commandments we have explored seemed simple on the surface but then turned out to be deeper than they looked. Not this one. Everybody knows how complicated truth and honesty can be.

Some questions immediately suggest themselves:

What is a lie?

Is a lie always words?

Could it be an action?

Could it be just a facial expression?

Could withholding something be a lie?

Is it *always* best to say exactly what you see?

Is it ever right to fudge the truth?

Is it okay to fudge the truth to protect yourself?

Is it okay to fudge the truth to protect others?

Who is my neighbor?

The last is the easiest to answer, because somebody was smart enough to ask Jesus directly, and He defined neighbor for us by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. The interesting thing is the twist on the end. The man asked, “Who is *my* neighbor?” Jesus asked, “Which of the three *became a neighbor* to the man attacked by robbers?” (Luke 10:36, emphasis added, *The Message*).

In other words, don’t ask who is a neighbor to you, ask to whom can you be a neighbor? The answer: anyone you choose. It could (should) be anyone with whom you come in contact. The Samaritan probably didn’t live near the victim, most likely had never seen him before, and may never have seen him again. He certainly hadn’t planned his day around some extra hours and some extra money helping this stranger. The Jews would have said he was not a “son of the covenant.” But he was the one who lived by it.

So the answer to our last question is clear. Let’s see if over the next week or so we can find some possible answers to some of the others.

Lord of the great, cosmic “neighborhood,” I want to be a good neighbor to all I meet. I want to be friendly and loving. I want to be honest, too, but sometimes it’s hard, and I don’t mean just the temptation to lie deliberately. Sometimes I *honestly* don’t know the right thing to do. Lead me as I explore the core values hidden in this ninth commandment.

GOD, investigate my life; get all the facts firsthand. I’m an open book to you; even from a distance, you know what I’m thinking. You know when I leave and when I get back; I’m never out of your sight. You know everything I’m going to say before I start the first sentence. I look behind me and you’re there, then up ahead and you’re there, too—your reassuring presence, coming and going. This is too much, too wonderful—I can’t take it all in! Psalm 139:1-6, The Message

If we are truly seeking to keep the first and greatest commandment by putting God in the center of every moment of our lives, then obviously the truth will begin with Him. First of all, He’s the only One who knows it! None of us knows the whole truth about even our own soul. But God not only knows the whole truth, He *is* the Whole Truth.

Yet, how much time and energy we waste trying to hide from God, trick Him, deceive Him into thinking we’re better than we are. Adam and Eve hide. Moses runs into the desert. Jonah runs away to the sea. Saul of Tarsus tries hiding in constant activity, chasing down followers of this new, disruptive Way.

Me? I tend to hide out in mindless entertainment or a lot of God talk. I write endlessly in my journal, pretending I’m telling God and myself the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me . . . ummm . . .

And He does. Help me, I mean. He helps me to be (or at least to try to learn to be) authentic before Him. It’s not so much a matter of *telling Him* the whole truth as allowing Him to *show me* the whole truth about myself. And you know what? Sometimes, as I expect, it’s worse than I feared. But often, it’s not nearly as bad as I feared. I thought it was all my fault. It’s not.

And then God points out that even that, blaming myself for everything, is a twisted form of pride . . .

If you know you are not living authentically, openly, honestly before God, ask Him how to start. You might need a human friend to help, too. And if you think you are already living authentically with Him, then pray David’s prayer after him.

“GOD, investigate my life; get all the facts firsthand. I’m an open book to you; even from a distance, you know what I’m thinking.” I admit I am afraid to know all those facts firsthand, but I do want You in the center, and if there’s any falsehood blocking Your light from reaching corners of my heart, then I do want it out. Help me!

"If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9, NASB

Many, many psychologists, books, and self-help gurus will tell you that your first task in being whole is to tell yourself the truth. They're almost right. That's your second task. Until you start trying to tell God the truth, letting Him shine His flashlight around the dark corners and to show you truths you never knew were there, it is pointless to even try to tell yourself the truth.

But after you've begun that, then you must also say it to yourself. This could be out loud, or it could be a journal. It is very helpful to have a godly helper such as a pastor, counselor, parent, close friend, to be your listening board. That's one reason alcoholics and addicts put so much emphasis on telling themselves, God, and one other person the whole truth about themselves as they learn it. They've found it essential to getting well.

For instance, God says to you one day, "Remember when *that* happened to you in the fourth grade? It caused you to begin drawing back on yourself or acting out in *such-and-such* ways, and look how it's affected your relationships—this one, and that one . . ."

"Wow," you respond. "I had no idea! What an awesome insight! From now on, I won't [act out, draw back, whatever.]"

Then you go about your life, and to your disgust, the same actions and thoughts still have sway. You may even, as in James 1:24, forget all about the insight that impressed you so much at the time.

That's why I chose the study verse I did, even though it doesn't seem to have much to do with God's command not to lie. It shows the importance of *saying* what we believe. Remember, the old thoughts and desires and false beliefs that have held us captive have been repeated and repeated, perhaps for years. We'll have to repeat the new truth over and over in order to convince our hearts to really believe it and live by it.

Then, and only then, will we begin to be able to live authentically before our own mirror as well as before God.

Now we are ready to look at the Christian core value of authenticity with others—a much more complex subject!

Great God of Truth, I know that when I gave You my *whole* heart, You took it, and claimed all of me. I also know there's a lot more for me to learn! Please lead me quickly enough to help me grow, and slowly enough that I don't collapse from the weight of all the lies I've lived by and never even known about.

"You'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies."
Philippians 4:8, 9, The Message

In our present context, there are three things that are very interesting about this passage. The most notable, of course, is that the first criterion for what to fill one's mind with is truth. And that's the core value we're looking at: living authentically and honestly with God, ourselves, and each other.

The second thing comes last in the text: the translation, "his most excellent harmonies." I love that, don't you? For one thing, it automatically rules out any lock-step obedience that turns unity into sameness. God doesn't like sameness. If you doubt, go outside and look around! Harmonies require different notes, and even different timing and sound.

The third thing, the one we will spend some time on, is "learned from me." Paul says this sort of thing several times in his letters, and sometimes, to tell the truth, he seems a little arrogant about it. Shouldn't he be telling them to imitate Jesus, not him?

Yes, and it's clear from all his writings taken together that that's what Paul means. But how do we learn? From each other. All the time. Good and bad. You learned all kinds of things yesterday from all kinds of people, and all kinds of people learned something from you. What did they see?

Scary thought, sometimes. Which is why we choose to put God into the center, meditate on the truths He shows us, practice telling them to ourselves and maybe one other person, and then, *then* we have a chance of living truly, honestly, authentically with all. Then, the things God shows us, the things we learn and speak and say, the good and true and authentic and gracious things we learn from each other will become natural parts of our lives, and when people see us, they'll see love, which will make them see Jesus.

That's a miracle, pure and simple. And it starts with telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us, God!

God of truth, nobility, authenticity, and grace, make me more like You. Help me to see Your truth, then to see my own truth, and then to share them both with those around me, not to make them more like me, but to help them turn to You.

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another . . . Colossians 3:12, 13a, NASB

If one thing is more certain than another, it's that when a group of people start living authentically with each other, there will be a lot of excusing and forgiving to do! Two of the core values that are the hallmark of the true Christian are forbearance (an old-fashioned word) and forgiveness.

And there is a difference.

Forbearance: to bear for; that is, to bear something *for* someone else, or bear with—to bear something *with* someone else. They both have to do with patience, and it's a certain kind of patience. Forbearance isn't about waiting or hoping for something. It's about bearing it now, either with or for (sometimes both) another person. In the context of this passage in Colossians, it's all about relationships.

Bearing with someone patiently means not expecting them to be what they are not. It means recognizing their weaknesses, which may be different from outright sins. Sins require forgiveness, and we'll get to that in the next devotional. Some weaknesses only require excusing. Bearing with. Bearing for. Patience. Compassion.

A person who was treated harshly as a child may now have a harsh tongue. Sometimes this person, who is now a devoted Christian, hurts people. She is deeply sorry and tries her best to do better, and she is improving. But sometimes she is sharp when she honestly doesn't mean it and may not even know it. Does this require forgiveness? No, it requires forbearance.

Another person may learn at a slower speed and may require more time to understand new concepts and lessons. Don't expect Christianity, plus Bible study, to change his or her way of learning. Consider everything and bear these needs in mind when you lead the Sabbath school class discussion.

You and I have our weaknesses, too. Some of them we know and fight against. Some of them are still hidden from us in those dark corners God is taking us patiently through. Is it possible that until then they may be used by God as training for the patience of those around us?

Father who bears us all, Savior on whose palms we are engraved, You bear with us in so many things. You bore *for* us an unimaginable load of sin, pain, and weakness. Help me, when I am in danger of impatience, to remember my own weaknesses, and to have the compassion to excuse those of my brother or sister.

If we admit our sins—make a clean breast of them—he won't let us down; he'll be true to himself. He'll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing. 1 John 1:9, The Message
Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed. James 5:16, The Message

A very important part of living an honest life is confessing our sins. There are two parts of confession. One is always essential. The other varies.

The first step in confession, after God has shown us sin and we've recognized it for what it is, is confession to God. We are not telling God anything He doesn't already know, but it's important for us to say it, name it, and admit it. This doesn't mean beating our breast and belittling ourselves. It means facing up to our choices and taking responsibility for them.

This part of confession is *always* necessary. "Against You, You only, have I sinned . . ." (Psalm 51:4). No matter what you did and whom you've hurt, it concerns God most. It wouldn't be sin if it weren't against God's law of love.

The second part of confession is confessing to the wronged one, and this is less certain. Most of the time, it is best to go directly to the person, name what you have done, and ask forgiveness. You may also make it clear that you are willing to offer restitution if it is possible. It is up to the other person to decide whether to forgive you or not. If they don't, you have done your part, and must now try to live in a loving way toward them, no matter what their attitude is.

There are times, though, when confession to the injured party is not the wise thing to do. If the other person doesn't know you did anything, for instance, you may cause more damage than you already have by confessing. In that case, your discomfort at not being able to lay the matter before the other person may be part of the consequences of your sin. If you are not sure whether to confess or not, talk to the wisest and godliest person you know and ask their counsel.

The promise is, if we confess to God, He will "purge us of our wrongdoing." In His books (the only ones that count, after all), we are clear. Acquitted. Confession to the other person does not carry the same promise, because it is up to the other's will also. But if the sinner and the injured party can agree, forgive and be forgiven, reconcile, then God promises they can "live together whole and healed."

Forgiving God, I know that You are the One who has made it possible for us to live in the grace and light of full forgiveness. Show me if there is someone to whom I should confess, and give me the courage and honesty to do so.

Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. Colossians 3:13b, The Message

We are now ready to look at the second part of the “bearing with each other” verse, the part that talks about forgiving. Forgiving is entirely different from excusing. One of the major problems many people have with forgiving is that they think it means to excuse, to condone, to say, “It’s all right!”

It’s *not* all right! Sin is never all right. There may be all kinds of extenuating circumstances, we may have weaknesses that make it difficult, but sin is a breaking of the fabric of love from which God created the universe, and it can’t be ignored. It has to be mended. Jesus is the *only One* who can do that mending, and it comes by the method of forgiveness.

To forgive requires three steps:

First, we must recognize that we have been hurt, that the other person has torn a hole in our hearts and owes us a debt. Christians tend to gloss over this part. In an honest desire to be “quick to forgive,” as the above passage asks, we may try to pretend nothing very bad has happened. Well, then the matter needs a clear look. If it really wasn’t a bad thing, then it wasn’t a sin, and it doesn’t need to be forgiven, but can be excused and borne with. If it was sin, it was bad, no matter how small. Recognize it. Name it to yourself and to God.

Second, we must recognize that the other person cannot, in fact, mend the tear. It’s not a human possibility. There may be restitution. If she stole from you, she can give it back, or pay you back, or even add damages. But she can’t go back and not steal from you. It’s done.

Third, we must realize Who *can* mend the tear. God can. And it happens through forgiveness, which always comes from Him. So we give the person and the sin to God and we *choose to release the debt*. This is the hard part. It is so hard that people spend their entire lives trying to learn how to do this one thing. We will look more closely at this third step in the next devotional.

Mender of the rips in time and space and human hearts, mend the rips in mine. Show me the wonder of Your forgiveness of me, and help me to pass it on. Show me if there is someone I need to forgive and give me the honesty to do all three steps, my hand in Yours.

Don’t secretly hate your neighbor. If you have something against him, get it out into the open; otherwise you are an accomplice in his guilt. Don’t seek revenge or carry a grudge against any of your people. Love your neighbor as yourself. I am GOD. Leviticus 19:17, 18, The Message

The text today directly addresses the authentic life called for in the ninth commandment (“get it out into the open”), and certainly one of the core values that identifies true Christians is the willingness to forgive and refuse to carry grudges. But we mustn’t pretend it’s easy. (“Just let go and let God!” chirps someone who has never been powerfully sinned against.)

Depending on how hurtful the sin was to you (and there are some horrendous sins on this poor old planet!), true forgiveness may take a long time to accomplish, but it must be done for your own wholeness.

This third step, releasing the debt, is by far the hardest. It may have to be done over and over, especially if the person does not recognize a debt or want forgiveness. This is the point where many people say, “Don’t ask me to forgive *that*. I can’t!”

Well, what is the alternative? Not forgiving means not letting go, and not letting go means holding on. Do you really want to hold on to that hurtful thing? Does holding on to the bitterness and hurt really help you? Refusing to forgive doesn’t hurt the other person. It hurts you. It’s like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.

Here’s the fact. That person is a sinner. His or her sin was one of those that caused the death of the Son of God. And so are you. And so am I. Our sin caused His death, too. Therefore, the sin is more against Him than against us, anyway. And if He, with a hammer at His bleeding wrists, can say, “Father, forgive,” then so can we.

And tomorrow we’ll say it again.

And the next day.

The debt is God’s. Put it in His hand and leave it there. Then He can deal with it as He chooses, but it can no longer damage you.

All-forgiving Father, it hurts! I feel as if it will hurt more to let it go. As if it will mean I no longer think it’s important, or am pretending it didn’t hurt me. I do, and it did . . . and I want to be free of it. I want You to release both me and the one who sinned against me. I choose to forgive. Help me!

"Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back." Philipians 3:13, 14, The Message

Before we leave the ninth commandment, the one that has shown us so much more than just "not lying," let's look down the road a bit. Look up ahead, where the sun is shining through the clouds and forgiveness (given and received) has had its work. Look at the joy of moving on in an authentic life, honest with God, oneself, and others.

"Forgive and forget," we like to say. "It's as if it never happened." There is truth in this. In God's Book of Life, once a sin is covered by Jesus' blood, it's gone. We stand before Him as clean as if we had never sinned at all. But we're not in heaven yet. We're none of us "experts," as Paul puts it. There are ongoing consequences. We're still living in some that have gone on all the way from Eden's gates to this day!

So, once we have forgiven (maybe seventy times two, at least) do we just go on as if that person has never hurt us? Well, that depends. If we know the person didn't mean to hurt us to begin with, and that he or she is also trying to live an authentic life, we can do that, though we will be loving enough to try not to put the same temptation in the way, if it's within our power.

But some people have no interest in authenticity, or they simply aren't ready to try it. They are out to get what they can, and they will continue to hurt those who get in their way. If you have a person like this in your life, it is not wise to continue to put yourself in the path of further heartache. It doesn't necessarily mean cutting off all contact with the person, though it may come to that, but if you know Joe has broken his word to you several times and told your business to the entire school, then it's not very smart to keep telling him your secrets! It's not even loving to Joe to keep putting the same temptation in front of him.

So we release the debt, put the person and the sin into God's loving hands and we move on in freedom—but we move wisely, always seeking guidance from God and from godly people. And we never stop praying for that person, because after all, just think how great it would be if he learns to live authentically with God!

God of the highest goal I can imagine (and higher than that, too), I have my eyes on You. I am pressing forward, leaving behind the weights that have dragged me down. I choose to forgive, to live in truth, to turn from lies and deceit and pretense. Show me the clear path, and no matter how narrow it is, I am not afraid if I am in You.

No lusting after your neighbor's house—or wife or servant or maid or ox or donkey. Don't set your heart on anything that is your neighbor's. Exodus 20:17, The Message

The last of the Ten Commandments is, in some ways, one of the most interesting. If you really think about it, not coveting, or lusting after, or "setting your heart on" something that rightly belongs to someone else is kind of the final result of all the nine that went before.

1. Put God first, last, and always, in the center of every moment.
2. Don't idolize anything else.
3. Take His name with power, not vanity.
4. Accept the glorious and undeserved (but badly needed) gift of a whole day of rest every week.
5. Honor and respect your families, from home to community.
6. Choose and seek abundant life.
7. Don't adulterate *any* relationships.
8. Cultivate a giving heart.
9. Live in honesty and authenticity before God and humanity.

If we seek to live in all these ways, we *will* be perfectly content with what we have, and will therefore not lust after what someone else has.

"Setting your heart" is an interesting term. It is used to mean putting your time and attention on something you deeply desire. But "setting" is also used today for all kinds of things biblical people couldn't have imagined:

- tuning radios or TVs
- setting a TiVo or DVR
- setting one's preferences on a web page
- setting a watch or clock

If we "set" our hearts, tune them in to God's love, then what we most deeply desire won't have anything to do with our neighbor's stuff. Who needs more stuff?

For the remainder of this quarter, let's consider some of the core values to be found in this final commandment.

Lord of peace and contentment, teach me to tune my heart to Your voice only. Let me set my heart and my desires so that I don't even have any interest in anything that is my neighbor's, especially today when the whole globe is one neighborhood! I want to be content with You and want only what You want.

Do not fret or have any anxiety about anything, but in every circumstance and in everything, by prayer and petition (definite requests), with thanksgiving, continue to make your wants known to God. And God's peace [shall be yours, that tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and being content with its earthly lot of whatever sort that is, that peace] which transcends all understanding shall garrison and mount guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6, 7, Amplified

The *Amplified Bible* is very interesting to read. The words in (parentheses) are words that are actually included in the Greek. So “(definite requests)” is what the Greek word, translated “petitions,” means. Then, the words in [square brackets] are words that are added, words that are not part of the original Greek, but are suggested by it in various commentaries and word studies. In the Bible itself, these are referenced at the bottom of the page, so you can see where the woman who translated this version got the ideas.

I love this particular reading of Phil. 4:7. I love the idea that God's peace will make a garrison, or fortress around my heart. But in the context of the tenth commandment, I found verse six especially interesting.

We might think perfect contentment would mean we shouldn't ask God for anything, but just to be content with whatever He provides. But this passage says that we may ask for specific things. The point is, we don't fret or worry about whether we get what we asked in the way we asked. We ask, thanking God from the beginning that His best will is being done for us, and that we can leave our wishes in His hands and be content with whatever comes.

Sometimes He says Yes, and we rejoice and thank Him.

Sometimes He says “wait awhile.” We aren't sure if we will ever get our request or not. This is when it's really hard not to worry, but we calmly choose to keep putting it back in His hands, and while we wait, we rejoice and thank Him in advance for whatever He chooses.

Sometimes He says no, and we are disappointed (perhaps severely so). We tell Him, maybe cry on His shoulder, then *rejoice and thank Him anyway*.

Because inside the fortress of God's love, all is well.

Commander and Guard of my soul, I don't always feel contented. I don't always even feel safe. But I do trust You, and I do want to learn to trust You more. Help me to wait without fretting, to thank You always, and to live as if I have every single thing I ever wanted.

You do well when you complete the Royal Rule of the Scriptures: “Love others as you love yourself.” But if you play up to these so-called important people, you go against the Rule and stand convicted by it. James 2:8, The Message

As we go through the core values buried by the boatload in ten short commandments, we keep coming back to what this verse calls the “Royal Rule”—Love. We know that it is *the* core value that identifies Christians, the one by which Jesus said we would be known. Think about it—was every truly loving person you've ever met Christian by name? Is every named Christian you know distinguished by enormous, compassionate, godly love? Jesus said the name doesn't mean anything—love does.

One way the contentment called for in the tenth commandment shows itself (or its absence) is in the lack of class distinction. James 2 tells the story of a nice-looking, well-dressed person and a ragged street person visiting the same church. James says the way you treat them will show if you are truly acting as a Christian or not.

Do we catch ourselves looking up to, admiring, even idolizing those among us who have lots of money and lots of things? If so, whether we literally lust after what they have or not, our attitude betrays that we are in danger.

Do we catch ourselves looking down on and belittling, or just ignoring, those who don't have much? Same attitude—just the other side of the coin, is all. Caution! Satan doesn't care a bit about which side of the road you go off, as long as he can get you swerving out of control.

A true Christian who is putting God in every moment will look at the person, not the trappings, and will sometimes see what is revealed of the heart in the face. We may notice that the rich-looking one is miserable and searching, and that the ragged one is aware of being a prince or princess of the Kingdom, and it shines out all over.

The question is, which are we?

God of the big and the small, the poor and the rich, show me clearly which I am. Help me to see if I am poor, blind, and naked, and to use Your eye-salve and Your cleansing blood. I want to put on Your rich robe of righteousness so that Your love will shine out to all I meet.

All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them. Matthew 6:27-29, The Message

Contentment is far more elusive and difficult to find if we get caught up in all the things the professional marketers of this world want us to think are essential to happiness. Personal appearance is only one of their topics, but possibly one of the most powerful.

God created beauty, and He created us to like it. After sin, it was only one short step to turning that desire for beauty onto ourselves. After all, Lucifer, created a perfect and beautiful angel, was the first to defame that perfection by getting proud and arrogant about it.

God created perfection, too, and designed us to seek it. So, once sin came and Satan got his way, being given permission by Adam and Eve to consider himself the lord of this earth and to twist every positive he could find into a negative, he did his best to make us all obsess over perfection that *doesn't* matter, so we would neglect the perfect love that *does* matter.

So now, how many thousands of ads do you suppose you've seen in your own lifetime that promise that this toothpaste, that designer outfit, the other hair gel, or color, or cut . . . will make you beautiful? Have you noticed that the underlying assumption, so universal that it isn't even noticed anymore, is that you are *not* beautiful now? Not handsome enough, not slim enough, not muscled enough, not blonde enough, not [fill in the blank] enough.

Not good enough. Not worthy. Even that, they've turned around. If you have any self-esteem at all, you'll realize you *deserve* this product that's going to make you perfect. If you don't have enough self-esteem, they've got a cure for that, too!

A walk in the meadow with Jesus is the best cure (free of charge, too!) for this storm of vanity that flutters constantly around our heads. Watch the birds and listen to their songs. Admire the wildflowers. Take a deep breath of pure air. Instantly get a new perspective.

Keeper of the meadows, I know this world isn't the way you meant it to be, and I'll look different when I arrive in Your New Earth. But I also know that You love me *now*, as I am. Help me to really *know* that—to know it in my gut—to depend on it. Help me take my eyes off the world's frenzies and see simplicity instead.

Each man will sit under his own shade tree, each woman in safety will tend her own garden. God-of-the-Angel-Armies says so, and he means what he says. Micah 4:4, The Message

Simplicity of taste is catching. Once you realize you look just fine (or if there are really things you *need* to change for health's sake, they are generally a matter of choices and can be disciplined), you start to look around at the rest of your life. You may think, "I don't really need that new ____." As Paul said in 1 Tim. 6:6, bread on the table and shoes on the feet are enough.

It's enlightening to look at biblical descriptions of heaven, especially those found in the Old Testament. People in that time lived by the seasons. If they were not directly involved in agricultural life, and the vast majorities were, they still ate what local growers grew, and lived in tents or simple houses where if it was hot you were hot, and if it was cold you were cold. If it was dark, you might have a tiny lamp for awhile, but then you went to bed. When it was light, you got up and worked.

These people, stretching their minds to the utmost and describing the good life—the perfect life—the heavenly life, almost always listed "your own vine and your own fig tree." *The Message* calls it "your own shade tree" and "your own garden." This was the epitome of the good life, the best thing they could imagine.

The same passage, and others, speaks of not being afraid. *The Message* says, "in safety." Other Bibles say, "None shall make them afraid." Isaiah 65:21, 22 adds that they will build their own houses and no one will come and take them over or destroy the gardens they've worked on. For a nation that had been taken over by foreign powers over and over and over, having their *own* home, and being safe there, was terribly important. It still is, in fact.

Yet, how many people today have no homes of their own, have no safety, while another portion of the earth's population thinks they need lots of houses, big houses, bigger than anyone else's?

We can cultivate the attitude of being satisfied with simplicity. If we have a roof over our heads, safety, and some grass, trees, and maybe vegetables, isn't that enough? What is our notion of "The Good Life"? What pictures convey our sense of heaven?

God of simple gifts, keep me simple. Regardless of what I have in this life, let me walk by Your side in humility, seeking the good things of earth, the grass, fresh food, fresh air, not only for myself but for others.

Speaking to the people, he went on, “Take care! Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.” Luke 12:15, The Message

A man came to Jesus with his need one day. He asked—maybe he demanded, “Make my brother give me my fair share!”

(I wonder how many of our prayers read like that.)

In response, Jesus told a story. It was the one about the farmer who kept building bigger and bigger barns. He was congratulating himself on being really successful. Only, before he could really enjoy it, he died.

“You can’t take it with you,” Jesus pointed out.

Living life by all Ten Commandments and the core values they produce means not only that we stop lusting after other peoples’ stuff, it means not only that we become content with what we have, it also leads to the recognition that lots and lots of people don’t even have enough to live. Most of the world’s population would probably still define having your own house, your own garden, your own shade tree, and safety, as heaven.

Have you seen the bumper sticker that says, “Live simply, so that others may simply live”? Have you ever thought about what it really means? How can my lifestyle choices impact the lives of people on the other side of the planet?

We talked briefly in the second commandment discussion of money as idol about the fact that most of us don’t know the true cost of what we buy. We may have commodities of various kinds that are inexpensive (and we probably still moan about them being too expensive) that are less costly in dollars only because they have been traded in the sweat, tears, and possibly blood of others.

What if, when the man had a bumper crop, instead of building another barn, he said, “I have all I really need. I’ll share this with the neighborhood”? Did the laborers that harvested his crops get richer, too, as he did? What if he had made a point of hiring people who really needed the work? What if he had let them work toward owning their own bit of land, since he had more than one man needed?

Radical? You bet. Those are the kinds of ideas that got Jesus killed.

Simplicity is simple, not easy. There’s a difference.

God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills, not to mention the hills themselves, keep my perspective clear. Help me to find ways to educate myself about the true costs of the economies of the earth. Help me to have simple tastes, and to be as concerned about others’ needs as about my own.

A righteous man who walks in his integrity—how blessed are his sons after him. Proverbs 20:7, NASB

When a person invites God into the center of every moment of his or her life, and begins seeking to learn and live more and more by the core values expressed in the Ten Commandments, the result is a life of integrity.

That’s a word that isn’t used as much as it used to be. We find it in other forms. We talk of schools in the last century being “integrated,” using the term as the opposite of “segregated.” We mean that the human race is a little less divided than it was, a little more whole.

We see it in its opposite form—“disintegrated”—something that falls apart, that goes back into its smallest parts.

Are we, in our inner souls, disintegrated? Are we fractured? Do we feel that we are forever walking around trying to pick up the pieces?

Could we even be internally segregated? Do we keep parts of our souls separate from other parts? Do we try to pretend God can’t see what those other parts are, and think, and want? Do we know ourselves?

Or are we internally integrated? Does each part have communion with each other part and with God? Are we whole, one person, the same at home and at school and at work and at play?

There are plenty of passages that speak of the blessings of this kind of wholeness. One is Psalm 15, which is a great thing to read, all of it. It’s not that long, and it’s a clear description of the integrated person, “a citizen of Zion,” the subhead in NASB says.

There are also passages that speak of the blessings to those who spend time around this kind of person.

But today’s passage isn’t just speaking of that—it’s speaking of the blessings to those yet to come. How interesting that the children of a person who walks in integrity are blessed! Why? Because they will receive a loving upbringing? Yes. Because they will benefit from their parent’s example? Certainly. Because others will already expect good things of them? Definitely.

But mostly because they will have been raised to know God. That’s the greatest blessing a person can have. If you’ve had that, thank God and your parents for it. If you haven’t, make the decision now that your children will be!

God of integrity, wholeness, and peace, I am so not whole! There are cracks and dents all over the place! Let Your wholeness fill me through Your Spirit. May Your integrity be like a force field holding me together, and leak out through every crack.

If you seek GOD, your God, you'll be able to find him if you're serious, looking for him with your whole heart and soul. Deuteronomy 4:29, The Message
Seek God while he's here to be found, pray to him while he's close at hand. Isaiah 55:6, The Message

We've covered a lot of values and a lot of commandments and a lot of ways of living. It can get overwhelming. So let's go back to the first choice—the only real choice. All the rest are results of that one choice.

SEEK GOD.

That's it.

That's all.

That's hard!

It's not that it should be hard. When we have those instants where for a second we can really glimpse God as He is, we would never choose anything else. But we're broken people, living in a broken world. We get up, pray, ask God to go with us, walk away, and fall into the pigsty.

God knows all that. Psalm 103:13, 14 says, "As parents feel for their children, God feels for those who fear him. He knows us inside and out, keeps in mind that we're made of mud." He holds our hands, and picks us up, and dusts us off, and then turns around and does it again.

But here's the miracle: While we are faithfully looking for Him with our whole hearts, seeking Him with all of our soul, feeling so disappointed at how often we fail, others are looking at us and seeing God!

Don't ask me how it happens, because I don't know. But when you and I, frail and faulty as we are, keep looking for God, then others see Him in us, even when we don't. Just glimpses of Him. But they know it's more than us alone. They know.

It's as if just looking for Him—looking every day, looking every minute, getting up and looking again when we get distracted and fall down—it somehow makes Him show up in *our* face!

If there is one thing I could do that would make another person look to the One I've depended on, the only One who keeps me going, that's the thing I want to do.

How about you?

One God, Holy God, Almighty God, all I want is You. Shut down the clamor of those other voices, of the temptations and the sinful nature and the selfish desires. *I only want You.*

People with their minds set on you, you keep completely whole [shalom], steady on their feet, because they keep at it and don't quit. Isaiah 26:3, The Message

If you choose God, set your mind and heart on Him, He makes a covenant of peace. A covenant is a vow or promise between two or more parties, and peace . . . that's the Hebrew word, *shalom*. This is a fascinating word. Everybody knows it means "peace." Some people also know it is used in Israel as a greeting for both "hello" and "good-bye," something like the Hawaiian "aloha."

But it means so much more that we can't even scratch the surface here. Do an online search, and you'll be amazed. From *Strong's Concordance* (#7965, from 7999), here are just a few of the meanings listed: well, happy, friendly, welfare, health, prosperity, peace, rest, safety. Meanings listed elsewhere include perfection, harmony, and wholeness.

If you look under "peace" in the concordance, you will find three and a half columns of verses, many of which use this word, and it brings peace just to read them. Here are just a few:

GOD makes his people strong. GOD gives his people peace (Psalm 29:11, *The Message*).

Turn your back on sin; do something good. Embrace peace—don't let it get away! (Psalm 34:14, *The Message*).

But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity [shalom] (Psalm 37:11, NASB).

One of the best passages of all is a story that embraces all we've talked about in seeking peace, and messing up, and seeking peace again. It's found in Isaiah 27:2-5. The vine is you. And me. Here's the story:

"At that same time, a fine vineyard will appear. There's something to sing about! I, God, tend it. I keep it well-watered. I keep careful watch over it so that no one can damage it. I'm not angry. I care. Even if it gives me thistles and thornbushes, I'll just pull them out and burn them up. Let that vine cling to me for safety, let it find a good and whole life [shalom] with me, let it hold on for a good and whole life."

Isn't that beautiful? Hold on. Just keep holding on, and never let go! And may shalom, a good, whole, safe, perfect, healthy life, be yours.

Savior of Shalom, Prince of Peace, we can barely imagine what true, whole peace is. You said You'd give it, and You do, and sometimes we can even see it and feel it. Every bit we touch makes us want more. Help us cling to You, vine branches that would be lost without You.

“So now: Fear GOD. Worship him in total commitment. . . If you decide that it’s a bad thing to worship GOD, then choose a god you’d rather serve—and do it today . . . As for me and my family, we’ll worship GOD.” Joshua 24:14, 15, The Message

So far this year, we have traveled far back in time, exploring the lives of biblical people whose trust in God became a source of our own faith and trust. Then we looked at the lives of some more recent pioneers who, in studying the Bible, found truths that had been lost and neglected. Their faithfulness became our heritage, a heritage which continues today in contemporary lives of those who seek to present these truths to the world. Thirdly, we examined some of the core values that hold us together and identify us as children of God. This final quarter, we will be coming down to more particular beliefs that identify us as Seventh-day Adventist Christians. We will be learning a little about every one of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs that unite us.

The most important thing to understand about these beliefs is that they are not an absolute creed in the sense that some other denominations have creeds. Our pioneers had seen human creeds, even though apparently based on the Bible, become dividing lines that led to corruption within the churches or even to persecution and death to those who disagreed.

In 1861, two years before the Seventh-day Adventist church was officially formed, J. N. Loughborough made this statement in the paper, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (now *Adventist Review*):

“The first step of apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is, to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And fifth, to commence persecution against such” (Oct. 8, 1861).

It wasn’t that “Adventists” didn’t believe certain things, and very firmly, too. For years they had met together in barns and living rooms because many churches had told them they were no longer welcome unless they stopped talking about the second coming of Jesus and end-time prophecies. By the mid-1840s they were beginning to keep the seventh-day Sabbath.

How could they hold to these beliefs without becoming rigid?

Unchanging Creator, You have led Your people for thousands of years. With unbelief and twisted belief on all sides, still You have kept a faithful few. I want to be one of those faithful few.

“Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Luke 12:32, KJV

At first, the people who would eventually become Seventh-day Adventists were just scattered groups meeting in homes and barns. Then, as the 1840s and 1850s passed, and more and more people gathered, meeting on the newly rediscovered Sabbath instead of Sunday, some began to speak of organizing into a church of their own.

Some believed this was a necessary step. Organization would help unite the scattered groups and give them a power to work for God together that they could not have in such small numbers.

Others were against the idea. They had seen how absolute creeds had caused trouble and dissension. This was a movement, not a denomination. If they chose to become an official denomination, some feared that in time it, too, would become rigid and inflexible, casting out members who dared to believe differently about anything at all.

Adventists, in contrast, highly valued freedom. They believed that was what Jesus had died for—the right to follow one’s own conscience, even to choose not to believe in God at all, though they were sorry anyone would choose that way, with its inevitable consequences.

They believed, too, that as the group met, studied, and most of all, prayed, God would guide. By 1860 the various groups had settled on the name Seventh-day Adventist, and in 1863 they were organized into the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The only things they were certain and united on were basic Christian beliefs such as God, Creation, salvation, and of course, the seventh day as Sabbath and the soon coming of Jesus, the distinctive truths that had brought them together in the first place.

Ellen and James White, still young, had become important voices in the new church, and they tended to call the church “the little flock.” They assured the people that the Good Shepherd was watching, and He had a plan.

Good Shepherd, when I am tempted to think I am just a stray lamb and not very important in the scheme of things, remind me of this brave little flock. Reassure me that You have Your eyes on me and are keeping me close. Help me not to stray!

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far has the LORD helped us." 1 Samuel 7:12, NIV

In the beginning, the fledgling Seventh-day Adventist church believed that only those who had come through the Great Disappointment when they had all expected Jesus to come on Oct. 22, 1844 were “the remnant.” The church was closed to new members.

Some people today dig out facts like these to try to embarrass us and cause us grief. However, this is just the sort of item that demonstrates most clearly the Adventist belief that God leads, that there is progressive guidance, that no one person or age or group has all the truth. Only God knows it all. These early Adventists were sure that God would continue to guide, and that they would gain new understanding as He did so. And they were right. It was only a few years before they realized their error in this “shut door” policy and began moving out in missionary work. The church began to grow rapidly. From 3,500 members at its founding, it grew to 16,000 by 1880. The need for some kind of statement of what they believed was more and more necessary.

But how could they make sure this statement of belief allowed for the sort of misunderstandings they knew humans would always have? First they had thought Jesus was coming in 1843, and then in 1844. They had taken awhile coming to agreement on the Sabbath truth. Then they had become confused on the “shut door.” The health message was just opening up. They knew that as long as we are on this earth and sinful beings, the best and most prayerful Christians will fall short of understanding all of God’s truth, and that the only thing we can count on is that God will keep leading us into a brighter and brighter understanding of His glory.

In 1872, a pamphlet was produced presenting 25 Fundamental Principles not to “secure uniformity” but “to meet inquiries” and “to correct false statements” (Schwartz, *Lightbearer to the Remnant*, Pacific Press).

Several times over the intervening century and a half, these principles have been amended and added to as our understanding has grown. For this quarter, we are going to look at the 28 we have today.

God of Truth, You have led us this far. You led those brave souls in the early days, and You are leading today. Lead me, too. Show me, personally, how to grow in my thinking as they did, and how to be mature enough to accept new truth without turning my back on anything from Your Word.

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.” Psalm 32:8, 9, NIV

Some people use creeds like bits and bridles. People won’t believe the “right thing” unless you make them. In the Seventh-day Adventist church, we believe that God is the One who does the instructing and teaching. We don’t believe He will force us, so we don’t believe we should force each other. We believe it is our responsibility to choose whether to come to God with understanding, or to act like mules.

Our foundation in this church is Christ alone. We believe that God is our only Head. We elect leaders at all kinds of levels, from local Sabbath school teachers to the president of the General Conference, but they all work under God, who always has the last word.

After years of working to find a way to say what we believe and to show both our absolute faith in God’s Word and our clear knowledge of our own frailties and foibles, the opening statement of our Fundamental Beliefs begins with these words:

“Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed.”

In other words, the Bible itself is the creed, rather than a human statement *about* the Bible. We fear, and rightly, any human attempt to delineate exactly what a person should believe, and so we look to the Word alone for this.

Even so, we try not to be too rigid about judging each other even on our belief in that Bible. There are certain things that are undeniable, but they are fewer than we might like to think. That’s why it is so important to study the *whole thing together*. We’ll get further into these principles as we go. But first we’ll take a good look at some of the main points of that opening statement.

From now on, direct quotes of the opening statement, and then the fundamental beliefs as we come to them, will be in boldface type. You can read the whole statement at www.adventist.org/beliefs/fundamental, and I urge you to do so. You will learn far more by studying them for yourself than you will from the brief looks we will have in this devotional book. God bless your digging!

Lord of the Bible, Keeper of Your Word, teach us to be good students, good followers, not mute slaves like horses or mules. Help us to study, to think for ourselves, and to be willing to change and grow under Your guidance.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:15, NIV

“Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.”

Our only creed is the Bible itself. When we say that we “hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching” of the Bible, we mean that we firmly believe that the statements that follow are Bible truth. Our beliefs, then, are our closest, most careful and prayerful statements of what we see unfolded in that Bible. In other words, it is incorrect and misleading to say “my church doesn’t allow” or “the Adventist belief or teaching is” such-and-such. It doesn’t matter whether it’s the Adventist teaching. It matters if it’s the teaching of God’s word.

When William Miller first studied Daniel, he found a certain word of prophecy in 8:14. “Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.” There is no doubt whatever that these words are in the Bible. There is no doubt for people of faith that they are God’s *Word*, spoken in Daniel’s *words*. The question is, what did they mean?

The fact that he and others misunderstood the meaning of one word—they thought “sanctuary” meant “earth”—does not change the fact that it’s the Word of God. In fact, we believe that very misunderstanding had even been prophesied in Revelation 10 when John ate the book that was sweet in his mouth and bitter in his belly.

So the point is, William Miller was seeking to understand *God’s Word*. And as he and those who later followed his teachings learned, it’s a progressive revelation. As long as we live, we’ll be learning more, even after we leave this earth and have perfect brains to learn with!

We Adventists have 28 beliefs that we’ve studied out for nearly two centuries and believe to be “the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.” There might be more coming. We hope so!

All-knowing God, You seem to enjoy laying out treasure hunts for us to follow. Perhaps You know that what we work to dig for will mean more to us than that which is easily and cheaply given. Yet there is so much that is clear and simple, too. Help us to cling to that which is known—You exist, You love us, You gave Your Son for us, You are coming to rescue us—and to enjoy the treasure hunt for the rest.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:17, 18, NIV

“Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God’s Holy Word.”

God’s Word can never change. However, human understanding of it changes as we grow, as shown throughout the Bible and exemplified in our text above. This fact, too, was written into our opening statement of belief, which sets us apart from many denominations.

Among Christians, there are generally two attitudes toward change. Some never change, holding fast to something their parents and pastors taught them, refusing even to ask questions. Questions are seen as disbelief or unfaithfulness, and are often feared. “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” Very true—if you’re sure of what He actually said!

Even if they can see that a certain cherished belief is not scriptural, Christians taught this rigid way have a very hard time changing, because they feel that if they were wrong, maybe they weren’t saved at all. Maybe they never even knew God before!

Adventists are in a unique position to comfort these folks.

Other Christians and churches change all the time. They change because a belief is unpopular, because it doesn’t match the culture in which they find themselves, because society pressures them. They may even change to keep up with the XYZ denomination.

These churches may see themselves as “progressive,” while completely leaving aside the role of our only reliable creed, the Bible, which may be seen as outmoded, itself. Just a collection of fables with good morals. Or even bad morals. You can pick and choose, leaving out the ones that don’t fit your present, ever-changing view of reality.

Adventists have something to offer these folks, too. We do see truth as being progressive. We don’t like static rigidity, either. And we are able to recognize the changing nature of human understanding without throwing out the only true measuring stick we have—the eternal Word of God.

Unchanging One, keep guiding our wavering steps. Keep us in the path, but keep us from being proud about it. Make us willing to explore, but pull us back from exploring outside Your limits.

Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory.

Proverbs 11:14, NASB

“For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” Matthew 18:20, NIV

How, then, do we protect ourselves from “every wind of doctrine”? (Eph. 4:14). Surely we don’t change our fundamental beliefs every time somebody questions one. After all, we are a denomination of independent thinkers, and we encourage that. “Be not mere reflectors of other men’s thoughts,” Mrs. White said. Our beliefs are forever being challenged by someone, and that’s just *inside* the church!

Well, truth be told, our basic beliefs have actually changed very little in all this time. The early pioneers were very careful with their study to begin with, and corrected errors as soon as they were found. Not only that, but the majority of beliefs we hold have been held for millennia by God’s faithful people, long before the Adventists came on the scene.

So how can a belief be changed? It’s a long process. In 2005, fundamental belief #11—not a new belief, but a new statement of one we’d long held but hadn’t described well—was added to make the 27 into 28. At that time, the following protocol was crafted for future additions or amendments:

1. A suggestion reaches the General Conference president at least two years in advance.
2. A committee is appointed to decide if it needs further action.
3. If so, they prepare a first draft.
4. This draft goes to Spring Meeting or Annual Council.
5. Additional suggestions are added and rewriting is done.
6. The document is circulated among theologians and the world church.
7. It is published in *Review* and *Ministry* magazines.
8. More suggestions are received from the world field.
9. The semifinal statement goes to Annual Council again.
10. It goes to GC Session with Annual Council’s final suggestions.
11. Still more suggestions may be made by delegates at GC Session, and then the statement is voted in—or out.

Whew! You can see that we take seriously the counsel given in Proverbs and other places about putting many minds to work on a task of this magnitude, and even more seriously the promise Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have made to be with us and guide us.

With all that in mind, let’s delve into our 28 Fundamental Beliefs.

Unchanging God, it’s taking us forever to figure out Your ways! Thank You for Your patience and guidance on the journey.

No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of private opinion. And why? Because it’s not something concocted in the human heart. Prophecy resulted when the Holy Spirit prompted men and women to speak God’s Word. 2 Peter 1:21, The Message

Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. 2 Timothy 3:16, The Message
FB 1. “Holy Scriptures: The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

“We’re a New Testament church,” the woman explained. It was her answer to why they didn’t believe God’s law was still in effect. “Paul says love is the fulfilling of the law. All you have to do is be loving.”

“Absolutely,” agreed the questioner. “So you can commit adultery or kill if it’s the loving thing to do, right?”

The woman’s eyes widened in shock. “No!”

Generally, when people talk about grace having done away with the law, they mean one particular law—the one about the free present God made of a whole day of blessed rest per week. They may also talk about regulations, such as stoning adulterers, or food laws.

I wonder what they would think if they learned that the New Testament is largely made up of quotes from and allusions to the Old Testament? Have they thought about the fact that the Old Testament was the only Bible Jesus and His disciples had, and that they learned all they needed to about salvation and the Messiah from it?

As Adventists, we believe the entire Bible is the Word of God, and it makes infinitely more sense when seen, read, and studied as a whole. It has been truly said that one can prove lots of silly things by taking a verse out of context from somewhere in the Bible. It’s only when we look at the 3 C’s: Context, Cross-Reference, and Common Sense, that we can really learn the whole truth.

And when the church set out its fundamental beliefs, obviously belief in the Bible had to come first of all, or where would you get *any* beliefs?

Lord Who breathed Your Word into people who loved you, Who breathed life into written scrolls, teach me to read with understanding, to hear Your voice in every part of the Bible, and to hold it in its rightful position—high and holy, but not so high and holy as You.

God means what he says. What he says goes. His powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defense, laying us open to listen and obey. Nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it—no matter what.

Hebrews 4:12, 13, The Message

FB 1. “Holy Scriptures: The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will.”

That word “infallible” gets a lot of people in trouble.

You see, there are several ways to look at the Bible. Some believe it is completely a human document, written by people attempting to describe or explain God's workings, but with human ignorance and without divine aid or intervention. These people believe there are great truths in the Bible, but it was written with only human wisdom, so they are free to use only human wisdom in picking and choosing what to believe and how to believe it. This is one extreme.

At the other extreme are those who believe God actually dictated the Bible. It's not just His Word, it's His literal words. These people use the word “infallible” to mean that every single word will agree with every single other word. When they discover such simple “contradictions,” for instance that different gospels record different words on the sign on Jesus' cross, their faith is actually shaken. They may either try to somehow force the text to agree with itself, or they may decide that it means the whole Bible is a lie and give up faith entirely.

As Adventists, we believe that the *whole Bible* all taken together is the *Word* of God, and therefore an infallible revelation of His *will*, not His *words*. Ellen White said, “The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen . . . It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired . . . But the words receive the impress of the individual mind . . . The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God” (*Selected Messages* 1, p. 21). This is from a marvelous manuscript called “The Inspiration of the Prophetic Writers,” and it is highly recommended that you look it up and read it all if this is a subject of interest to you.

For now, let's agree with Mrs. White: “I take the Bible, just as it is, as the Inspired Word. I believe its utterances *in an entire Bible*” (p. 17, emphasis added).

Amen!

Inspiring God, there aren't enough human words to thank You for Your incredible generosity in coming to us and inspiring some of us to tell Your stories. You didn't have to do that. You did it because You love us. Inspire me, too, as I seek to share the stories with my friends.

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe. 1 Thessalonians 2:13, NIV

FB 1. “The Holy Scriptures: In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation . . . They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history.”

What is the Bible for? This part of FB #1 lays out what we believe as Adventists. We believe it contains what we need to know in order to enter into God's life. We believe it shows us how to live and authoritatively reveals doctrine. That's where the other 27 beliefs will come from, after all. Once we have established firmly that we believe the Bible and we believe it really means what it says, then we can go on to make lists of what we've learned from it.

2 Timothy 3:16 claims that “every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way.” But you'd have to believe the Bible first before you could believe what it said about itself. And after all, how can you know for sure? Any book could say it's good for all those things. Thousands of books do make that claim, in fact!

Then you get to verse 17: “Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.” Once we place our trust in the Scriptures, we discover by personal experience that they really do put us together and shape us up for our tasks. They even show us which tasks we are called to do.

So, the bottom line is, as Mrs. White pointed out, it's not the words that are inspired—it's the people. First those who wrote, and now and always, those who read. Our text for today says the word of God is “at work” in us who believe. We can often hear and feel the hammering and sawing! Our friends and family can definitely see the new shape our lives take and feel the love that shines out. That's when we figure out that it's not just letters on a page. It's a living God, a living Holy Spirit, using those words to make us who we are meant to be.

And from choosing to believe, we move to knowing in our hearts.

Holy Wordsmith, Carpenter of Nazareth, keep working, building, shaping me. Help me to be faithful about presenting myself at the work site by reading and studying my Bible earnestly, conscientiously, knowing it's not the words I want to come close to—it's You.

The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they might be one heart and mind with us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me. The same glory you gave me, I gave them, so they'll be as unified and together as we are—I in them and you in me. John 17:21-23a, The Message

FB 2. “Trinity: There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons . . . infinite and beyond human comprehension.”

“I in you, you in me, they in me, you in them” . . . my head is spinning! “Beyond human comprehension” is right! Our second fundamental belief is that we do accept the truth of the Triune God, but let's just admit right now that we don't get it!

British writer C. S. Lewis said trying to understand a three-person personality was like this: Suppose you could mash yourself into a two-dimensional being and visit a two-dimensional planet with flat little people sliding around on it. Then you try to describe a cube to them. How would you begin? “Well, a cube is kind of like a square, but it has six sides . . .” Try drawing some images you think two-dimensional people would understand as they tried to get their flat minds around a cube, and you'll have some idea of the different ways humans attempt to understand the Trinity.

Some people use images: a three-ply cord that is still one cord; an apple with a core, flesh, and peel; an egg with yolk, white, and shell. These help, but they all fall short, because you could easily have just an egg yolk or just one ply of a cord, but just one member of the Godhead is still all God, and is never really alone . . .

And yet, somehow at the cross they were divided . . . the mind boggles!

We are going to spend some time looking at some of the ideas people have, hoping that in looking at this issue from several directions we can gain some insights and trusting that one of these days we'll meet Him/Them in Person(s?) and understand it better!

Father, Son, and Spirit, I am glad You try to reveal Yourself to us in human language, even though it isn't sufficient. I am also glad You are too big for me to comprehend. What use would a God small enough to fit in my brain be?

The amazing grace of the Master, Jesus Christ, the extravagant love of God, the intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you. 2 Corinthians 13:14, The Message

FB 2. “Trinity: There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons. God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present.”

The easiest way for the human mind to conceive of the Trinity is simply to imagine three beings. There is definitely truth in this, and we will be studying some things about each member of the Godhead in the next three FBs. This text is a good example: Jesus has amazing grace because He chose to die for us when He could have gotten away any minute He wanted to. God is extravagantly loving because He chose to let His Son make this unbelievable sacrifice. The Holy Spirit is the One who lives with and around us all the time, giving intimate friendship.

But there is danger in this position if we aren't clear about it. It's a way of imagining that helps us understand different facets of God, but it's *one* God. People who earnestly and clearly cling to the ideal of one God, such as Jews and Muslims, have accused Christians of polytheism. We have to understand that like those two-dimensional people trying to imagine cubes, we can make a bunch of diagrams, and none of them will be the real thing.

When we imagine God the Father up on His throne in the high heavens, and Jesus in human form next to Him, or before Him interceding for us, and the Holy Spirit away from them both, down here on the planet, we must be very clear that these are helpful imaginings, but not the whole truth. God gave us these images in His Word, and sent His Son to give Himself a human face we could at least relate to, but it's like flannel board figures for toddlers. It's to help us. It's not the whole truth.

Only God really understands it, and we can only try to remain humble as we learn the greatness of His ways.

Father, Son, and Spirit, I do really appreciate the flannel board pictures! Even they are beyond my comprehension, but it helps to have a human face to imagine, in my Brother, Jesus. I'm just glad You—all of You—love me!

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Deuteronomy 6:4, NIV

FB 2. “Trinity: He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. He is forever worthy of worship, adoration, and service by the whole creation.”

In the Canaanite countries surrounding Israel, there were many gods. You could call on the one in charge of whatever need you had—Baal for weather, Astarte for fertility, etc. There were gods for home, for the field, for war, for almost anything you needed.

By the time of Jesus, the Greeks and Romans had dozens of gods, one for every purpose imaginable, and not all of them good, either. In Asian and African societies, as well as others, there have sometimes been hundreds of gods. According to Wikipedia, there are 330,000 gods in various Hindu mythologies.

From the beginning, God has made it clear that He is the one and only real God. He called Abraham and his family out of polytheistic Ur, and spent centuries teaching Israel not to worship anyone else. Judaism and Christianity both have been fervent and constant in denouncing polytheism.

The greatest prayer in Judaism is the Sh'ma, in Deuteronomy 6:4-6. “God,” this text insists, “is One!”

So some people can't accept the idea that Jesus is God, or that the Spirit is anything other than the feelings or force or nature of God. Some who do believe in all three imagine that one God came in three forms. Sometimes He's the Great Creator. For a while He was a Man in Galilee. Other times, He comes to us as Spirit.

Just as we can take our imaginings of three Persons too far, so can we take our ideas of oneness too far. Then, the question becomes, who was it Jesus was praying to? Who was it that He said would be sent as “another Comforter”? Are all those texts about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to be simply ignored?

As Adventists, we believe the whole Bible is one, too. And it teaches that there are, somehow, three Beings in One God.

We don't claim to get it.

We just trust.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I can't wait to see You for myself. I thank You for Your oneness and for Your threeness, whatever they mean. I lean on the Father, cling to Jesus, trust the Spirit. Keep me humble as I try to understand and share these truths from Your Scriptures.

Worthy, O Master! Yes, our God! Take the glory! the honor! the power! You created it all; it was created because you wanted it. Revelation 4:11, The Message

FB 3. “Father: God the eternal Father is the Creator, Source . . . of all creation. He is just and holy.”

As we discuss each member of the Godhead, we will continually find ourselves tripping up again on what one-in-three means. God the Father is the Creator and Source of everything, and yet Jesus is also the Creator. John 1 says that nothing was made without Him. And Genesis speaks of the Spirit hovering over the waters of creation. So anything we say about one is generally true of the others, too.

But we are considering God the Father first. As we go through three devotionals about Him, we will consider three giant adjectives applied to Him, but not giant enough to really describe Him. The first is *omnipotent*. It means all-powerful. God is able to do anything at all.

And the first thing that we know of that He did (though He somehow had already existed for an eternity when He did it) was to create. He created powerful beings we call angels, or messengers, who loved Him and who lived and breathed in the joy that came from being in His presence. Then He created this world. He may have created others first, but this is the one we know about.

Somehow, out of nothingness, out of Himself, out of the fabric of Love, God made things just . . . *be*. “Let there be light!” He said, and there it was. “Let there be rocks and water and air and stars and planets and fish and birds and animals and people.”

He could have done it in six seconds. I used to wonder why on earth people had trouble believing He did it in six days, if they believed in God at all. Then I learned that some Christians actually don't believe God is omnipotent. I heard with my own ears a leading theologian say, “This idea of God as omnipotent has got to go!”

Well . . . okay. But how terrifying! What a universe to live in, where you don't know what God can and can't do! Why would you want to worship that God?

I trust the God who made everything, can do anything, and who has promised all will be put right one day soon.

Almighty God, there is no God like You. I believe in and trust Your power, and I am watching for the day when You will make Yourself known once and for all.

Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love. This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. 1 John 4:7-9, The Message

FB 3. “Father: God the eternal Father is the . . . Sustainer . . . of all creation. He is . . . merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

We wouldn't draw our next breath if God were not sustaining us. God is the One who keeps the stars in motion and the earth spinning. God is the One keeping your heart beating right now. Our next giant adjective is *omnipresent*. God is everywhere at once, all the time. He's here helping me type, and there helping you read. He's with people in prison, and with people in palaces. He loves us all. *All*.

One of the most enduring images of God is “the Father.” Jesus called Him that all the time. He even called Him “Abba,” the Aramaic term for “Daddy.” Picture the most perfect Daddy you can imagine. This Dad always understands, never loses His temper, is always there when you need Him, has unlimited hugs, unlimited joy in you, and knows all the answers. Not that He always gives them when you think He should, but that, too, is because of His wisdom. This Dad will also never force Himself on you, so although He tries a million ways to get all His children to come to Him, if they really, really don't want to, He will cry as they walk away, but He'll let them go.

And still love them.

For some people, though, who didn't have a father, or had a human father who did not treat them fairly, the image of God as Father is not so helpful. For them, it is helpful to remember that God uses images of motherhood, too. In Psalm 131, a short prayer psalm, David says his soul is before God like “a child at his mother's breast.” In Isa. 49:14, 15, when Israel claims God has forgotten them, God asks, “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast?” In Deut. 32:11, Moses compares God to a mother eagle. The fact is, of course, God is neither a man nor a woman. If men and women are, as Genesis claims, created in God's image, then God must contain both what we would call male and female characteristics. Other languages have a neuter pronoun—English doesn't.

The bottom line? God is love. All the time, everywhere. Right now—close by your side.

Great Sustainer, You hold us up like a mother eagle helping her babies learn to fly. You carry us like children. You never forget or abandon us, even if earthly parents do. I want to love You as You deserve!

Deep honor and bright glory to the King of All Time—One God, Immortal, Invisible, ever and always. Oh, yes! 1 Timothy 1:17, The Message

FB 3. “Father: God the eternal Father is the . . . Sovereign of all creation . . . The qualities and powers exhibited in the Son and the Holy Spirit are also revelations of the Father.”

Our last giant adjective that applies to God is *omniscient*, or all-knowing. It wouldn't be a good thing if God were all-powerful and present everywhere, but didn't know everything. It could even be scary! Imagine an all-powerful being making a mistake. It would likely be a big mistake, since that's a big being.

Thank God, we can know that His wisdom is up to the task of caring for a jillion galaxies and who knows how many billions of beings. Six billion here, at any rate, and here, we require more care than most, because our ancestors chose Satan's deceptions over their rightful Sovereign, and we've all been semi-brain-dead ever since. God even knew enough, right from the start, to shorten our lifespans so that we wouldn't be miserable for so long, or able to think up the unimaginable evil we could have if we kept living, growing, and learning for centuries.

When Jesus was here, demonstrating on a visible, physical level the “qualities and powers” of God, He didn't spend a lot of time demonstrating God's all-knowledge, because it was much more important that we know God's love and mercy. However, even in His human form, there are hints of His having more than human knowledge. John 2:25 says that Jesus didn't need anyone to tell Him what was in people's hearts. Several times He knew what some nearby critics were thinking, such as the observers when He healed the paralytic, and Simon the leper, at the dinner where Mary anointed Jesus' feet.

So imagine how much the Father knows, not bound at all by human flesh, even temporarily. In Isaiah 46:10 He says that He knows the end from the beginning and makes known from ancient times what will come to pass. He laid out the history of the planet to Moses, to Daniel, even to King Nebuchadnezzar.

God has the wisdom to know what we need, the power to do it, and the love to carry it out. Praise His name!!

Most High God, we can't even imagine You, but we like to try. You have shown us hints of Your glory and power and glimpses of Your constant presence, but You've overwhelmed us with evidence of Your most important quality—Your love and patience. Thank You for loving me!

We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. Colossians 1:15-17, The Message

FB 4. "Son: God the eternal Son became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Through Him all things were created, the character of God is revealed, the salvation of humanity is accomplished, and the world is judged."

"Son" can be a confusing word, too, when applied to God. Clearly, if the Trinity are all equal and all one and have all been existent forever, then there is no "Parent" or "Child" in quite the ways we think of them. This is a human concept, human language that God has chosen to help us understand Him, so it's the language we use.

God the Son (also, of course, not a man, or male in ways we understand) has been in existence forever and "all things were made through Him." This belief, too, sets us apart from many denominations. Most Christians still believe that Jesus is God, but not all do. Many, now, believe Him to have been a special teacher, or a man who was particularly blessed by God, or in whom God dwelt in an especially complete way.

But the Bible teaches that God the Son, who already existed, had been in on the plan of salvation from "before the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). He came to earth, and at that time, but not before, was actually "begotten"—that is to say, became a Son. He chose to become a man, too—a Jewish man, to be precise. The medieval images of the thin, white, often light-haired Jesus are incorrect, but there is great spiritual value in seeing Jesus as "like you," no matter what race, nationality, or ethnicity you are.

This God/Man had within Himself the light of life—eternal life that He didn't get from somewhere else—life He could lay down and take up again. He was the only One who could throw Himself down across the horrible rip hatred had made in the fabric of love from which the universe was created and make a way out for all of us.

He knew He might not get back. But He chose to do it anyway.

For you.

God the Son, how can I ever thank You? I simply can't imagine, though I like to try, what You were like before, in all Your glory. I can't imagine it now, either, but at least I can imagine a human face, a human body. Human scars. I love You.

From the very first day, we were there, taking it all in—we heard it with our own ears, saw it with our own eyes, verified it with our own hands. The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes; we saw it happen! And now we're telling you in most sober prose that what we witnessed was, incredibly, this: The infinite Life of God himself took shape before us. 1 John 1:1, 2, The Message

FB 4. "Son: Forever truly God, He became also truly man, Jesus the Christ. He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He lived and experienced temptation as a human being, but perfectly exemplified the righteousness and love of God. By His miracles He manifested God's power and was attested as God's promised Messiah."

When John said in John 1 that the Word (*logos* in Greek) took human form, he was using a term that the Greeks used to mean the reasoning power that runs the universe—the communicating power that connects God with humanity. Pagans like Plato and Aristotle had already written a lot about this power. John was saying, "Listen—this power is real, it has always taken care of things, it has always been the communicator and connection between us and God, and now it has human form! His name is Jesus of Nazareth. Sound crazy? Listen to me—I saw Him, I touched Him, I know what I'm talking about!"

We, today, also have to depend on stories from those like John, who saw and touched Jesus. Only, in our case, it was 2,000 years ago, and a lot of our contemporaries think it's just a myth.

Here's the million dollar question: How can we know for sure that it's true? It's more than just seeing that John and his friends insisted it was true. That's the first step, of course: believe the Bible as the Word of God and trust what it says. But that's not enough. If He's real, He'll come to you and me, too. He will! Mostly, it will be through the Spirit, whom we'll study next. But we need to be able to say with the same assurance, "I haven't seen Him with my eyes, or touched Him with my hands, but I have seen Him with the eyes of my spirit, heard Him in my mind, touched Him in the loving hands of others around me. I know what I'm talking about!"

Because the bottom line is, He has to be, in a way, "incarnated" or put into human flesh and form in you, too. Is He?

Son of Mary, please live again in me. Take my hands to do what You would do if You were here. Take my lips to speak Your words. Take my heart to love as You do. I do believe—please help and heal my unbelief.

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace.

Ephesians 2:6, 7, NIV

“Trust me. There is plenty of room for you in my Father’s home . . . I’ll come back and get you so you can live where I live.” John 14:1-3, The Message

FB 4. “Son: He suffered and died voluntarily on the cross for our sins and in our place, was raised from the dead, and ascended to minister in the heavenly sanctuary in our behalf. He will come again in glory for the final deliverance of His people and the restoration of all things.”

Incredible! He suffered and died voluntarily. For me. In my place.

He’s at the right hand of the Father, ministering. For me.

He’s coming back! For *me*!

Sometimes, life gets confusing. Have you noticed? Sometimes, all these 28 fundamental beliefs, no matter how clearly laid out, start to seem murky and hard to understand. Sometimes, friends and their doubts and arguments sound reasonable, and the world looks so bad we get to wondering fearfully, “What if it really is our imagination? Dear God, what if it really isn’t true? What if You don’t even exist? What if we’ve all made it up, all these centuries?”

When those moments come (and they will come), John 14 is the text I turn to. It isn’t Abraham’s words, or David’s words, or Daniel’s words. It isn’t a disciple or an apostle. It isn’t even John, my personal favorite writer. It’s Jesus. Jesus Himself, speaking tenderly to some men who were feeling scared and anxious, just like me—and, mind you, when *He* was feeling afraid. In just a little bit, He would say His soul was so troubled He felt He might die! (Matthew 26:38, Mark 14:34).

And in that dark and difficult moment, this is what Jesus said: “Don’t be afraid. I’ll come back to get you.”

When I look at that again, when I imagine hearing His own gentle voice saying it, all the fears subside. No matter what anyone thinks, or what things I may feel confused about, Jesus *promised* He would come back.

And I know He will.

Beloved Friend, I don’t usually imagine You as the powerful, conquering King You really are. I usually see You as You came to us, just a gentle, loving, quiet Man from the country. I trust You. I know You’ll come for me. And then, I’ll see the King.

God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss. Genesis 1:2, The Message
The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest hover over you; therefore, the child you bring to birth will be called Holy, Son of God. Luke 1:35, The Message

FB 5. “Holy Spirit: God the eternal Spirit was active with the Father and the Son in Creation, incarnation, and redemption.”

If the Trinity, the very idea of a three-Person personality, is mysterious, this third member of it is the most mysterious of all. Actually, that’s good news. One of the most important things for humans to keep in mind as we seek to cultivate an attitude of worship, is to maintain a sense of humility in the face of incomprehensible mystery. God is too big for us to understand.

Way too big.

Isn’t that great?

Just like the wind the Spirit is named after, we mostly know about Him by what He does. The first thing we know is that the whole Godhead did the creating. Our world, and everything on it, was important enough to God to put all members, all qualities, all powers to work together on making it just right.

The Spirit’s role, apparently, was like that of a mother hen, brooding over a nest. That’s the meaning of the Hebrew word used here, often translated “hovered.” Have you ever seen a mother bird brood? She enters into a state almost like a trance, it’s so calm and concentrated. A hen gives off a definite “Do not disturb—important work going on here!” aura while she is waiting for her eggs to hatch. She gets up only once or twice a day to eat and drink.

When God spoke on one day and something came to be, was the rest of that day given over to the Spirit’s brooding, hovering, nurturing? I can’t wait to watch the New Creation and find out if God does it the same way. I want to watch!

In Luke, the wording almost sounds the same as Gabriel explains to Mary what will take place in her life. It’s as if the Spirit once again hovered, brooded, cuddled and comforted and nurtured. Only this time, it took nine months to bring the original Word-spoken reality to fruition.

Holy One, I hope You are hovering and brooding over me in the same way. I know You are nurturing, warming, bringing to maturity in me the qualities and spiritual fruit You want to grow. Help me to lie still and soak up Your love.

“Every part of Scripture is God-breathed . . .” 2 Timothy 3:14, The Message
“The One on whom you see the Spirit come down and stay, this One will baptize with the Holy Spirit.”
John 1:33, The Message

FB 5. “Holy Spirit: He inspired the writers of Scripture. He filled Christ’s life with power. He draws and convicts human beings; and those who respond He renews and transforms into the image of God.”

Imagine Moses or Isaiah getting ready to write. They have quills and ink and scrolls, or maybe papyrus or clay tablets. They gaze into the distance, seeming far from the ordinary scene around them. You can’t see Him, but there’s the Spirit again, hovering over them, almost like He did when the world was created. He’s helping them to remember, to order their thoughts. He’s giving them ideas and reminding them of the ways they’ve seen God lead.

In the case of Isaiah and other prophets, the Spirit also sometimes gives direct visions to the mind, which the prophet then struggles to get into human words. The prophet is probably never quite satisfied, because how do you get divine things into human words?

The Holy Spirit continues to hover as the centuries pass, watching over every child of God, whispering peace, or conviction, or warning, as each one needs. Some people listen and partially understand. But the Spirit is longing for the fullness of time, when the people can be spoken to in their own human words by a Person who looks just like them.

At last the day comes, the Spirit hovers over Mary (of course, He’s been hovering over her all her life), and a Baby is born. But there’s still a long wait. To God, thirty years is like ten seconds, but I suspect that in this instance it seemed like a long time even to Him.

Then Jesus went to the Jordan, and the Holy Spirit was overjoyed enough to appear visibly in the form of a dove, hovering over Jesus’ head. John sees it and reports, “There’s no question about it: This is the Son of God!” John 1:34).

Like the first Creation, the New Creation also calls for all Members of the Godhead, and all their power and love. *Everything*—the fate of the whole universe—is riding on this!

Holy Dove, hover on me. Remain with me as You did with Jesus. Inspire my mind and heart as You did the Bible writers. Fill me, move through me, show at least a little hint of Your love to others through me.

The Friend, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send at my request, will make everything plain to you. He will remind you of all the things I have told you. I’m leaving you well and whole. That’s my parting gift to you. Peace. I don’t leave you the way you’re used to being left—feeling abandoned, bereft. So don’t be upset. Don’t be distraught. John 14:26, 27, The Message

FB 5. “Holy Spirit: Sent by the Father and the Son to be always with His children, He extends spiritual gifts to the church, empowers it to bear witness to Christ, and in harmony with the Scriptures leads it into all truth.”

There are those who, in seeking to understand the oneness of God, do not understand how the Spirit could be a Being. They think maybe it’s an influence—the “spirit of God,” in the way we say, “He has a spirit of competition.” It is definitely confusing, so when we wonder about all that, all we have to do is go to Jesus’ own words. He sure seemed to think He was talking about Somebody else. And He ought to know!

As the Spirit has hovered over God’s creation and God’s children from the morning of the first Word of creation, so He hovers and broods now. He is still seeking to bring to birth the “fruit of the Spirit,” the virtues and qualities that will identify true followers of God.

But once Jesus had come, He said that when He left, the Spirit would be able to come in a fuller, more powerful way than ever before (John 16:7). He told His disciples to wait for that outpouring, and they did. It was fulfilled in astonishing ways on Pentecost, nearly 2,000 years ago.

Ever since that time, the Spirit has been more active than ever before, passing out gifts, empowering, wrapping comfort around dying martyrs, and leading into all truth. We Adventists are descendants of people who discovered, about 170 years ago, some truths that had been left by the wayside. We expect there will be even more—deeper understandings of the Word of God, which has been here all along.

So we cling to the Spirit, and we keep our eyes open, and we take deep, nurturing breaths of the Breath of God. And we give thanks.

Holy One, breathe on us again, today. Hold me close and don’t let me stray. Help me to see what new fruit or virtue You would like to develop and cultivate in me today. I submit myself to cooperate with You in any way that I can. Make me well and whole with Your peace.

First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don't see . . . God looked over everything he had made; it was so good, so very good! It was evening, it was morning—Day Six.

Genesis 1:1, 31, The Message

FB 6. “Creation: God is Creator of all things, and has revealed in Scripture the authentic account of His creative activity. In six days the Lord made “the heaven and the earth” and all living things upon the earth.”

That's how many hours there are in six days: 144. Of course, that's only true because God decided to make our earth rotate precisely as quickly as it does now. He could have made our days thirty hours long or twenty. The point is, He set the limits. He decided on a period of darkness and a period of light. He decided how far away the sun should be and how much gravity the moon should have.

He decided.

This is the crucial point here. No, we don't know all the answers. No, we don't understand some of what the fossil records seem to imply. If we try to insist that everything we see on this planet is explainable by Genesis 1, we will only look foolish. On the other hand, if we wait to understand it all and have it all scientifically proven before we decide whether to trust God or not, we are more than foolish—we are in danger.

The question is this: Do we trust and believe God or not? Do we see Him as omnipotent? If our answers are yes, then, as we noted before, He could have done it in six seconds if He wanted to, right? He seems to have gone to great trouble to get it recorded that He did it in six days, each with a light period and a dark period. I believe Him. Do you?

Why does it matter? Is it really a “salvation issue”? Let's think about that in the next two devotionals.

Creator of all I survey, (and a whole lot I can't see, too), give me faith, trust, and humility. Help me to leave the things I don't understand in Your capable hands. Help me, when talking about these things, to refrain from both arrogance and weak waffling. Help me not to try to argue others into my point of view. And thank You for creating me and everything else!

By the seventh day God had finished his work. On the seventh day he rested from all his work. God blessed the seventh day. He made it a Holy Day because on that day he rested from his work, all the creating God had done. Genesis 2:2, 3, The Message

FB 6. “Creation: In six days the Lord made ‘the heaven and the earth’ and all living things upon the earth, and rested on the seventh day of that first week. Thus He established the Sabbath as a perpetual memorial of His completed creative work.”

Ah. Well, now we've come to something. If we take the Creation account to mean long ages, there goes Sabbath! We might be tempted to think we put too much emphasis on that one day, but the problem with that is, all through the Old Testament, time after time, God kept bringing it up. People, both individuals and the whole nation, got in trouble for ignoring or desecrating the Sabbath. It certainly seemed to matter to Him!

Then came Jesus, and He, too, kept revealing, not so much through words as through actions, what God thought of His holy day and how godly people were to honor it.

Why does it matter so much? What difference does it make which day?

God decided. That's number one. Then come the reasons for it. It's a memorial of Creation, which keeps us humble; it's a gift—imagine how you would feel if somebody kept slinging your gifts in the mud!—and most of all, it's the fact that God repeated twice in Ezekiel 20 that Sabbath is the sign that *He is the one who sanctifies us*.

If the Sabbath doesn't matter, then God doesn't matter. Don't misunderstand. All Christians are on different points in their journey. There are millions of saved people who dearly love God, and He dearly loves them—even those who don't yet recognize the importance of the gift of the Sabbath. But once you see it—really *see* it—then if Sabbath doesn't matter, God doesn't matter. Because, if the Creator, Sustainer, and King of all the universe gives you a gift and you say, “No, thanks,” then your problem is deeper than which day to worship on.

I don't want to go there. Do you?

Creator, Re-Creator, Gift Giver, I accept, and I thank You. I accept Your creation, I accept Your sovereignty, I accept Your gift of Sabbath, and I accept with joy Your gift of re-creation. Make me new every morning. Use the Sabbath to bless my life and the lives of others around me.

God's glory is on tour in the skies, God-craft on exhibit across the horizon. Madame Day holds classes every morning, Professor Night lectures each evening. Their words aren't heard, their voices aren't recorded, but their silence fills the earth: unspoken truth is spoken everywhere.

Psalm 19:1-4, The Message

... creation has been groaning. . . Romans 8:22, NIV

FB 6. "Creation: The first man and woman were made in the image of God as the crowning work of Creation, given dominion over the world, and charged with responsibility to care for it. When the world was finished it was 'very good,' declaring the glory of God."

Psalm 19 says that the earth is talking to us without words. It's speaking of the glory of God—"God-craft on exhibit," says *The Message*. Every opening bud, especially the first one after a long, hard winter, every happy dog face panting up at you, every sunrise and sunset, every snowflake can remind us of a loving and infinitely imaginative Creator.

But there are more things being taught in those "classes" than God's glory. Sometimes creation's silent voice is groaning. Paul was speaking of the long wait for the Messiah; however, this groaning is continuing and getting louder and louder in our time. Isaiah 51 and Psalm 102 speak of earth wearing out like a garment. The bud that opens may follow ever harsher winters in which deadly storms and freezing temperatures kill people, plants, and animals. The happy dog face may be so happy because you rescued her from abuse and starvation. The sunrises and sunsets get ever more colorful as pollution continues to increase. And those snowflakes, piling and piling, take us back to the long winter again.

The first job God ever gave the human family was to multiply so that they could care for the earth with the same love with which it had been created. Keeping our sights clear on the recent, six-day Creation will help to keep us clear about our responsibility to God's earth. After all, if it's been around for billions of years and will be for billions more, then naturally it's got problems! Reducing pollution is then only a matter of self-interest, since the planet itself could get along fine if humans made themselves extinct.

If, on the other hand, it's fairly new and in such bad shape, then we are much to blame. And why would God make a new one and give it to us, unless we are willing to show ourselves responsible for the one we have?

Creator, Sustainer, we are sorry for the mess we've made of Your lovely creation. I am sorry for my part in it. I don't even know my full part in it! Help me to learn, to see clearly, and to make better choices about my use of and care for Your earth.

God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God's nature. He created them male and female. Genesis 1:26, The Message

GOD formed Man out of dirt from the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life. The Man came alive—a living soul! Genesis 2:7, The Message

FB 7. "Nature of Man: Man and woman were made in the image of God with individuality, the power and freedom to think and to do. Though created free beings, each is an indivisible unity of body, mind, and spirit, dependent upon God for life and breath and all else."

There are several descriptive terms here in the Creation story.

First, it says God made people "in Our image." *The Message* puts it well—"godlike, reflecting God's nature." Human nature being what it is (now that it's fallen), people tend to go to extremes with this. They consider themselves godlike, period, and they become proud and arrogant. Lucifer was the first with that attitude.

"I have to live my own life! I have to do what feels right to me." What you're really saying is "what I want is all that matters." Even though those last words may not be out loud, of course.

If we keep our eyes on the Creation story the way God told it to Adam, we find the words, "*reflecting* God's nature." That's a different matter entirely, and it automatically keeps us humble.

Then there's the actual making. God "formed," then "blew . . . the breath of life." The man became a "living soul." Far too long, humanity has caved in to the ancient pagan idea (again, propagated first by Satan) that we are a compound, sort of symbiotic creature—a self-sufficient soul that simply inhabits this temporary (and undesirable) body of mud, and will leave it someday and become a ghost.

God says, No, the earthly body is good—I made it, and it plus My breath makes a living, breathing, free, individual, a unique soul. As for death, it wasn't part of the plan, but given the way things are now, it's a gift you can be grateful for. It's temporary, but it's complete while it lasts. The "ghost" is not hanging around miserably watching its family suffer. The breath is with Me. And don't worry, I can do it again!

Creator of Life, Giver of wholeness, Your way is so much simpler. Your story may not answer all of our questions, but at least it makes sense! You made us. You made us whole and perfect. And You will make us so again.

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, . . . in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—for before the law was given, sin was in the world.

Romans 5:12, 13, NIV

You know the story of how Adam landed us in the dilemma we're in—first sin, then death, and no one exempt from either sin or death. That sin disturbed relations with God in everything and everyone. Romans 5:12, 13, The Message

FB 7. “Nature of Man: When our first parents disobeyed God, they denied their dependence upon Him and fell from their high position under God. The image of God in them was marred and they became subject to death. Their descendants share this fallen nature and its consequences. They are born with weaknesses and tendencies to evil.”

Of all the stories in the Bible, the story of the fall of humanity must be the most sorrowful, because the other sorrowful things, like Jesus' death, never would have happened if not for this one horrible choice.

It's interesting *how* the serpent got Eve to eat—“You'll be godlike!”

She was already godlike! Once she ate, she never was as godlike again.

And neither are we. But there's an important thing to understand about this belief. Adventists do not believe the doctrine of Original Sin is biblical. This is the commonly held belief that since the fall of man, every person has been born already guilty and under the condemnation of eternal death. This is what led to infant baptism. The newborn was already guilty, already condemned by God, and already headed for hell if it wasn't baptized quickly, in case it died young.

All you have to do in order to refute this is look closely at this one text, though of course all beliefs must hold together from multiple texts. I chose to include two translations so you can see the different details. Notice that “death came to all *because all sinned*.” And “sin disturbed relations with God.”

We are all born with a “fallen nature,” and with “weaknesses and tendencies to evil.” We are not condemned for those. The problem is, we very quickly give way to them. We have “disturbed relations with God.” No matter how hard we try, we keep on sinning. Then, with Paul, we cry out in agony, “I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me?” (Romans 7:24).

Savior, You created us perfect, but we didn't last long. First Eve, then Adam, then my grandmother's grandmother, and now me. I'm a mess! Help me to draw ever closer to You, learning day by day how to become more like You.

Now that we are set right with God by means of this sacrificial death, the consummate blood sacrifice, there is no longer a question of being at odds with God in any way. If, when we were at our worst, we were put on friendly terms with God by the sacrificial death of his Son, now that we're at our best, just think of how our lives will expand and deepen by means of his resurrection life!

Romans 5:9, 10, The Message

FB 7. “Nature of Man: But God in Christ reconciled the world to Himself and by His Spirit restores in penitent mortals the image of their Maker. Created for the glory of God, they are called to love Him and one another, and to care for their environment.”

God created humans to be perfect. They decided to change their allegiance from Him to (they thought) doing what seemed to them the best thing to do, which was really changing their allegiance to the devil. Satan was overjoyed—he thought he'd won.

Then God showed up in the garden. He still loved these erring children of His! He promised a Redeemer. Satan snarled as he listened to God's promise that, though Satan would succeed in bruising the head of this Redeemer, his own head would be crushed. He slunk away in fury. He would bide his time.

When Jesus came to earth as a tiny, helpless baby, as He grew through vulnerable childhood, Satan was sure he could beat this Boy. But no. The years turned to decades, and he couldn't get Jesus to turn against His heavenly Father in any way. His faith held firm. In fact, it kept growing.

The adult ministry began. Satan took advantage of Jesus' time in the wilderness with the Holy Spirit to pour on more temptation. Jesus was weak, hungry—now was the time to get under His defenses!

“It is written,” Jesus kept saying. His defense was the Word of God, and no matter how weak Jesus felt, that Word held.

Then came the garden of Gethsemane and the cross. Satan still couldn't get Jesus to give in—even to His discouragement and fear. But at least He died. Ha! Now Satan would have the last—

“Jesus! Arise! Thy Father calls thee!”

Unwavering, victorious Son of God and humanity, I can't believe You could do it. But You did. Now it's up to us to live as connected to You as You lived to Your Father. It's up to us to live in Your love, drink it in, pour it out, lavish it on everyone we can reach. It's up to me to do that today. I can't. But You can. Help me not to get in Your way.

You were the anointed cherub. I placed you on the mountain of God. You strolled in magnificence among the stones of fire. From the day of your creation you were sheer perfection... and then imperfection—evil!—was detected in you. Ezekiel 28:14, 15, The Message

FB 8. “Great Controversy: All humanity is now involved in a great controversy between Christ and Satan regarding the character of God, His law, and His sovereignty over the universe. This conflict originated in heaven when a created being, endowed with freedom of choice, in self-exaltation became Satan, God’s adversary, and led into rebellion a portion of the angels.”

Before, we thought the saddest story in the Bible might be that of the Fall, but really, the Fall might not have happened if this first Fall hadn’t. This one is really heart-breaking.

Imagine the most beautiful, powerful angel you can. The Bible says Lucifer (Son of the Morning) had beautiful robes decorated with precious stones. He was sheer perfection. He stood by the throne of God, and all his thoughts, all his songs, all his very being was joy and peace and praise.

What was it that made him, one day, start thinking about his own beauty? What was it in his heart that made him start wanting to be like God, and then wanting to have God’s power, and then getting jealous of God the Son? What could possibly have made him actually start spreading rebellion and whispers among holy angels, pretending that God ruled by force? And why on earth—or rather, why in *heaven*—did they listen?

War. We don’t even know what that means. What—guns? Bombs? Some kind of fighting we can’t imagine? Or just spiritual warfare? At any rate, it ended with God, probably crying, casting His own beloved children, His own angels that He had made and loved, out of heaven for good.

That’s a greater tragedy than we can even begin to imagine from our tiny, earthly point of view. It’s one thing for humans, even perfect ones, to listen to carefully calculated temptation deliberately crafted to trip them up. It’s another for a mighty being like an angel, one who daily lived the reality of heaven and the personal presence of God, to deliberately, with malice aforethought, choose to try to overthrow the throne of Almighty God.

Lord God, Commander of heaven’s armies, You must have been so heartbroken when all this happened! If there’s anything, any tiny thing at all, that I can do to help prevent You from losing one person, just show me, and I’ll do it!

“The very ground is cursed because of you; getting food from the ground will be as painful as having babies is for your wife; you’ll be working in pain all your life long. The ground will sprout thorns and weeds, you’ll get your food the hard way.” Genesis 3:17, 18, The Message

FB 8. “Great Controversy: He introduced the spirit of rebellion into this world when he led Adam and Eve into sin. This human sin resulted in the distortion of the image of God in humanity, the disordering of the created world, and its eventual devastation at the time of the worldwide flood.”

The rebellion that began in heaven spread like a cancer to this beautiful new earth, just fresh from the hand of God, when Adam and Eve chose to try things Satan’s way.

The distortions began at once. First they hid from God, the Beloved Friend they had walked with every day of their lives. Then they started blaming each other, the serpent, and even God! Within about 1000-1500 years, the whole population of the planet, maybe as many as a million people by then, were almost all evil, almost all the time.

And God had to do His first cleansing routine. It was a horrible time in earth’s history. For 120 years, Noah begged and pleaded with people to listen, repent, and enter the ark, but in the end, only Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their wives were saved, along with samples of all the animal species.

“*Distortion of the image of God in man*”—That’s for sure! They were married to more than one person at a time, they murdered each other, and they didn’t care at all what God’s way was.

“*Disordering of the created world*”—animals were now afraid of the humans who were supposed to care for them, and they killed each other constantly. The once-beautiful earth produced thorns, thistles, swamps, and poisonous plants.

“*Devastation*”—As bad as things were, they were going to get worse. During the Flood, Satan himself thought he would die, and once it was over, the entire planet was unrecognizable.

But the rebellion didn’t end. To this day, many humans still want only their own way, not God’s way. The thorns, the poison ivy, the mosquitoes, the earthquakes, grow worse every day. Is there an end in sight?

Victorious Conqueror, I know You will win in the end. I’ve seen some darkness and pain, and I admit I’ve been afraid a few times. But I *know* You will win. I’m on Your side, and I’m waiting to see the grand finish.

God . . . decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him. After God made that decision of what his children should be like, he followed it up by calling people by name. After he called them by name, he set them on a solid basis with himself. And then, after getting them established, he stayed with them to the end, gloriously completing what he had begun. So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? Romans 8:29-31, *The Message*

FB 8. “Great Controversy: Observed by the whole creation, this world became the arena of the universal conflict, out of which the God of love will ultimately be vindicated. To assist His people in this controversy, Christ sends the Holy Spirit and the loyal angels to guide, protect, and sustain them in the way of salvation.”

The last two devotions have been pretty grim. If we didn’t know the end of the story, we’d be tempted to think, *How can we win?* Those are some powerful adversaries! But we do know the end of the story. The powers on the side of God and good are far more mighty than those on the side of selfishness and evil, because love is innately so much more powerful than evil that there’s really no contest. So all we have to do is be on the side of love, right?

Yes, but there’s even more. God does the battling, it’s true. There’s not much we can do to sway the tide of battle, small as we are, except to choose God’s side and stand valiantly, determined that not by our hand shall He be hurt or deprived of one more of His beloved children. But get this—we are given a *part to play*! Can you imagine? We—the ones who messed everything up—are handed out armor and weapons, trained in the use of them, cautioned to NEVER use them against flesh and blood, and sent into the fray!

You’d think it was a joke, unless you knew the story of David and Goliath, Miriam and the basket in the Nile, a handful of fishers and the whole Roman Empire. God uses small things—like me, like you—to create mighty victory. Satan may laugh, but he doesn’t laugh last. We may be pretty small inside this big armor, but we have powerful bodyguards. And every time we save one more soul from the fray, pull one more living body from the wreckage, God’s angels cheer and Satan’s angels grind their teeth.

We are those who follow the Lamb. They know us by our love.

Mighty Captain, I’m not that good at spiritual swordplay yet. I don’t always remember to wear my breastplate of Your righteousness or shield of faith. But I’m learning. And I’m sticking with You to the glorious end.

We don’t have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He’s been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. Hebrews 4:15, *The Message*

In his Son, Jesus, [God] personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity in order to set it right once and for all. Romans 8:3, *The Message*

FB 9. “Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ: In Christ’s life of perfect obedience to God’s will, His suffering, death, and resurrection, God provided the only means of atonement for human sin, so that those who by faith accept this atonement may have eternal life, and the whole creation may better understand the infinite and holy love of the Creator.”

Jesus knows. He does. He knows how you feel right this minute, and He knows how you felt the last time temptation was so strong it nearly knocked you down. He knows what it feels like to grieve and mourn, and to be angry or joyful or excited. He came so He could be with us and like us, in order to make it possible for us to be with Him and like Him.

Amazing!

In the Old Testament, when God asked people to pick out their best, most perfect lambs to sacrifice, it was an attempt to show them, just a little, what it would be like for a perfect, innocent life to be given in place of their own. It was a pretty small picture, really. A lamb has never been King of the universe.

Jesus was. He came, and the first thing He did was to live as a baby who couldn’t do a thing for Himself—He couldn’t eat, speak, walk, or dress Himself. He had to wait on His family to care for Him. They did, and Baby Jesus learned to trust them. Then He lived through the life of a child, a teenager, and a young man. For thirty years, He had an ordinary family life, and at some point during those years, He lost His dad to death and had to stand by, unable to do anything about it, even though He *could* have. How hard would that be?

We tend to think of Jesus’ life almost entirely in terms of the last three and a half years of it, and that must be what God wants, because that’s what He’s given us a record of. But we should also remember that those first thirty years, quiet, obscure, hidden away, were a crucial part of His mission. He lived sinlessly. Sinlessly! With the devil on His back determined to beat Him!

And now He offers that hard-won perfection to you and me. Freely.

Sinless Savior, I am speechless with awe. I don’t deserve what You offer. But I’ll take it. And live the rest of my days in gratitude and praise.

But if anyone does sin, we have a Priest-Friend in the presence of the Father: Jesus Christ, righteous Jesus. When he served as a sacrifice for our sins, he solved the sin problem for good—not only ours, but the whole world's. 1 John 2:1, 2, The Message

FB 9. “Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ: This perfect atonement vindicates the righteousness of God’s law and the graciousness of His character; for it both condemns our sin and provides for our forgiveness. The death of Christ is substitutionary and expiatory, reconciling and transforming.”

The darkest day in history never should have happened—it wouldn’t have if Lucifer and Adam and Eve had been a little more sensible. Then again, maybe it would have. Someone would have eventually decided they wanted to try things their own way instead of God’s.

Here’s the thing: Lucifer said God was unjust. He rules by force. He doesn’t really care.

But there’s the cross. Absolutely unanswerable. How could God possibly care more? “Your sin has caused a rip in the fabric of love from which I created this universe. But don’t worry—I’ll close it. I’m the only One who can.” He did. And it killed Him.

Let’s look at some of those long, scientific-sounding words:

Substitutionary: It should have been me. Believe me, I deserve it. He took my cross so I could have His crown.

Expiatory: Paid in full. My part of that rip in the universe, sewed up. Repaired. Actually rewoven. Gone. Can you *believe* it?!

Reconciling: The offender (that would be me) and the victim (God, whose perfect work I have seriously marred) have met, I have wept in bitter remorse and offered reparation I can’t possibly provide, He has provided it Himself and taken me in His loving arms, and we are completely reconciled.

Transforming: What could be more transforming than that kind of love? It changes everything!

Most gracious, amazing, shocking, unbelievable God, how can I ever thank You? I fall at Your feet in tears of sorrow and joy, and I beg You to live out Your love in me and make it visible to others who haven’t yet had this experience.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. 1 Corinthians 15:20-23, NIV

FB 9. “Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ: The resurrection of Christ proclaims God’s triumph over the forces of evil, and for those who accept the atonement assures their final victory over sin and death. It declares the Lordship of Jesus Christ, before whom every knee in heaven and on earth will bow.”

God knew that death came to our world through that first sin, and with it all these evil tendencies we are cursed with, so He made a way for life to come to us through His Son, the second Adam.

We are made alive now, not just in the “someday soon.” Romans 6 teaches us that just as we died with Christ when we brought our sin to Him, and were buried with Him in baptism, so we are resurrected by God’s call, the same as Jesus was. We stand upright for the first time ever and walk in a completely new life, alive by the Holy Spirit, who lives in us, prays with and for us, and works out His will in us.

Eternal life, 1 John 5 (and other places) teaches, begins now!

But it’s still really hard, and only visible by small glimpses now and then. So best of all, the thing we all look forward to more than anything else is the day when we will rise to true, complete, full LIFE, forever with Jesus! Our dead will rise up, we will be transformed, and that ugly rip sin made will be completely closed up forever.

All heaven and earth will be once and for all beneath the feet of Jesus. Every knee will bow to Him. Here’s another of those I-in-You-You-in-Me-them-in-both conundrums: 1 Cor. 15:27, quoting Psalm 8:6, says everything will be made subject to Christ. Verse 28 then says Christ will be “subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him” (NASB). Daniel 7:18 says the *saints* will receive the kingdom forever.

In other words, Christ’s resurrection accomplishes what nothing else could—the complete, total unity for which Adam and Eve were created, and for which Jesus prayed before He died (John 17).

Hallelujah!

Glorious Ruler, I can’t wait until Your triumph over all becomes visible to all. Right now, we are proclaiming it because You have proclaimed it and we believe You. But it’s not visible yet, and many scoff. Bring all You can into Your kingdom, and set things right once and for all, forever!

It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. . . Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's

God's gift from start to finish! Ephesians 2:4, 8, The Message

FB 10. "Experience of Salvation: . . . Led by the Holy Spirit we sense our need, acknowledge our sinfulness, repent of our transgressions, and exercise faith in Jesus as Lord and Christ, as Substitute and Example. This faith which receives salvation comes through the divine power of the Word and is the gift of God's grace."

We often speak of "seeking" or "searching for" God. It's a good term, because that is what it feels like to us. We are surrounded by confusion or fear or uncertainty, or whatever, and if we think there is a God at all, we may seek to find or understand or experience Him somehow, despite all that darkness and fog.

What we don't understand at that point, we realize later—God was there all along. We wouldn't have cared, or thought about Him, or looked for Him if He hadn't been there all along, loving us already, calling us already, reaching out to pull us to Himself, blind and groping and dirty though we may be.

Conversion, repentance, is just a matter of turning around. He's there, and we're running in all directions, crying out for Him. Stop. Stand still. Hold your sobbing breath and listen. Shhh. Hear it? There He is! The still, small voice saying, "Come here, little one. I love you. Yes, yes, I know all that, but I still love you."

He picks you up, quiets your tears, rocks you gently, and then sets you down facing an entirely new direction. You hold His hand, and basically, the only thing you spend the rest of your life learning is to keep your hold on His hand! He does all the rest.

But don't be deceived. Keeping a hold on God's hand is anything but easy! In the next belief, "Growing in Christ," we will explore ways we can help ourselves do that better.

Faithful Spirit, thank You for continuing to call me, no matter how far I wander. Thank You that You still do that, every time I lose my hold or get off the track. Help me to hold Your hand, but more importantly, keep Your hold on me! Jesus said no one could snatch us from His hand,* and I am counting on that.

*John 10:28

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Luke 18:13, 14, NIV

FB 10. "Experience of Salvation: Through Christ we are justified, adopted as God's sons and daughters, and delivered from the lordship of sin."

Paul talked a whole lot about justification. When I put "justified" into a keyword search at Biblegateway.com, I found nineteen mentions of just that one form of the word in Paul's writings alone. That's besides the times other writers use it. In the end, I chose to use the text above because it was Jesus' own words, and He's the Expert.

It comes from the story Jesus told, of a man who was making sure God noticed all his good works by listing them in his prayers. "I'm not a robber, evildoer, or adulterer, I fast twice a week, I pay a full tithe."

He even gave God the credit. "Thank You, Lord, that I'm not like *other* people, even this—eww—tax collector here!"

When Paul speaks of justification, he likes to analyze things. Jews, especially Pharisaic rabbis, liked that. Adventists do, too. And there are some great things, deep details, to dig out of the subject, if you want to seek them out. But Jesus didn't analyze. He said, "The tax collector is justified before God." Period.

So what did the tax collector do?

Bowed (showed humility), beat his breast (showed remorse), and said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

We can do that.

What is justified, anyway? Literally, it means square. Even. Like the margins on this page. In the old days, you had to count out spaces laboriously to make that happen. Now you can just click a mouse. Think about it.

Forgiving God, I know the computer is doing all kinds of things I don't know how to do when I click that mouse and ask for justified margins. And I know You are doing all kinds of things I can't do when I ask for and accept Your justification. Thank You!

"I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. . . This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples. I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love."

John 15:5, 8-9, The Message

FB 10. "Experience of Salvation: Through the Spirit we are born again and sanctified; the Spirit renews our minds, writes God's law of love in our hearts, and we are given the power to live a holy life. Abiding in Him we become partakers of the divine nature and have the assurance of salvation now and in the judgment."

Justification, sanctification, glorification. We Adventists love big words. They are, let's admit, glorious words. They are, let's also admit, not big enough! Not for the concepts they try hard to express.

Justification, getting our margins square, blotting out all past sins with Jesus' shed blood, happens in a minute—the minute we turn in repentance and claim His sacrifice and work on our behalf.

Glorification will also happen in a minute, "in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:52). We are caught up with Jesus in the air, and just like that, the same way He created things to begin with, we are made new—glorious—immortal!

Sanctification. Ah, there's the rub! The simplest thing might be to say that it's what happens in between. All the time. Well, most of the time. When we aren't letting go of God and wandering off on our own.

Sanctification is the process of learning to *live* in the grace and love and joy God has granted free of charge with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We'll go into more details in the next devotionals.

Justification is God reformatting your entire hard drive. Sanctification is His rewriting or reprogramming of it, with His own perfection, which means learning to love perfectly—loving everybody, all the time, everywhere, under every circumstance. It's hard work! It's also His work, and our work together.

And it's worth everything. Well, it must be—it was worth the life of the Son of God.

Sanctifying, indwelling Spirit, make me holy. I dedicate my whole self, even the parts I know nothing about yet, all to You. Now and forever, I am Yours. Help me learn to show it.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Galatians 5:22-25, NIV

FB 11. "Growing in Christ: Jesus' victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seek to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy, and assurance of His love. Now the Holy Spirit dwells within us and empowers us. Continually committed to Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we are set free from the burden of our past deeds. No longer do we live in the darkness, fear of evil powers, ignorance, and meaninglessness of our former way of life."

This is the "new" Fundamental Belief that was added in 2005. Naturally, there is nothing new about it—Adventists, along with other Christians have always believed in growing in Jesus! However, we found we hadn't expressed this concept well in an official statement. Especially as mission is growing in places where there is still visible battle to do with evil spirits, we needed a clear statement to help people see God had the victory and they need not live in fear anymore. We don't have room to quote the whole statement here, so it would be a good idea to read it at www.adventist.org.

In a very real way, this belief, which we will examine in the next three devotionals, delineates the details of sanctification. How do we learn to live constantly connected with Jesus through the Holy Spirit?

The first step, like conversion and justification, is to accept the gift and say thank You. It's exceedingly important for us not to get the confused idea that justification is God's work, and sanctification is ours. We ask for, believe in, and claim the holiness God wants to build into us, just the same as we accept any other of His gifts. We ask Him to throw out fear along with "the evil forces that still seek to control us." We can live in "peace, joy, and assurance" *now*, before we see results, and we can stay there throughout.

But there are things we can do to help ourselves stick with God. We're going to look at some of them.

Master of the universe, You cast the devils out of heaven a long, long time ago. They're only here now because we gave them permission to be, by choosing their ways over Yours. I don't choose them! I choose You! Please cast them out, and cast my fear and doubts with them. Live in me and make me Yours alone.

Once again I'll go over what GOD has done, lay out on the table the ancient wonders; I'll ponder [meditate on] all the things you've accomplished, and give a long, loving look at your acts.

Psalm 77:11, 12, The Message

Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens.

1 Thessalonians 5:16, 17, The Message

FB 11. "Growing in Christ: In this new freedom in Jesus, we are called to grow into the likeness of His character, communing with Him daily in prayer, feeding on His Word, meditating on it and on His providence, singing His praises . . ."

The first, last, and in between activity of a Christian's day needs to be prayer. We pray when we get up, pray when we go to bed, pray when we eat, pray when we work, pray when we play, pray when we are frightened, pray when we are happy . . . Get the picture? PRAY!

There are four things listed in this portion of FB #11: prayer, meditation, study, and praise. Not one of them can be done without prayer.

Prayer could be defined as us talking to God. It includes requests, confession, questions, expressing all of your feelings. If it matters to you, it matters to God.

Meditation could be defined as God talking back. There are people who will encourage you to "just listen to that inner voice. That's God!" Well, not necessarily. Both your prayer *to* God and your listening for messages *from* God will be shaped and informed by your careful, dedicated Bible study. Again, it must be bathed in prayer. It was the Holy Spirit who inspired those words, and the Spirit can make them clear to you, along with giving you nuances for your own personal circumstances. But they'll be nuances—not whole new interpretations just for you!

We do need to learn to be quiet and wait for God to answer. If we treated others the way we treat God, talking and talking and then walking away without listening, we'd soon lose all our friends.

Praise, too, is prayer, whether done in word, action, song, or just sitting and *breathing* your joy as you watch a particularly spectacular sunset. That's the easy part. The hard part is praising in the middle of crisis. But if you try that, hard though it is, you'll find reserves of strength and peace you can find no other way.

Beloved Friend, closer than my own heart, be with me. Keep me connected. Teach me. Today, all day, I am Yours.

We pray that you'll live well for the Master, making him proud of you as you work hard in his orchard. As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do your work. We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. Colossians 1:9-12, The Message

FB 11. "Growing in Christ . . . gathering together for worship, and participating in the mission of the Church. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience."

Colossians is one of the best books one can read about how a church works and lives together. The text chosen above could be taken as speaking to just one person, and of course, you can definitely claim those prayer requests for yourself. But in context, Paul is talking to the whole church at Colossae, and this portion of FB #11 is about that. First it talked about accepting Jesus' victory over dark forces and His peace and assurance, then about personal prayer, study, and meditation. Now it talks about gathering and working together.

The truth is, except in certain narrowly defined ways such as evangelistic series or seminars, our churches have largely lost the sense of working and living together that the early churches had. We meet, it is true. We gather to study, share, and praise. We pray for each other. But how much do we really see of each other's lives during the week? Do we really work *together* on a regular basis?

The world is very different these days, and there are ways in which this must change. We can't turn back the clock to the first or second century, and we probably wouldn't like it even if we could.

But we can and must find new ways to share more deeply and fully than once a week in pews. If you are a member of a church that's really a family, thank God and find ways to share the blessing. If you feel your local congregation could use some help in being more unified in this way, then perhaps you have some ideas. It's up to the young people to come up with new ways. The ways that seem so old to you were new when those who came up with them were young. They worked well, and they have brought millions to God.

It's your turn! What are some of your ideas?

God of the gathering, bring us together. I can think of some people with whom I do live in a two-way sharing relationship. I can think of others who might feel left out, even abandoned. Sometimes I feel that way, too. Help me find new ways for Your new work in sharing the old, old story.

You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness. Ephesians 4:4-6, The Message

FB 12. “The church: The church is the community of believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. In continuity with the people of God in Old Testament times, we are called out from the world; and we join together for worship, for fellowship, for instruction in the Word, for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, for service to all mankind, and for the worldwide proclamation of the gospel.”

As we look at the beliefs that identify Seventh-day Adventists, it is worth noting one line in the above statement. Nearly all Christians believe the church is “the community of believers who confess Christ” and that we gather for all the stated reasons. But we made sure to put in that line, “in continuity with the people of God in Old Testament times.”

We often hear the term “Judeo-Christian,” but many churches, while accepting that Christianity came from Jewish roots, repudiate that the Old Testament still has anything valid to say to us today. These are the same people who speak of Christianity as a “new” or “young” religion, as opposed to paganism or other early religions, as well as Judaism.

Here’s the thing: if it’s true, there’s nothing new about it. (“Before the foundation of the world,” remember?) If it’s false, who cares how old or new it is, I don’t want to follow it!

As Adventists, we believe in all the above ways that the church follows God. We are forever seeking clearer, more effective ways of “serving all and proclaiming the gospel.” But we don’t think we’re new, even though our particular branch of Protestantism was organized less than two centuries ago.

God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Smart people have always followed Him.

One God and Father of us all, unite Your children. Call together those You have called out. Help us to see ways we can work together for worship, fellowship, instruction, celebration of Your supper, service, and proclamation. Show me my part, and give me ability.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. Ephesians 4:15, 16, NIV

FB 12. “The church: The church derives its authority from Christ, who is the incarnate Word, and from the Scriptures, which are the written Word. The church is God’s family; adopted by Him as children, its members live on the basis of the new covenant. The church is the body of Christ, a community of faith of which Christ Himself is the Head.”

One of the biggest problems in Christianity throughout the centuries—in fact, even in Judaism in Old Testament times—was authority. So often, churches of various kinds have either been too autocratic, deciding what all their people must do, be, and believe, or have been lax and laissez-faire, letting things roll along as they would.

Both groups would say they derive their authority from God and His word. From the excessive kings of the Old Testament to the excessive kings of 17th century Europe, too many have seen the very fact that they are king as a sort of blank check from God—the “divine right of kings.” Lax churches may not have any kind of statement of belief or hold anyone accountable, because “they’re leaving it all in God’s hands to deal with.”

I won’t claim our church has been perfect in this regard (or any other, of course). We have gone too far one way or the other, and individual congregations and church boards still do. But as a denomination, we do our best to determine what Christ, the Head, has already said in His word, and then what He says to do for this particular situation we are facing. We try hard to be a loving family—to express parental authority only when necessary, to see ourselves as all children together, and with God as the only Head.

We also do our best to learn to see each other as different, with different gifts and different callings, like different parts of the same body.

Head of us all, guide Your church. Help me to be a loving child in Your family. Show me when and to whom to be humbly submissive, and when and to whom I may be called to be humbly authoritative. Help me to remember, and to remind those around me, that You are the only Head—the “highest” of us is only an undershepherd.

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. Ephesians 5:25-27, NIV

The Marriage of the Lamb has come; his Wife has made herself ready. She was given a bridal gown of bright and shining linen. The linen is the righteousness of the saints. Revelation 19:7, 8 The Message

FB 12. “The church: The church is the bride for whom Christ died that He might sanctify and cleanse her. At His return in triumph, He will present her to Himself a glorious church, the faithful of all the ages, the purchase of His blood, not having spot or wrinkle, but holy and without blemish.”

These have to be some of the most beautiful passages in the Bible. I don’t know about you, but at my best, I certainly can’t see being radiant enough to ever be even a tiny part of the dazzling bride described here. But we will be.

All of God’s children who choose Him, cling to Him, confess and repent when they need to, cling to Him, share the news that calls others to cling to Him . . . all of us, if we just don’t turn back, will be this purified. Can you imagine? Washed in His blood, dressed in His pure righteousness, even of good deeds we don’t remember doing, glowing with the light of His love, rising to meet Him, being carried into our unbelievable, golden, jeweled new home . . .

Oh, I can’t wait!

But . . . wait . . . This statement says, “The church is the bride for whom Christ died . . .”

Is? Now? I’m not radiant! I’m not shining and pure and holy! How can I be this bride?

There’s only one answer. The only way the bride will ever be that beautiful is with the beauty of Christ, and that’s where we get it now. That’s where we’ve gotten every bit of goodness we’ve ever had. But be careful—if you look at it, it disappears. Look to Jesus, that’s all. We won’t even notice being changed from glory to glory, growing up into His likeness.

And when the day comes, we’ll throw our bridal crowns at His feet, weeping with joy and gratitude.

And we’ll be home.

Holy Bridegroom, I can’t see You doing it. I can’t hear You or feel You changing my sinful ways. I can’t understand how it can ever be done. But I am Yours, now and forever, and I thank You for the washing, the white robes, the jewels of a gentle spirit, and the glow that lights Your eyes and reflects in mine.

Helpless with rage, the Dragon raged at the Woman, then went off to make war with the rest of her children, the children who keep God’s commands and hold firm to the witness of Jesus.

Revelation 12:17, The Message

FB 13. “Remnant and Its Mission: The universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ, but in the last days, a time of widespread apostasy, a remnant has been called out to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.”

If you go to a fabric store and ask for the “remnant table,” you will find small amounts of different kinds of cloth, often at a discount. They may be folded up, with labels to say what they are and how much cloth is left, or they may still be on the rolls. If they are still on rolls, you can see there are only a few layers of cloth left, wrapped around the cardboard core. These are the “leftovers,” the pieces of cloth that may not be big enough for major projects, and the store wants to get rid of them. However, if you lift up the bolt (in your imagination) and look at it, you’ll realize something interesting: the leftover bits are the cloth that was wound on the roll first.

There’s a “church within a church” that’s like that. The Body of Christ consists of all believers all over the world. There are even people Jesus counts as His own who don’t really know about Him yet, but are living in wholeness and unity with the Creator as they understand Him. Within this worldwide body, a small number have been “called out” to be like the first churches on the roll, the ones described in Acts.

This “remnant,” the “rest of her children,” according to our text, believes in obeying *all* that God says, not just the parts they like. They don’t ignore or change any of the commandments, and they cling to the testimony, or witness, of Jesus. In other words, they believe God is still speaking, and they don’t want to miss a word.

We believe that our denomination was called up in the 19th century to give the call to all God’s faithful, wherever they are, to come and be a part of God’s remnant.

Jesus, Who still witnesses to us today, be with Your people wherever they are. Give them strength and courage to stand up courageously for You. Give me that same strength and courage today. Let me be a part of Your last faithful ones on the earth.

I saw another Angel soaring . . . “Fear God and give him glory! His hour of judgment has come! Worship the Maker of Heaven and earth, salt sea and fresh water!” A second Angel followed, calling out, “Ruined, ruined, Great Babylon ruined! She made all the nations drunk on the wine of her whoring!” A third Angel followed, shouting, warning, “If anyone worships the Beast and its image and takes the mark on forehead or hand, that person will drink the wine of God’s wrath . . .” Meanwhile, the saints stand passionately patient, keeping God’s commands, staying faithful to Jesus.

From Revelation 14:6-12, The Message

FB 13. “Remnant and Its Mission: This remnant announces the arrival of the judgment hour, proclaims salvation through Christ, and heralds the approach of His second advent. This proclamation is symbolized by the three angels of Revelation 14.”

There are three particular pieces to the message the remnant has for the world. Two of them seem scary to the average person, so we try to make sure the third is really loud and clear. Here are the scary two:

God has already begun judging!

Jesus is coming sooner than you think!

The very reason God called a remnant is that for centuries, as the church in general slid away from God, people either thought God was a terrifying, harsh judge, or they thought He was a doormat and didn’t care what anyone did. People forgot Jesus had said He would come back. The way to get to heaven, they thought, was to die. But you’d better be good! Because when you died, God would sort all your deeds into piles, and the good ones had better outweigh the bad ones!

The only way not to be afraid of these two beliefs is to understand and cling to the third, the best of all:

Salvation is in Jesus Christ alone, and it’s a free gift!

Yes, there is a judgment, but we have an advocate. We’ll look more deeply into this tomorrow.

Great and Righteous Creator and Judge, You see every deed, good or bad. You haven’t forgotten, nor can You be distracted. That would scare me to death, even though I try hard to cling to You and love as You do, if I didn’t know You have already promised to wash my sins all away in Your blood. Remind me, when talking about judgment or prophecy to others, to emphasize the joy and mercy of salvation by faith in Your unlimited grace.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2:8, 9, NIV

FB 13. “Remnant and Its Mission: This proclamation . . . coincides with the work of judgment in heaven and results in a work of repentance and reform on earth. Every believer is called to have a personal part in this worldwide witness.”

Imagine standing before the throne of God, your every act held up to judgment. Your *every* act! Yeah, that one, too . . . You cringe, remembering. Then you take another look. Every sin has been blotted out by Jesus’ blood! All that is left are the acts of love and mercy He taught you to do.

Jesus steps forward. “This child of mine came to me in humble faith, and I promised not to cast her out. She clung to me through the darkest of times, accepted my righteousness and learned to wear it. She is mine.”

God the Father nods majestically and a gavel bangs. “Not guilty!”

You are speechless. You look back over to the Book of Records and notice something you wouldn’t believe if you couldn’t see it with your own eyes: as the years of your life in Christ passed, the acts of love and mercy grew more frequent, and the blanks where sin was blotted, less so. You feel puzzled. It always seemed to you that you just got worse and worse. Although, now that you think about it, you realize that after a while you started forgetting to think about yourself and your actions. You started to notice other people and their needs, and you were so busy trying to love them and get them to look up and see Jesus, that you just didn’t pay much attention to yourself anymore. Sometimes you felt guilty about that. You knew you were supposed to be “repenting and reforming . . .”

You feel the strong arm around your shoulders give you a squeeze and you look up. Jesus is smiling down at you, and through the tears in your eyes, you can’t help smiling back. “Well done, good and faithful child,” He says. “Enter in to the joy of your Father.”

This is our major message as the remnant. This is what makes the judgment and Advent bearable. In fact, we can’t wait!

Advocate of my heart, stand by me, hang on to me, never let me stray! I know how sinful I am. Only You know the true extent of it. I claim Your forgiveness, Your blood, Your righteousness . . . and Your ongoing sanctification. Help me forget myself and think only of You and Your other children. I want us all to be there.

Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't. Romans 12:5, 6, The Message

FB 14. "Unity in the Body of Christ: The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us."

Diversity is a good thing. Have you noticed that God seems to like *everything* to be different? Dogs have a lot in common with each other, but each one has its own personality and even its own physical characteristics, otherwise we couldn't have dog shows. Even snowflakes are each unique, and after all, who would notice if they were all the same? I suppose God can even tell guppies apart.

People, though, may be the most different of all. We have different colors, different sizes, different shapes, different hair textures, and unique faces, and that's just physically! Think about the variety of gifts, talents, abilities, interests, and even the variety of annoying characteristics present just in your own office, or class, or team. Or what about your own family? How can people who share so much DNA be so incredibly different?

Now turn your thoughts toward your church family. Think of the loudest person, the quietest person, the most musical, the best speaker, the shyest. Think of the one who drives you nuts, and spare a moment to wonder if you drive him nuts, too. How can there be unity in the body of Christ when there are so many, well . . . *humans* in there?

We are going to examine a biblical formula that doesn't seem to make sense: Diversity plus Equality equals Unity. (It might help to realize that many biblical formulae don't make sense to us. Highest = lowest? Leader = servant? God becomes peasant?)

Hang on for the ride!

Creative God of the unimaginable imagination, help me today to see the beauty in the diversity of the world around me. Help me to watch for, enjoy, and encourage it in the people I meet, in my family and friends, and in my own thinking.

In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:28, The Message

FB 14. "We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation."

Equal. There's been a lot of discussion throughout the past couple of centuries, especially in the western hemisphere, about what that really means. It doesn't mean equal in ability, energy, money, or fame. We aren't equal in education, even if we went to the same school for fifteen years and have the same degree. We aren't the same in health or . . . hmm, maybe the difficulty is in using the term "the same" as a synonym of "equal."

The text says, "We are equal in Christ Jesus." *The Message* defines this as "in a common relationship," and FB #14 goes on to clarify, "We are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation."

Wow. Without even private reservation? Like, "Okay, I'll wash that person's feet, but in my heart I'm not very comfortable about it"? That kind of reservation?

Or, here's an even harder detail. I get that we're supposed to serve each other, and that we strive to serve impartially, loving each one as God does—which actually is possible, assuming I have the Holy Spirit within. But ". . . *and be served?*"

Uh-oh. I recently heard a sermon on the Good Samaritan from the point of view of the injured man. It was very interesting. If he was conscious, this man had to watch his own people passing him by, and he had to accept help in his most vulnerable moment from someone he (if he was an observant Jew) spent his life avoiding!

That kind of equality??

All loved the same, each just as important to Jesus, each a soul He would have died for, all by itself.

Wow.

Lord of the Good Samaritan, I want to do better at serving, and being able to love everyone as You do. Help me with that, please. But while I'm learning that, help me, too, to learn to accept help and service from others, even those I don't feel comfortable about. Help me to "serve and be served without partiality or reservation."

One man died for everyone. That puts everyone in the same boat. He included everyone in his death so that everyone could also be included in his life, a resurrection life, a far better life than people ever lived on their own . . . The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15, 18, The Message

FB 14. “Unity . . . Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope, and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children.”

So church unity is nearly as mind-boggling as the unity of the Trinity. That’s kind of comforting, actually. It means I don’t have to totally understand it in order to live it. Just as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are somehow completely one God, and yet have different jobs and even, sort of, different personalities, so the body of Christ on earth has different jobs, different faces, different parts, all important and all equally loved.

As life goes on, we are all seeking to understand more and more what our place in the world and in God’s family is. We learn to use our talents and spiritual gifts. We learn that sometimes we are shocked by sudden new calls we could not have foreseen. We discover that those who are called alongside to work with us, or those with whom we are called to work (there can be a difference) are not always the ones we would have chosen.

And it isn’t always easy. Sometimes, as Proverbs 27:17 says, “iron sharpens iron,” or we rub up against each other, and it stings! But we are enriched by it, just the same.

The task, perhaps, is to:

- strive daily to see, appreciate, and encourage the **diversity**,
- cultivate the habit of seeing all as **equal** in God’s sight and therefore in our own as well,
- and then to accept that as true, godly, biblical **unity**.

One God, One Spirit, One Savior, You live in a unity we are forever trying to wrap our minds around. Let me just tell the truth: I can’t. I don’t get it. So please live it out in me, through me, and all around me. Teach me by experience.

“God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:18-20, The Message

FB 15. “Baptism: By baptism we confess our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and testify of our death to sin and of our purpose to walk in newness of life. Thus we acknowledge Christ as Lord and Saviour, become His people, and are received as members by His church.”

John the Baptist wasn’t the one who started the custom of baptism. The Jews already had rituals for purification by water, including ones in which the entire body was immersed. In fact, according to John 2:6, the jars in which Jesus turned water to wine were intended for ceremonial washings and contained twenty to thirty gallons each, which makes them nearly as large as our bathtubs.

You could even say Elisha’s instructions to Namaan were a kind of baptism.

During the early ministry of both John and Jesus, baptisms were becoming ever more common, and represented both a repentance (John) and an entering in to the New Kingdom Jesus invited everyone to join.

And of course, our perfect Example chose to be baptized to signify the beginning of His ministry as Messiah. He also gave the commission to His followers to baptize when He went back to heaven.

The early church baptized people by the thousands, and Paul found it necessary to explain what it was all about, at least to pagan converts. “That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land!” (Romans 6:3, 4, *The Message*).

God of Life, I, too, can die with Jesus through baptism and rise with Him into “a new life in a new land.” Help me to leave that old country of sin far behind and walk with You in newness of life.

That's what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we're going in our new grace-sovereign country. Romans 6:4, 5, The Message

FB 15. “Baptism: By Baptism, we confess our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and testify of our death to sin and of our purpose to walk in newness of life . . . Baptism is a symbol of our union with Christ, the forgiveness of our sins, and our reception of the Holy Spirit. It is by immersion in water . . .”

Whenever Christians baptize, whether they sprinkle or pour, the water is always seen as a symbol of the new life of the Spirit, and we do not need to criticize or make light of other people's customs, let alone try to usurp God's position as Judge and decide whether their method is acceptable to Him. However, as Adventists, we want a more complete picture of what Paul describes here. “Baptism,” says our belief, “is a symbol of our union with Christ.”

First, we die with Him. We accept the fact that our sin is deadly and incurable, and that it will, absolutely and certainly, lead to death if God does not intervene. We humble ourselves in His mercy and ask forgiveness and the power for repentance, which only comes through Him.

Then, in baptism, we are buried with Him. Naturally, the actual fact has happened already, in our hearts and in the courts and records of heaven. But baptism is the outward symbol, and what a powerful symbol it is! Down we go, down where there is no breath, and we would die if kept there only a few minutes. It's a scary sensation, to tell the truth.

Third, and most importantly, we rise with Him! In the verses following the above passage, Paul says we are raised into new life by the same power that called Jesus from the dead, and that we can “reckon ourselves dead to sin.”

We believe that baptism by immersion is so much more powerful as a symbol of this death, burial, and resurrection, that anything else is a distant second. Besides, guess what the Greek word *baptizo* means—to immerse! It's like saying that sprinkling your car should “work just as well” to make it clean.

Sovereign of Grace, You have given us the glorious option of choosing to die with Jesus on His cross, participating with Him in work He has already accomplished and we never could, being buried with Him in baptism, and rising with Him into a “new grace-sovereign country.” I want to live in the brightness of that light.

[The jailer] led [Paul and Silas] out of the jail and asked, “Sirs, what do I have to do to be saved, to really live?” They said, “Put your entire trust in the Master Jesus. Then you'll live as you were meant to live—and everyone in your house included!” They went on to spell out in detail the story of the Master—the entire family got in on this part. They never did get to bed that night. The jailer made them feel at home, dressed their wounds, and then—he couldn't wait till morning!—was baptized, he and everyone in his family. There in his home, he had food set out for a festive meal. It was a night to remember: He and his entire family had put their trust in God; everyone in the house was in on the celebration. Acts 16:29-34, The Message

FB 15. “Baptism: Baptism . . . is contingent on an affirmation of faith in Jesus and evidence of repentance of sin. It follows instruction in the Holy Scriptures and acceptance of their teachings.”

There are far too many stories of people who got baptized because they believed it was going to magically make them good Christians. When it didn't work, they lost faith and were set back, instead of ahead, on the path of life.

Let's make it clear—*baptism is not a magic ritual!* It will not make you holy, it doesn't really wash you of your sins, and you will actually face more, not less, temptation after it. *Jesus* makes us holy. *Jesus* washes away our sins. Unless a person has already committed himself or herself to Jesus in “entire trust,” baptism is meaningless. It is just a symbol of something that has already taken place.

The above is a very interesting story. Paul and Silas didn't know their singing would reach the heart of the jailer. They sang to build up their faith and feel better, and also to reach out to everyone within sound of their voice. Then, when the earthquake set everyone free, they didn't think of their own skins, they thought of the jailer's. “Don't kill yourself—we're all here!”

This had an effect on the jailer that was probably quite startling to the two apostles. He instantly demanded to know what it would take to be as unafraid as they were. (Salvation means safe, whole.)

All night long, Paul and Silas told them the stories. (Which ones, do you suppose? Which ones would you have told?) Before morning, another family had joined God's fold, and they were eating a festive meal in celebration.

How similar or different are our baptisms today to this story?

God of all, You were already working on that jailer and his family. You knew when he was ready to be “reaped.” If I had been the one thrown in jail, I have to wonder if I'd have been thinking about my jailer and the other prisoners or about myself. Help me today to watch the faces of others, find their needs, minister to them. Like You.

During the meal, Jesus took and blessed the bread, broke it, and gave it to his disciples: "Take, eat. This is my body." Taking the cup and thanking God, he gave it to them: "Drink this, all of you. This is my blood, God's new covenant poured out for many people for the forgiveness of sins. I'll not be drinking wine from this cup again until that new day when I'll drink with you in the kingdom of my Father." Matthew 26:26-29, The Message

FB 16. "Lord's Supper: The Lord's Supper is a participation in the emblems of the body and blood of Jesus as an expression of faith in Him, our Lord and Saviour. In this experience of communion Christ is present to meet and strengthen His people."

The Lord's Supper, or communion, is one of the most sacred services Christians share. It is hard for many to understand. In the early days of Christianity, some people, hearing talk of "eating His body and drinking His blood," thought Christians were involved in terrible rituals.

Even Jesus was misunderstood when He talked about the principles involved. In John 6:47-58, He said He was the Bread of Life, and the Jews started arguing, demanding how He could give them His flesh to eat. When He clarified further, claiming that whoever ate His flesh and drank His blood would live forever, many of His followers turned away from Him, saying it was too hard a teaching, and they couldn't accept it.

What couldn't they accept? They knew, obviously, that He didn't literally intend to barbecue Himself. So what were they objecting to? The same thing people object to now, including Christians, including Seventh-day Adventist Christians: Life comes to us only as we take Him deep within us, making Him and His teachings as much a part of us as the food we eat becomes our skin and bone and flesh.

Like baptism, communion is only a symbol. We don't believe the grape juice becomes the literal blood of Christ, or that the bread becomes His flesh. It makes a powerful picture for us of what it means to invite Him deep within, to become bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh.

Don't partake, if that's not what you want.

Bread of heaven, feed me. Make me a partaker of Your divine nature.* Live within me, remake me in Your image. I really do want it. Yes, I really do.

*2 Peter 1:4

What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns. You must never let familiarity breed contempt.

1 Corinthians 11:26, The Message

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11:26, NIV

FB 16. "Lord's Supper: As we partake, we joyfully proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again. Preparation for the Supper includes self-examination, repentance, and confession."

Mealtimes require preparation. Most of the time there is some washing involved (both of hands and food), maybe some cooking, then more washing of dishes. The more important and ceremonial the meal, usually the more preparation is required—special dishes, special silver, special linens, special food, maybe some that took days to make.

Communion is no exception. Deaconesses get out the necessary utensils. Someone makes unleavened bread. Grape juice is obtained. Most churches have some special linen. The people who prepare it may wear white gloves.

All of this helps us to give this occasion the honor and reverence it deserves.

But there's a far more important preparation for the Lord's Supper, one which is often neglected. In His words to Peter, "You are already clean by My word; you only need your feet washed" (story in John 13:3-12), Jesus implied that the foot-washing before communion is a kind of mini baptism—a refresher, a washing of the feet we've gotten dirty on the road of life.

We need to spend time before communion taking a look at our spiritual feet. Is there someone we have wronged and need to ask forgiveness of? Are there people we need to forgive? Are there confessions to be made? Paul said, "Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Master irreverently is like part of the crowd that jeered and spit on him at his death. Is that the kind of 'remembrance' you want to be part of? Examine your motives, test your heart, come to this meal in holy awe" (1 Cor. 11:23-30).

Jesus the crucified, I don't *ever* want to take You or Your death for granted. I certainly don't want to jeer or spit on you! Show me my heart, and help me prepare to allow You ever deeper within.

Then he said, “Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as ‘Teacher’ and ‘Master,’ and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other’s feet. I’ve laid down a pattern for you. What I’ve done, you do. I’m only pointing out the obvious. A servant is not ranked above his master; an employee doesn’t give orders to the employer. If you understand what I’m telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life.

John 13:12-17, The Message

FB 16. “Lord’s Supper: The Master ordained the service of foot washing to signify renewed cleansing, to express a willingness to serve one another in Christlike humility, and to unite our hearts in love. The communion service is open to all believing Christians.”

The “ordinance of humility,” an old-fashioned name for the foot-washing service, is another of the beliefs that sets Adventists apart from many denominations. Most have stopped doing this part of the service, if they ever did. Some still offer it as an added blessing at certain times of year.

Like baptism and communion, this is a symbol of a much larger truth, but in this case the action itself is so outside of our ordinary experience that our embarrassment and discomfort over the act itself may distract us from a greater meaning. It’s not that easy to wash someone’s feet! We tend to ask a close friend or a family member to serve with us, so that we won’t feel as uncomfortable.

The truth is, by avoiding the deeper truth the discomfort may bring to us, we miss much of the blessing, even of washing a family member’s feet. Who do we most need to learn to serve in humility and love? Our own family and friends, of course! It’s a paradox. Because we don’t feel as silly or embarrassed with someone we’re close to, we miss the very blessing the action is meant to bring.

Look again at the text above. Jesus didn’t just say, “Wash feet like I do.” We can’t say, “Oh, we do foot-washing, so we’re following in Jesus’ steps! Cross that one off the checklist!”

He said, “*Live like Me. Do the things I do. Treat people as I treat them. Be a servant, as I have been. I left My rightful place and put on your flesh, your clothes, ate your food, to show you that My Father and I love you. Now, I’m leaving. You do as I have done. And live a blessed life.*”

Servant Master, I know I am not remotely like You in this way. The service I do manage to accomplish is all mixed up with pride in my own humility. Wash my feet again. Take me again. Make me like You.

God’s various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God’s Spirit. God’s various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God’s Spirit. God’s various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, The Message

FB 17. “Spiritual Gifts and Ministries: God bestows upon all members of His church in every age spiritual gifts which each member is to employ in loving ministry for the common good of the church and of humanity. Given by the agency of the Holy Spirit, who apportions to each member as He wills, the gifts provide all abilities and ministries needed by the church to fulfill its divinely ordained functions.”

We’ve talked about them before, but now we’re going to take a closer look at spiritual gifts. First of all, what’s the difference between talents and spiritual gifts?

Everyone is born with various talents. We tend to think of people as talented only if they can do certain narrowly-defined things others around them can’t do, like draw, paint, or sing. However, *everyone* has talents. Some are good at math, good with children, good at cooking or gardening, good at listening—a greatly needed skill! All these are gifts from God, but each person has been given another gift too, the gift of free will. So they can decide whether to use their gifts for God.

If they do decide to use them for God, then something special happens. Some of those talents may be called by God into use for His church and become spiritual gifts. Other gifts, ones the person didn’t have and often never expected, may be given—gifts of pastoral care and church administration, and helping the community. Most churches nowadays need at least one person who is gifted in the use of technical equipment! It may not be listed in Romans 12 or 1 Corinthians 12 or Ephesians 4 (the three accepted lists of spiritual gifts), but it definitely helps the work of God progress.

Those lists are not total, anyway. There are lots of gifts God can give—anything He wants, in fact! But studying the lists in the Bible can help us to see and identify what may be some of the callings of God in our lives.

Next we’ll look at categories of gifts.

Giver of all good things, I have some ideas about what my gifts might be, but I need You to show me more clearly, and to help me develop and use them. How can I work for You today?

He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christ's followers in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church, until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ. Ephesians 4:11-13, The Message

FB 17. "Spiritual Gifts and Ministries: Some members are called of God and endowed by the Spirit for functions recognized by the church in pastoral, evangelistic, apostolic, and teaching ministries particularly needed to equip the members for service, to build up the church to spiritual maturity, and to foster unity of the faith and knowledge of God."

Many churches and leaders accept a division of spiritual gifts into three general categories: practical gifts like help or administration, gifts that are more overtly spiritual, like wisdom or encouragement or prayer, and ministry gifts such as pastor, teacher, and evangelist. If you are interested, there are lots of places in print and online to learn more.

For today, we will concentrate especially on the third category, ministry, for one reason: Most Christians, and Adventists are no exception, think this category contains the only "real" spiritual gifts, and leaves them to the paid professionals of the church. ("I can't give Bible studies! Isn't that the pastor's job?") However, look again at our text: Pastor/teacher is given to *train Christ's followers in skilled servant work*. In other words, what we see as the ministry gifts, those which are often followed by spectacular reaping in various parts of the world and therefore look like the main way God runs His church, are actually there for the purpose of training the rest of us to use the gifts we have!

We can take the concept of spiritual gifts too far, making up tests and lists and spending lots of time deciding who is supposed to do exactly which job—and what do we do if there is no one in our church with the gift of cleaning the bathroom or baby-tending? But if we honestly open our hearts to God and ask Him what He wants us to do, He will show us.

Master Teacher, teach us to be wise in this area. I want to know what my gifts are, but I don't want to be either arrogant about them or too retiring and humble. I don't want to say, like Moses, "But God, I can't do *that*! You didn't give me that gift!" Show me. And make me willing to serve.

[After choosing seven deacons:] Then they presented them to the apostles. Praying, the apostles laid on hands and commissioned them for their task. The Word of God prospered. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased dramatically. Not least, a great many priests submitted themselves to the faith. Acts 6:6, 7, The Message

FB 17. "Spiritual Gifts and Ministries: When members employ these spiritual gifts as faithful stewards of God's varied grace, the church is protected from the destructive influence of false doctrine, grows with a growth that is from God, and is built up in faith and love."

When we find our gifts, donate them back to God, and serve faithfully, the whole church prospers in ways we couldn't have expected.

Notice the above story. You remember the context—the Greek and Hebrew widows are arguing about who is getting favored treatment at the food pantry. So the apostles get together and say, "Listen, we need to be busy preaching and teaching. Choose some people who are full of the Holy Spirit to serve the food." They come up with seven, the apostles lay hands on them and pray for them in their new ministry, and . . . and my mind goes directly to the story of Stephen. The fact that he preached, even though he was an ordained server of food. The fact that he died.

But let's rein ourselves back in and look at the text. Yes, the story of Stephen and the persecution that arose thereafter is an important part of this whole story, but look what happens first.

The number of disciples in Jerusalem increases dramatically. Because the church has made a sensible decision about division of labor?

Priests "submit themselves!" A great many priests! These have to have been in on the decision to kill Jesus. Now they make u-turns, just as Paul later did. Because we have deacons now?? No.

The Word of God prospers.

Because people (filled with the Holy Spirit) are wisely and humbly using the gifts they have been given in the furtherance of God's work. They are serving.

How can you serve God's cause this week?

God of varied grace, show me where I fit. Show me whom to serve. Help me also to encourage the gifts I see around me. Perhaps I can notice a spirit-led ability in someone I know, and help him or her to devote that gift to You.

*If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith. Romans 12:6, NIV
 . . . to another prophecy . . . 1 Corinthians 12:10, NIV
 . . . some as prophets . . . Ephesians 4:11, NASB*

FB 18. “The Gift of Prophecy: One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy.”

Every list of gifts in the Bible includes the gift of prophecy. In fact, after spending all of 1 Corinthians 12 explaining about the variety of spiritual gifts, Paul goes on to give us the “great love chapter,” 1 Cor. 13. In the first verses of that chapter, he makes it clear that some of the gifts the Corinthians were wrangling over, thinking them more important than others, were speaking in tongues, prophecy, wisdom and knowledge, and giving great gifts to the poor. Paul says none of those matter unless you have the greatest gift of all—love.

What is it about us that makes some gifts seem somehow bigger, better, and more important? Is it because we think we’ll get more credit? If so, we’ve misunderstood the whole point of the gifts, which are for serving.

In particular, the gift of prophecy seems to be a point of contention. Some think it was only in effect during Bible times. Others think someone at their church prophesies every week.

What is it? Is it foretelling the future? If you look it up online, that’s what you’ll most commonly find. But the Bible has a wider view than that. According to *Strong’s Concordance*, the Hebrew word means to speak or sing under inspiration, and the Greek one is made up of two words, which mean to “bring forth” or “go before,” and “to make known.” Sometimes, certainly, the prophet’s word, given by God, “went before” the event, and therefore foretold the future. In fact, God said that if a prophet did foretell and his words didn’t come true, then he wasn’t a true prophet. But mostly, the prophets, both in the Old and New Testament, spoke out for God to the people, giving them advice, warning of danger, and providing encouragement and instruction.

As Adventists, we don’t think God has quit that job.

Ever.

God of the past, present, and future, speak Your words to me through whatever means You choose. I trust Your Word, the Bible, and I trust the prophets who speak in tune with all of that inspired Word. Sometimes, I hope even I can speak for You in some small way.

The Angel said to me . . . “I’m a servant just like you, and like your brothers and sisters who hold to the witness of Jesus. The witness of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” Revelation 19:9, 10, The Message

FB 18. “This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen. G. White.”

In case you haven’t noticed, we just went over the line into a belief that we don’t hold in common with any other denomination. It’s pretty controversial, this “Spirit of Prophecy” thing. There’s a whole spectrum even within the church. There are those who consider Ellen White very nearly the fourth member of the Godhead.

True example: One person was horrified to learn that Mrs. White had given differing counsel to different people. “How am I supposed to know which to follow?” this person demanded.

A friend suggested, “Decide which person your case most nearly resembles.”

“I don’t want to have to *think!*” exclaimed the person angrily. “I thought that’s what we had the Spirit of Prophecy for!”

Others want to throw out Ellen White and all her writings. She was “neurotic” or “deceived,” or simply a hoax.

I wouldn’t mention these, but you’ve heard them already. Perhaps you’re worried about what to believe. Take a deep breath. Let’s look again.

Truth: God said prophecy was a spiritual gift.

Truth: God said that gift was an identifying mark, along with keeping the commandments and the faith of Jesus, of the end-time remnant church.

Truth: God chose a young girl named Ellen. She didn’t want it. Others had refused it before her. The fact that she said yes doesn’t make her somehow supernatural or sinless. Just a prophet. A servant of God.

Truth: God also said this: “Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Murderer of prophets! Killer of the ones who brought you God’s news! How often I’ve ached to embrace your children, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you wouldn’t let me” (Matthew 23:37, *The Message*).

He wept when He said it. I don’t want Him to say it to me.

Oh, God, be a mother hen to me. I will accept Your teachings. I do want to be under Your wings. And I will not stone those You have sent to help me.

"I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters. Your old men will dream, your young men will see visions. I'll even pour out my Spirit on the servants, men and women both." Joel 2:28, 29, The Message

FB 18. "As the Lord's messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested."

That's Latin—our title. You may have heard it, and even if you haven't, you may be able to guess what it means: "Only the Bible!"

There are people who believe that Adventists follow Ellen White the way brainwashed people follow cult leaders. There are, unfortunately, Adventists whose words and behavior could confirm this belief.

Ellen White, however, repeatedly referred to her writings as "the lesser light" intended to lead us to "the greater light" of God's Word. She even said that if we'd paid more attention to the latter, we'd need less of the former!

If you want to know what she taught about inspiration and its role, read carefully the entire introduction to *The Great Controversy*. Here are some brief quotes: "The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience . . . Yet the fact that God has revealed His will to men through His Word has not rendered needless the continued presence and guiding of the Holy Spirit . . . The Spirit was not given—nor can it ever be bestowed—to supersede the Bible . . . Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the scenes of the long-continued conflict between good and evil have been opened to the writer of these pages" (p. vii).

In other words, Ellen White's writings can and do provide "comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction." However, they always and always stand below the Word of God, pointing us to it, to Him Who is the only reliable Source of that comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction.

Comforter, Guide, Teacher, You have given us much light, from the early days of people telling stories of Creation and the Flood, through those who were inspired to write the stories all down, and continuing to this day, in the work of Mrs. White and others who strive to make Your Word more clear and more available to all. Please make me a help and not a hindrance, both to myself and to others that I know.

"Don't suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures— either God's Law or the Prophets. I'm not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama. God's Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God's Law will be alive and working." Matthew 5:17, 18, The Message

FB 19. "Law of God: The great principles of God's law are embodied in the Ten Commandments and exemplified in the life of Christ. They express God's love, will, and purposes concerning human conduct and relationships and are binding upon all people in every age."

Those who suppose that because they go to a "New Testament church," they no longer "have to" keep the law would do well to reread Jesus' words and life. We believe as Adventists that the Ten Commandments are "exemplified in the life of Christ." What He did, we want to do.

Jesus worshiped only God, no matter what lure was offered to Him. He never let anything else get in the way and become an idol to Him. He took the name of God very seriously indeed. He kept Sabbath, honored His family, and sought life, even giving it back in the face of death on more than one occasion. He stood against easy divorce, gave instead of taking, told the truth even when it threatened Him, and covet? Jesus? You can't even imagine it. By my count, that's all ten.

Anyway, what is this "have to" all about? Just because we humans have a habit of "making" each other do things, of setting up and handing out "punishments" for not doing them, of labeling each other as worthy or unworthy, lovable or unlovable based on whether we do them or not, doesn't mean God does that.

God, to the contrary, risks (well, loses, actually) His life dashing into the inferno after us, pulls us out, fusses over us, bandages and heals us, and then sets us safely down far from the blazing boundaries and says tenderly, "There, now. Go this way! It leads to peace and green pastures, and will keep you far from the flames and the screams and the pain."

And we push out our lower lips and whine, "You never let me do anything I want to do! Why do I have to keep all these rules? All the *other* kids' dads let *them* play in the fire!"

All I have to say is . . . "???"

Lord of the green pastures, I really do prefer Your way to the inferno! Really! Remind me of that the next time I want to whine, "All the *other* kids . . .!"

The law always ended up being used as a Band-Aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it. And now what the law code asked for but we couldn't deliver is accomplished as we, instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in us. Romans 8:4, The Message

FB 19. "Law of God: These precepts are the basis of God's covenant with His people and the standard in God's judgment. Through the agency of the Holy Spirit they point out sin and awaken a sense of need for a Saviour. Salvation is all of grace and not of works, but its fruitage is obedience to the Commandments."

Things often get a bit sticky right about here. If the Law is the basis of God's covenant and the standard in His judgment, then I'd better be awfully good . . . but salvation is by grace, not works . . . but surely if I'm saved I'll obey . . . let's see, do I have any fruit yet?

Take note: the eyes are on self again! Here's what the Bible actually says: the Law asked what we couldn't deliver, but now Jesus has delivered, and in giving us the indwelling Spirit, He accomplishes in us what we never could have done! Hallelujah! And just the minute we start checking ourselves to see if we're "fruiting" yet is when growth runs into a check, because the whole point of the Law is to love God and love others, and not keep looking in the mirror and measuring ourselves.

On the other hand, James says something about a person who looks in the mirror and then walks away and forgets what he looks like (1:24). It is possible to say, "Yay! The Spirit is doing it; I don't have to worry about it!" and dash off into the sunset. So what does it mean to "embrace what the Spirit is doing in us"?

We can't embrace it if we don't even notice it. This takes us back to FB #11, about growing in Christ. We spend time in the Word, time in prayer, time in service. We practice keeping our eyes on God and on what He wants to do for others, and watching for things we can do to help. And He works the miracle. It's amazing and unexplainable, but it's true, and while you may not be able to see it in yourself, others will.

Unchangeable God, I'm so glad You did both—sent the Law to show the way, and then sent Your Son to walk in it. Now, walk in and with me, and help me to follow Your footsteps. Show me ever-increasing ways to embrace what You are doing in me.

"I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done—kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love." John 15:9, 10, The Message

FB 19. "Law of God: This obedience develops Christian character and results in a sense of well-being. It is an evidence of our love for the Lord and our concern for our fellow men. The obedience of faith demonstrates the power of Christ to transform lives, and therefore strengthens Christian witness."

I love the way that's worded. "This obedience . . . results in a sense of well-being." It does, doesn't it? Have you noticed how lovely it feels to get to the end of a day where, perhaps with great difficulty and fighting against temptation, you have succeeded in maintaining your faith hold on Jesus, and you've done the right thing? The sense of well-being is tangible.

Then, look at the way *The Message* has that familiar text: "Make yourselves at home in my love." Intimately at home, even. Like Martha of Bethany, we worry about way too many things.

Am I being good enough?

Is God unhappy with me?

Did I act lovingly in that instance?

What would happen, I wonder, if we just settled down and relaxed into Jesus' love and acted the way we would if He were visible, walking beside us, holding our hand, smiling at us, encouraging us.

It might just show "evidence of our love for the Lord and our concern for our fellow man [and woman]." It might demonstrate so much power to transform lives that everybody in our office, class, or neighborhood would want to follow God, too.

Remember, just a bit before He spoke the words in our text, Jesus also said, "This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other."

It will draw them as moths to a flame.

Lord of Love, live in my life so deeply and so purely that I live daily in that sense of well-being and peace. Let others see that You are real and really care, let them find a door to their own peace by watching me find it in You.

By the seventh day God had finished his work. On the seventh day he rested from all his work. God blessed the seventh day. He made it a Holy Day because on that day he rested from his work, all the creating God had done. Genesis 2:2, 3, The Message

FB 20. “Sabbath: The beneficent Creator, after the six days of Creation, rested on the seventh day and instituted the Sabbath for all people as a memorial of Creation.”

The Sabbath, say some, is Jewish. Not, says the Bible, unless we were all created Jews. Were Adam and Eve Jewish?

God is the only One who could have told the story of Creation—after all, Adam wasn’t there for much of it, and Eve was present for even less. God is the One who told Adam and Eve how it all came about, and He is the One who told them of His delightful surprise—the only thing created after they were—the Sabbath.

It’s interesting, because presumably, God wasn’t tired. Adam and Eve certainly weren’t. They hadn’t even done *any* work yet. They probably didn’t even know what they were going to do or how to do it. That first Sabbath wasn’t so much a day of rest as a Memorial Day.

Just think—we love spending time in green spaces on Sabbath, watching birds, or waves, or flowers. What would it have been like to spend that whole first day of life exploring the perfect garden, in the company of the One who’d just made it—for you!

It would never even have occurred to them to think, “Oh, we *have to* keep the Sabbath, now. Be careful! Don’t do anything that might be seen as fun or exciting!”

What could be more exciting than a whole day with God, our loved ones, and the natural world?

Creator God, Thank You, thank You, thank You! You didn’t have to give us this day. You had already given us the whole world and all Your love to go with it. The Sabbath is like the cherry on top, the fancy bow on the beautiful gift, the unexpected present on an ordinary unbirthday. Thank You!

Then Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” Luke 6:5, NIV

FB 20. “Sabbath: The fourth commandment of God’s unchangeable law requires the observance of this seventh-day Sabbath as the day of rest, worship, and ministry in harmony with the teaching and practice of Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day of delightful communion with God and one another.”

Delightful communion. Doesn’t that sound nice? I hope it’s a good picture of the Sabbath you spent this week.

This Belief says Sabbath is for rest, worship, and ministry.

Rest. Yes! We are all for that, especially these days, when we’re all running in 16 directions at once. Rest is something we all long for, but it’s harder to grasp than we expect. Do we really rest, or just worry about a different set of things? Sabbath is a chance to let go of everything else and really *rest* in God.

Worship. That’s an easy one. What are some of the most special things you love about your church service? In what ways do you both worship privately and contribute to the corporate worship experience?

Ministry. This is not necessarily talking about what the pastor or teacher or music leader does. To minister means to take care of someone in some way. Jesus did a lot of healings on Sabbath, and He was criticized for it. How do you minister on Sabbath?

We use the word “keep” a lot in conjunction with the Sabbath. “Keep the Sabbath.” What does “keep” mean? We keep our treasures. We keep the things that matter to us. We keep our children’s first drawings and the ticket to the concert where we had our first date. We even call them “keepsakes.” Something kept for the sake of the feelings it evokes.

Sabbath is God’s keepsake. He’d like to share it. Maybe we should change our words and say, “Don’t forget to treasure the Sabbath!”

Keeper of the eternal Treasure Chest, I know You have great and precious treasures I haven’t found yet. I’m still digging, and will keep doing it all my life. But I have found this one—this lovely, restful Sabbath day. I do treasure it, and I ask You to help me find even more to treasure about it, and to help others to see its beauty, too.

"I gave them laws for living, showed them how to live well and obediently before me. I also gave them my weekly holy rest days, my "Sabbaths," a kind of signpost erected between me and them to show them that I, God, am in the business of making them holy." Ezekiel 20:11, 12, The Message

FB 20. "Sabbath: It is a symbol of our redemption in Christ, a sign of our sanctification, a token of our allegiance, and a foretaste of our eternal future in God's kingdom. The Sabbath is God's perpetual sign of His eternal covenant between Him and His people. Joyful observance of this holy time from evening to evening, sunset to sunset, is a celebration of God's creative and redemptive acts."

The Great Creator made the heavens and earth, called them good, made the first people, called them *very* good, and then rested on the Sabbath, walking and talking with these children of His love.

Today, Sabbath can be a shimmering aftertaste of Eden.

The Great Re-Creator came to live with us and undo the harm we had done, living in our clothes, our skin, eating our food, speaking our language. He undid evil and redid good by living a perfectly loving life under God, and then went humbly, willingly, to a horrible, unspeakable death in order to take captive the last enemy, death itself. He gave His breath up to God and rested on the Sabbath, waiting in the cold silence for His Father's call.

Today, Sabbath can be a symbol of that unspeakable sacrifice, for which we can never be sufficiently grateful.

The Great King will return again, no longer the humble Carpenter of Nazareth. He will take all those who love Him home with Him, and they will celebrate together the most indescribable Sabbath . . . we cannot possibly imagine.

While we wait, Sabbath can be a tiny foretaste of that heavenly victory. And why? Because the Great Deliverer said to hold onto Sabbath and treasure it as the sign of our sanctification. We can't buy it, sell it, or work for it. He gives it, just like the Sabbath. A free gift.

Today, we wait. And we celebrate in advance.

Great Maker and Re-Maker, remake me in Your glorious image. Show me every week how to make my Sabbath treasuring a little more like the heavenly one. Remind me that every Sabbath is a celebration of thanksgiving for all You have done, are doing, and will do. I won't let go!

And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions." Luke 12:42-44, NASB

FB 21. "Stewardship: We are God's stewards, entrusted by Him with time and opportunities . . . We are responsible to Him for their proper use . . ."

In earlier devotionals, we took a fairly thorough look at stewardship, but there are always new details when you take another look at anything from the Bible. This text is chosen from the New American Standard Bible, which is known as one of the most literal translations, more word-for-word than thought-for-thought, both of which are valuable translation techniques. Notice that in this saying of Jesus, He uses the term "steward" and the term "slave" interchangeably.

Our modern minds boggle a little at this—why would an owner put a slave—a possession—in charge of all his other possessions? But their idea of slavery differed in some ways from ours. Certainly Jesus didn't mean to condone one person owning another. What He was talking about was the return of God to the earth, and God certainly does own us, body and soul. He could do with us as He wished—thank God He wishes to love and care for us!

And He gives us the same responsibility: to love and care for each other. One of the most moving facts in Scripture is that God still let Adam and Eve have charge over the earth even after they had messed up royally. It's still true today—what we have helped to destroy, God will let us help restore.

He gives us resources with which to steward His possessions, and there are several listed in FB #21. Today we consider time and opportunities. Here are some questions to consider:

Would it change your concept of the use of your time if you thought of it as God's time that He has put into your keeping, and if so, how?

What are some changes you would make in your schedule for today?

What opportunities has God given you that He wants you to use in care for His people, planet, and work?

Are you God's possession? He only takes willing slaves—an oxymoron in our language!

Master, I want only to serve You. I want never to think of You as a tyrant or bully, but only as a loving Master who has good jobs for me, and helps me do them.

Every creature in the forest is mine, the wild animals on all the mountains. I know every mountain bird by name; the scampering field mice are my friends. If I get hungry, do you think I'd tell you? All creation and its bounty are mine. Psalm 50:10-11, The Message

FB 21. "Stewardship: We are God's stewards, entrusted by Him with . . . abilities and possessions . . . We acknowledge God's ownership by faithful service to Him and our fellow men, and by returning tithes and giving offerings for the proclamation of His gospel and the support and growth of His church. Stewardship is a privilege given to us by God for nurture in love and the victory over selfishness and covetousness."

Today we'll consider the abilities and possessions God has entrusted us with. One of the most important concepts to get into our head is that *He* is the Owner, we are only stewards. In this Psalm, God points out the obvious—He already owns it all!

Sometimes we seem to get the idea we're doing God some kind of favor by offering Him part of "our" things, "our" money, "our" abilities. Do we think we'd have so much as the breath in our bodies if He hadn't given it to us? Look around the place you are sitting right now. How many things do you see that you own? How did you get them? Were they given to you by someone? Did you work for them, thus turning your God-given abilities into possessions? Does your opinion of them change if you remind yourself they are all really God's, and if so, how?

A woman sat in church wishing she had something to give. She was living on very tight means, and although she was faithful with God's ten percent, she could rarely give more. Then she realized that the church was in need of special linens for communion. She sewed, embroidered, crocheted, putting prayer into every stitch.

Her gift to God and to His people lays on the altar every communion, and she knows that God sees her small gift and smiles on it and on her.

What will you give to God this week?

What would happen if you gave it *all* to Him?

Owner of the cattle on the thousand hills, and of the hills, too, I keep forgetting my stuff is Your stuff. I'm sorry. I also know there are things I've bought with the gifts You gave me that You'd really prefer I didn't have at all. Help me to weed out those things, and to give You all that is left, including myself. Teach me to be a good and faithful steward.

When God sent the prophet Haggai to them, they paid attention to him. In listening to Haggai, they honored God. Then Haggai, God's messenger, preached God's Message to the people: "I am with you!" God's Word. Haggai 1:12, 13, The Message

FB 21. "Stewardship: We are God's stewards, entrusted by Him with . . . the blessings of the earth and its resources . . . The steward rejoices in the blessings that come to others as a result of his faithfulness."

Haggai 1 is a fascinating story. The verse above is just the tail end of it. The people have come back from the long Babylonian captivity, and they've spent so much time rebuilding houses for themselves and planting fields and so forth that they've put off rebuilding the temple. It never seems like quite "the right time."

But the more they put it off, the less able they are to do it. Through Haggai, God points out that they keep working, but don't have much to show for it, never quite feel full, never are quite warm enough. "We don't have any extra to give for God," the people might feel justified in saying.

In verses 9-11, God says, "And why? . . . Because of your stinginess. And so I've given you a dry summer and a skimpy crop. I've matched your tight-fisted stinginess by decreeing a season of drought, drying up fields and hills, withering gardens and orchards, stunting vegetables and fruit."

The message is clear. If you give to God first, the blessings will come, just as Malachi, in the same times, promised. The people listened, and God responded immediately, as He always does to any who move in His direction.

But it's important not to try to be good stewards so *we* will be blessed. As our FB points out, the greatest joy is in seeing others blessed because we have faithfully cared for God's resources.

We only have this one planet. God is going to remake it, it's true. But those who are in on that blessing will be those who took good care of it now, and of all who live on it. If you really start looking for it, it's amazing how many blessings in the Bible are directly tied to the earth and its resources and the care (or lack of care) for them.

Lord of all the earth, I confess the constant temptation is to think of myself and my needs first. I do believe that if I seek You and Your kingdom, all the rest will be cared for.

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. 2 Peter 1:3, 4, NIV

FB 22. “Christian Behavior: We are called to be a godly people who think, feel, and act in harmony with the principles of heaven. For the Spirit to recreate in us the character of our Lord we involve ourselves only in those things which will produce Christlike purity, health, and joy in our lives. This means that our amusement and entertainment should meet the highest standards of Christian taste and beauty.”

“Participate in the divine nature.” Other translations say “partake of” it. *The Message* calls it “participation in the life of God.” Did you ever really think about the shocking nature of this promise? It means you and I can be part of God’s perfection!

How? By “great and precious promises.”

Far too often, when we start talking about Christian behavior, no matter how strongly we emphasize grace in all other things, we suddenly have lists—mental clipboards with little checkboxes. Do this, don’t do that, watch out for the other. We argue about which videos and which games and which hairstyles; meanwhile, what is God sorrowfully checking off? The arguing!

“Godly people who think, feel, and act in harmony with the principles of heaven!” That would require the participation in divine nature that our text promises. And *that* can come only through the Spirit’s indwelling presence, “recreating in us the character of our Lord.”

It takes time, every day, at the feet of Jesus. More difficult than that, it requires time, every day, walking and working *with* Jesus. If we throw away the clipboards and practice love, we’ll find ourselves much more inclined to become heavenly apprentices, learning to wear His yoke, not our cheap imitations.

And then we’ll find “purity, health, and joy.”

Who could argue with that?

Master Yoke Maker, I want to throw mine away and wear Yours. Will You show me how, today and every day?

What matters is not your outer appearance—the styling of your hair, the jewelry you wear, the cut of your clothes—but your inner disposition. Cultivate inner beauty, the gentle, gracious kind that God delights in. 1 Pet 3:3, 4, The Message

FB 22. “Christian Behavior: While recognizing cultural differences, our dress is to be simple, modest, and neat, befitting those whose true beauty does not consist of outward adornment but in the imperishable ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit.”

It’s my guess that Peter would be amazed if he could know that Quakers, Amish people, and others, have taken this passage to mean they should only dress in a few sober colors, and that their styles should not change with fashion; early Methodists and Adventists thought it meant “no jewelry,” and some conservative Christians believe it means women’s hair should never be cut or braided. I think Peter would say that people who concentrate on those details have missed his entire point, which is that the outside does *not* matter.

Peter knew that God had told Samuel people might look on the outside, but God looks on the heart. He specifically said the real jewel was an inner, quiet beauty.

Why, then, does it matter at all how we dress or adorn ourselves?

Well, Peter (being decidedly human!) also knew that we humans *do* look on the outside. We make way too much of how we, and everyone else, look. We can squander those other gifts of God we’ve been looking at—time, opportunity, money, possessions, even our abilities—on our hair and clothes! What a waste!

We even judge each other’s worth by looks, just as Samuel did when he thought David’s oldest brother ought to be king. As this is written, *NEWSWEEK* magazine (July 26, 2010) has an article called “The Beauty Advantage,” which quotes research that says if you look good you do better in school and make more money in your life! That is, if others *think* you look good. There is also horrifying research on the self-destructive obsession with physical beauty that is taking hold of little girls, especially in western society.

So here’s the question: Who do you want to decide your value—God? or society? How will your answer affect your personal choices today and this week?

God of beauty, You think we’re all beautiful. You, as the saying goes, have our pictures on Your refrigerator. Help me to remember that when I look in the mirror and worry about what I see. Help me, especially, to remember that when I decide how much time and money to spend on my appearance.

Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Romans 12:1, The Message

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31, NIV

FB 22. “Christian Behavior: It also means that because our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, we are to care for them intelligently. Along with adequate exercise and rest, we are to adopt the most healthful diet possible and abstain from the unclean foods identified in the Scriptures. Since alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and the irresponsible use of drugs and narcotics are harmful to our bodies, we are to abstain from them as well. Instead, we are to engage in whatever brings our thoughts and bodies into the discipline of Christ, who desires our wholeness, joy, and goodness.”

That’s a long quote, but what could I cut? Every bit of it is essential. Our behavior is, by definition, what we do with our bodies, with our hands, our feet, our mouth, our brain. How can we possibly know what good Christian behavior is, let alone practice it, unless we have healthy, sound minds, in healthy, sound bodies?

Above all, we must work toward balance. How many times do we as Adventists pass up the pork and then pig out on potato chips? An Adventist doctor once said to me, “Put a glass of wine and a bowl of ice cream on a table, and the Adventist will pass up the wine, but the ice cream is probably worse for you.” What??

Then again, perhaps we eat healthfully, but stay up half the night. Maybe we sleep well, but avoid exercise. Perhaps we would never think of using alcohol or illegal drugs, but we pop pain pills or sleeping pills immoderately.

Possibly worst of all, we may follow every health rule we know, but indulge in worry or negative thought patterns. We’re Adventists, remember? We believe the body and mind are one being! We don’t want either giant, overworked brains on weak bodies or buff bodies with puny brains.

Self-control, or temperance (another word for balance) is, thank God, a fruit of the Spirit! We can ask Him in, and *He’ll* grow it.

Lord of life, keep me balanced, whole, and healthy. Grow Your fruit in me. Show me good care of my body and my mind, and keep me from extremes in either direction. I’m Yours, Your living sacrifice. Do with me as You will.

GOD then used the rib that he had taken from the Man to make Woman and presented her to the Man. Genesis 2:22, The Message

FB 23. “Marriage and the Family: Marriage was divinely established in Eden and affirmed by Jesus to be a lifelong union between a man and a woman in loving companionship. For the Christian a marriage commitment is to God as well as to the spouse, and should be entered into only between partners who share a common faith. Mutual love, honor, respect, and responsibility are the fabric of this relationship, which is to reflect the love, sanctity, closeness, and permanence of the relationship between Christ and His church.”

It can safely be said that God likes weddings. He performed the first one Himself, almost the very first thing after He made the first humans. It’s impossible for us to imagine now, thousands of years down, and I do mean *down* a very steep road, what that marriage was like at first, but let’s try, anyway.

First, the word often translated “helper” or “companion” is the Hebrew equivalent for the Greek word *paraclete*, “one who comes alongside.” In other words, God’s ideal for a godly marriage is that each one be to the other the kind of loving, constant, faithful companion, comforter, and helper that the Holy Spirit is to us!

Second, God chose the pair. He knew exactly what Adam and Eve each needed in a partner, and “presented” them to each other with great joy. What if He did that now? What if we let Him?

Then, look at those descriptions above:

Mutual love—Imagine the perfect love between two perfect people!

Honor—Adam’s first act was to call Eve the “mother of all living.” They honored each other highly.

Respect—What would it be like to live with someone who was always interested in your opinion and valued your thoughts, who sometimes gave up his or her own opinions and went your way because of that respect?

Responsibility—Now, this was a big one in that first family. They were given charge of the whole created order! God had given them a head start in a lovely garden, but it was their work to cultivate and care for that garden, and then to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28, NIV). They had different natures and abilities, but worked together in perfect harmony.

God of marriages, make mine like that! Whether I am married now or not yet, I know that through the Holy Spirit, praying together, we can still approach that ideal, that unity of two-in-one, and harmony of diversities.

Three days later there was a wedding in the village of Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there. Jesus and his disciples were guests also . . . Jesus ordered the servants, "Fill the pots with water." And they filled them to the brim. John 2:1, 7, The Message

FB 23. "Marriage and the Family: Regarding divorce, Jesus taught that the person who divorces a spouse, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery. Although some family relationships may fall short of the ideal, marriage partners who fully commit themselves to each other in Christ may achieve loving unity through the guidance of the Spirit and the nurture of the church. God blesses the family and intends that its members shall assist each other toward complete maturity."

Jesus confirmed that God likes weddings. He did His first miracle at a wedding, although the text implies that He hadn't really planned to do that yet (Vs. 4). The second section of this FB talks about dealing with the reality in a broken world. And there's an uncommon twist that can be taken from this miracle story, which can give us new insights to deal with painful reality.

First, the wedding runs out of juice. Our marriages do that, too, sometimes. There's no flavor left, no zest. Some people assume that means the love is over and run away to find another exciting new "love." Others assume that's the new reality; mature love just isn't as tasty and exciting as new love. They may settle down and accept a bland existence. Or couples may go to all kinds of lengths to try to spice up their marriage, get the life back. But have we tried "whatever He says, do it"?

Take the empty jars you already have. Fill them with Living Water. I know, it's just plain water, how is that going to help? It'll take work. Lots of trips to the Well. Lots of heavy lifting. Lots of splashing. Lots of worrying that this is all going to be wasted effort.

When the jars are full "to the brim," take a drink. And prepare to be blown away.

Just as the wedding host exclaimed, "This is even better than the wine we started with!" so, too, married couples who have gone through this process with Jesus say that their marriage is now better than they had ever hoped it could be.

Miracle Worker, I know You're still the same. Whether I am in a difficult marriage myself or know someone who is, help us all to do this work together and encourage others to do it as well. I know You can still create unity. And I pray that You will.

Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night. Deut 6:7, The Message

FB 23. "Marriage and the Family: Parents are to bring up their children to love and obey the Lord. By their example and their words they are to teach them that Christ is a loving disciplinarian, ever tender and caring, who wants them to become members of His body, the family of God. Increasing family closeness is one of the earmarks of the final gospel message."

Every morning, Jessica is awakened by her parents with a kiss and a smile, and she rolls out of bed to pray with them, thanking God for a new day and asking Him to bless it.

At breakfast, they sing a bright song of praise, and a spontaneous discussion breaks out over all the different kinds of fruits and grains God made, and aren't we glad!

At school, Jessica gets into an argument with her friend, and the teacher puts an arm around each and listens carefully to their grievances, then prays with them and helps them find new ways to work out their differences.

After school, someone helps Jessica to be responsible about her homework, her room, and her pet parakeet. Her work is admired, and a drawing she made is put on the refrigerator.

Before bed, she and Daddy get into a tickle-fest, and Jessica wins. Then she sits on his lap while Mama reads from the Bible, and they sing some more of Jessica's favorite songs.

The last thing Jessica remembers as she drifts off to sleep is kneeling in prayer with her parents again, thanking God for blessing this day, and asking for peaceful rest before the new one.

Jessica is not likely to be a statistic in a future study of why young people leave the church. But if she is, her parents will continue to pray and to bless her in all the creative ways they can think of, never judging or condemning.

Too "perfect"? Maybe. Then again, maybe God is still the Miracle Worker.

Great Three-In-One Who created families to begin with, no family I know completely lives up to this ideal. But I want to try. Thank You for the good days, forgive us for the not-so-good ones, and grow us together. Help us to remember there is no quick fix, just little words and touches repeated, when we walk, when we sit, when we lie down. God bless our families!

But when the Messiah arrived, high priest of the superior things of this new covenant, he . . . went straight into heaven's "tent"—the true Holy Place—once and for all. He also bypassed the sacrifices consisting of goat and calf blood, instead using his own blood as the price to set us free once and for all. Hebrews 9:11, 12, The Message

FB 24. "Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary: There is a sanctuary in heaven, the true tabernacle which the Lord set up and not man. In it Christ ministers on our behalf, making available to believers the benefits of His atoning sacrifice offered once for all on the cross. He was inaugurated as our great High Priest and began His intercessory ministry at the time of His ascension."

Again, we have come to a Fundamental Belief that sets Adventists apart from most of the Christian world. We find this teaching to be so inextricably wound into the whole Bible that we have difficulty understanding why everyone else doesn't believe it, too. But other Christians have some reason to worry about our belief in the sanctuary service. For one thing, they are concerned that we think Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was somehow not enough. But we do believe in the once-and-for-all sufficiency of that sacrifice.

Then there's our attitude, sometimes. Have you been in on discussions in which people were arguing over the exact dimensions of the heavenly sanctuary? I have. It isn't pretty. It isn't godly, either. Surely the embroidered angels of the earthly sanctuary were meant to represent the real ones in heaven, not some more embroidered ones up there! Surely God's throne isn't on a gold-plated box of such and such fabric. And the cherubim who overshadow Him are real.

When we lay aside these petty details and pay attention to the immense truth laid out for us in God's Word, we are more likely to gain friends and interested listeners. It's up to God to change anyone's mind, though, not us.

Hebrews states very clearly that our Great High Priest is administering His perfect sacrifice on our behalf. We believe that, as the text says, the veil between the earthly compartments represented Jesus' fleshly body, which, seen in one light, safely veiled divinity so we could behold it, and seen in another light, has been "torn from top to bottom" to give us bold access to God's throne.

We can be infinitely grateful for both.

Great High Priest, I want to thank You again for Your ministry, from the beginning of time until this day. I stand under Your wings, trusting in Your atonement, putting Your perfect self in my place.

As I was watching all this, thrones were set in place and The Old One sat down. . . Thousands upon thousands served him, tens of thousands attended him. The courtroom was called to order, and the books were opened. Daniel 7:9, 10, The Message

FB 24. "Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary: In 1844, at the end of the prophetic period of 2300 days, He entered the second and last phase of His atoning ministry. It is a work of investigative judgment which is part of the ultimate disposition of all sin, typified by the cleansing of the ancient Hebrew sanctuary on the Day of Atonement. . . The investigative judgment reveals to heavenly intelligences who . . . are ready . . ."

In the United States, since 9/11, we have heard a lot of talk about inter-agency sharing, or the lack of it. We can do a much better job of protecting ourselves and others when various agencies have access to the intelligence that other agencies have gathered about terrorist activities and organizations.

The Investigative Judgment is kind of like that, because it's certain that God doesn't need it. As an omniscient Being, the Godhead has perfect knowledge of any and everyone's status at any given moment. God knows (as we do not) whose heart is longing to serve Him, and who really doesn't care or is pretending. God knows whose life path is tending upward, even if it doesn't show on the outside yet.

Why, then, does God need an investigation before Jesus comes and we have the final, official, "judgment day"? Because everyone else doesn't have all the knowledge God has. So this time is for "heavenly intelligences," that is, angels and perfect beings from other worlds, to see on what basis God is judging. We could call it the HBI—Heavenly Bureau of Investigations. And God is sharing with all the agencies, because contrary to what Satan has spent millennia declaiming, God is all about transparency.

FB #24, which is too long to quote above, mentions both the dead and the living. For some, the decision is already made. For others, it's pending. But God already knows. Which choice have you made?

Ancient of Days, Judge of the living and the dead, I can't tell You how thankful I am that You have shown us from the beginning that the judgment is on the basis of love. Those who hide in Your love, who live and move and have their being in Your love, who choose to partake of Your love and share it, those are acquitted, by the complete sacrifice of Christ. *Thank You!*

"Time is just about up. Let evildoers do their worst and the dirty-minded go all out in pollution, but let the righteous maintain a straight course and the holy continue on in holiness."

Revelation 22:11, The Message

All created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ. Philippians 2:10, The Message

FB 24. "Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary: This judgment vindicates the justice of God in saving those who believe in Jesus. It declares that those who have remained loyal to God shall receive the kingdom. The completion of this ministry of Christ will mark the close of human probation before the Second Advent."

God is acquitted?! What? Yes, it's true. From the very beginning of the rebellion, Satan has insisted that God is unfair. "He's too stern. He's too unbending. He wants you to fail! You'll like my way of governing much better!" We live on the planet where he got permission (ours first, then God's) for a full-scale experiment. How do you think it's going so far?

All too many times through the millennia, Satan has gotten religions to further his dirty work. First there were the pagans who said the gods were so angry you had to hurt yourself to try to please them, even sacrificing your children to them. Then conscientious Jews believed they had to keep every one of a zillion little "laws" in the vain hope of pleasing God. The medieval church encouraged violent penances, forced conversions, and horrifying persecutions, all to please, or at least placate, this vindictive God.

But then came the Enlightenment. We don't believe that sort of thing anymore, do we? Look up a sermon by American colonial preachers Jonathan Winters or Cotton Mather sometime. Listen to a conservative Christian describe hell. Notice even some of the sermons or books in our own beloved denomination. "God *has to* require complete perfection of us!" Every time we portray God as angry and demanding, we further that satanic view.

In the final judgment, though, everyone—*everyone*—will see, with wide open eyes, the God who gave Himself to save us from the natural consequences of our rebellion. The God who offered heaven and eternity, free of charge. That God! And He will be acquitted, once and for all.

Most Holy and Most High God, I bend my knees before You now. I can already see Your unbelievable mercy and love. I already know that Your justice is perfect in Your Son. I can already thank You for Your intervention in my life. Please show forth Your gentle character through me today.

Then, the Arrival of the Son of Man! It will fill the skies—no one will miss it. Unready people all over the world, outsiders to the splendor and power, will raise a huge lament as they watch the Son of Man blazing out of heaven. At that same moment, he'll dispatch his angels with a trumpet-blast summons, pulling in God's chosen from the four winds, from pole to pole.

Matthew 24:30, 31, The Message

FB 25. "Second Coming of Christ: The second coming of Christ is the blessed hope of the church, the grand climax of the gospel. The Saviour's coming will be literal, personal, visible, and worldwide."

We've reached an interesting point in our Fundamental Beliefs. This particular belief is the major one that brought this church into being. It is so essential to us that it forms the most important part of our name, the part we use even when we're abbreviating. Adventists. That's what we are, at heart.

Today it's hard to believe, since nearly all Christian churches believe in some form of a second coming of Christ, but this doctrine had been all but forgotten in the early 19th century when William Miller and others all over the world began to study it again.

Since the "little flock" of that time did its work so well that Christians mostly recovered their belief in the Advent, Satan had to try to distort it in other ways. One common distortion is the belief that the coming will be invisible or intangible. This shows up both as the common "secret rapture," and as a belief that Jesus is already here or soon will be, but behind the scenes.

It is hard to know how these ideas arose, since the Bible is pretty explicit. It was difficult to choose just one text for this devotional, there are so many that speak of trumpets and "every eye" seeing and angel voices, not to mention the voice of God. If you accept the Bible at its word, there is simply no way to make the second coming be a secret.

Adventists. That's what we are, more than any other one thing. No matter what else people know or don't know about us, let's make sure they know that!

King Jesus, we mostly like to imagine You as You might have been in Judea, but one day soon we'll see You as the mighty King You really are. I can't wait! But I don't want You to come until You can gather every single one of Your children that You possibly can. Show me how to help.

The Master himself will give the command. Archangel thunder! God's trumpet blast! He'll come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise—they'll go first. Then the rest of us who are still alive at the time will be caught up with them into the clouds to meet the Master. Oh, we'll be walking on air! And then there will be one huge family reunion with the Master. So reassure one another with these words. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, The Message

FB 25. "Second Coming of Christ: When He returns, the righteous dead will be resurrected, and together with the righteous living will be glorified and taken to heaven, but the unrighteous will die."

The second coming will be the most glorious event in the history of the universe. Try to imagine it—the earthquake, the oceans roaring, the graves opening, and millions of faithful people from all ages arising to meet Him in the air! People will be crying with joy and excitement. Mothers will be hugging babies and children who have died. Grandparents will look young and strong again. People who have died of crippling diseases will be forever free of pain and weakness. Those who need crutches and glasses and hearing aids will fling them away, never to be missed.

Angels will be visible! At last we'll be able to greet and know the guardians who have hovered over us from our bassinets and cribs throughout our whole lives.

But above all, fairly bursting with joy, will be the awesome face of Jesus. Even with the crown and the glory, He will be recognizable as a Son of humanity—one of us, forever. I think He'll be crying tears of joy, too. Just imagine His reunion with His mother, and with His eleven faithful disciples, and Paul, who never met Him, as far as we know.

However, in all this glory, there will be darkness, too. Those who refused, no matter how many times or in how many ways they were invited and urged and coaxed to follow God, will not find His coming to be a good thing. They are not hidden in Christ, and therefore the glory of heaven is deadly to them, and they will die. In its own way, this is a mercy. But that day will not be without tears.

Fortunately, it's still not the end of the story. Not quite yet.

Oh, Jesus, how can we wait? I think of those I've missed and mourned for, and how I long to see them. I think even more of You, and how I long to see Your face! But help me spread the word first. Please don't let anyone die lost if You can help it!

"But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven's angels, not even the Son. Only the Father knows . . . So stay awake, alert. You have no idea what day your Master will show up. But you do know this: You know that if the homeowner had known what time of night the burglar would arrive, he would have been there with his dogs to prevent the break-in. Be vigilant just like that. You have no idea when the Son of Man is going to show up." Matthew 24:36, 42-44, The Message

FB 25. "Second Coming of Christ: The almost complete fulfillment of most lines of prophecy, together with the present condition of the world, indicates that Christ's coming is imminent. The time of that event has not been revealed, and we are therefore exhorted to be ready at all times."

A second grader came home from a Seventh-day Adventist school, worried. "Mama, am I ready for Jesus to come? What if I'm not ready?"

When her mother questioned her, it turned out she had been frightened by a teacher who believed we must be sinless in order to be ready for Jesus.

This is not helpful. Fear is not a good motivator, and in fact, the Bible explicitly forbids it: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7, NKJV). "There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love" (1 John 4:18, *The Message*).

"Do you love Jesus?" Mama asked the little girl.

"Yes."

"Do you ask Him to live in your heart every day?"

"Yes."

"Are you looking forward to seeing Him again?"

The little face cleared as if by magic. "Oh, yes!"

"Then," said Mama, "you're ready."

Let's ask ourselves the same questions.

Do you love Him?

Do you ask Him into your heart every day?

Are you looking forward to seeing Him in person?

If not, talk to a godly person you trust, and see what the source of your fear is, because it's not God. God wants us to have power, love, and a sound mind, watching for Him to come and eagerly helping others do the same.

God of love, show me the roots of my fears and worries, and please tear them out of me, no matter what it takes. I want Your perfect love and nothing else. I want to be ready by faith, not by my own efforts. Even so, come!

"You can eat from any tree in the garden, except from the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil. Don't eat from it. The moment you eat from that tree, you're dead." Genesis 2:16, 17, The Message
Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death. But God's gift is real life, eternal life, delivered by Jesus, our Master. Romans 6:23, The Message

FB 26. "Death and Resurrection: The wages of sin is death. But God, who alone is immortal, will grant eternal life to His redeemed."

The line in the middle of this quote, "who alone is immortal," is a very important one, even though it seems obvious. It comes from 1 Timothy 6:16, "He's the only one death can't touch, his light so bright no one can get close." The NIV says, "who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light."

If the Bible is so clear, why do so many still believe that everyone is immortal from birth? Or even before—many believe there are immortal souls waiting for bodies, who then live physically for awhile, and at the death of the body go back to bodilessness. Maybe even many times!

Those who believe in a forever-burning hell can't explain why they believe God doesn't really have power to end life, only to decide where it will be spent. Apparently, people are just naturally immortal, and not even God can do anything about it.

We ourselves sometimes act as if death is some kind of punishment, a penalty for wrongdoing that God exacts because He is so perfect and hates sin so much. It's bigger than that. Living connected with God *is* life! It's quite literally the only way one can live. Breaking that connection *is* death! There is no other way. If you don't get life from God, where *can* you get it?

Immortality is not a right or an inborn quality of humanity. It's a gift. It comes from only one Source. If we reject the Source, we reject the life.

Period.

If, on the other hand, we accept the Source, if we reach out and grasp the hand of God, held out to us in love and longing, we will become partakers of His life, forever.

Wow!

Eternal Father, I admit, I don't get it. I have a hard time grasping going on forever, and I can't even begin to imagine never starting to begin with! But I believe what You plainly tell us, that in You is life, abundant and eternal, and You are willing to share with us. I accept. Thank You!

The living at least know something, even if it's only that they're going to die. But the dead know nothing and get nothing. They're a minus that no one remembers. Their loves, their hates, yes, even their dreams, are long gone. There's not a trace of them left in the affairs of this earth.

Ecclesiastes 9:5, The Message

The dead don't thank you, and choirs don't sing praises from the morgue. Those buried six feet under don't witness to your faithful ways. Isaiah 38:18, The Message

FB 26. "Death and Resurrection: Until that day death is an unconscious state for all people."

There's death, and then there's Death. We speak of eternal life as a gift from God, and so it is. But the temporary kind of death we know now, the death Jesus called sleep, is a gift, too.

It's true that it doesn't seem like it, lots of times. When it's a young person killed in a freak accident, a whole city buried in an earthquake or hurricane, worst of all, when it's a baby or child, death is an enemy well depicted by the creepy skull and crossbones of popular culture.

But consider the alternative. Consider still having Cain and Lamech and Jezebel and Herod and the medieval inquisitors and Hitler and Son of Sam living among us. Consider Adam and Eve, who already had to watch for nearly a millennium as their children multiplied the consequences of their awful choice, being here for the Holocaust!

Or consider living on as a ghost, as many fear. Even Shakespeare had his character, Hamlet, afraid that the sleep of death would be filled with troubled dreams. There is a country song that depicts the ghost of a little girl who died begging for a ride home every year on the anniversary of her death. It gives a person chills to even try to imagine actually believing such a thing!

No, the sleep of temporary death that we face now is a gentle gift of God to help us get through until the devil's experiment on this troubled earth is ended once and for all. We can be at peace, knowing that our loved ones are quiet, kept in the heart of God for a great day of awakening.

God of the sleeping, You gave the Breath of Life to begin our lives, and You keep that spark with You when we end them. I trust You to be able to awaken, to recreate again, the ones I love who are waiting for You. And as much as I hate death and wait with longing for its end, I am grateful for it now, knowing that it is only for a while.

I also saw the souls of those beheaded because of their witness to Jesus and the Word of God, who refused to worship either the Beast or his image, refused to take his mark on forehead or hand—they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years! The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years were up. This is the first resurrection—and those involved most blessed, most holy. No second death for them! They're priests of God and Christ; they'll reign with him a thousand years.

Revelation 20:4, 5, The Message

FB 26. “Death and Resurrection: When Christ, who is our life, appears, the resurrected righteous and the living righteous will be glorified and caught up to meet their Lord. The second resurrection, the resurrection of the unrighteous, will take place a thousand years later.”

“The Great Awakening” is a common term for the revivals of the first half of the 19th century, out of which was born, among others, our own denomination. It was as if the churches suddenly awoke from the sleep of centuries and realized anew who God was and what life in Him could signify. They “remembered,” all at once, that Jesus had promised to come back. They realized that we can live for Him now, and can improve life and the lot of many even on this sinful and temporary earth.

But that is nothing compared to the Great Awakening that awaits us at the second coming. We have tried to imagine the scene, but what comes next? What does it mean to “reign with Him a thousand years”?

In an earlier devotional, we discussed the Investigative Judgment, and how it is a time when “heavenly intelligences” get to see firsthand how God is judging, and that He is fair and merciful. But when we arrive in heaven and don’t see some people we expected to see, we will still not have been privy to that information. God, remember, is all about transparency. He’s had a ringside seat for thousands of years at the debacle of sin, and He does *not* want it to happen *ever again*!! So He will give us a whole millennium to pour over the records ourselves, to have every question answered, to agree finally and fully, not just by trust, but by facts, that He is right and His way is the only way to live.

Righteous, merciful, just God, I admit, I do have questions, and I am waiting as patiently as I can to have them answered. But in the meantime, I know You love us, and I trust You now and always.

“I saw a human form, a son of man, arriving in a whirl of clouds. He came to The Old One and was presented to him. He was given power to rule—all the glory of royalty. Everyone—race, color, and creed—had to serve him. His rule would be forever, never ending. His kingly rule would never be replaced. . . But eventually the holy people of the High God will be given the kingdom and have it ever after—yes, forever and ever.” Daniel 7:13, 14, 18, The Message

FB 27. “Millennium and the End of Sin: The millennium is the thousand-year reign of Christ with His saints in heaven between the first and second resurrections.”

There are many now who believe that the millennium is already happening. They combine Old Testament prophecies with Revelation in a way to imply that while we are still on earth, Jesus’ reign will become stronger and stronger, humanity becoming better and better, and then at the *end* of the millennium, Jesus will come back.

If I had ever believed this, I do believe the state of the world during my lifetime alone would have convinced me otherwise!

It is true that figuring out the correct order of events in Revelation, and which are symbolic and which are real, can be complicated. However, in some places, it makes itself very plain, and this is one of them. Our text yesterday stated simply that the righteous reign in heaven with Christ 1,000 years, and after that, the unrighteous are resurrected to face their judgment. During that 1,000 years, we ask all our questions and get everything settled.

But I chose the above text from Daniel because it makes it clear that this 1,000 years is just the beginning. It’s an awesome progression—Jesus receives eternal, glorious reign, then He turns around and shares it with His faithful followers.

Why? Did you ever wonder? How on earth can people like you and me be worthy to reign with Jesus?! Because, in His usual way, He has turned evil to good and made the original lie, “you will be like gods” true. You see, thanks to ugly experience, we really do have more “knowledge of good and evil” than the rest of the universe. And those who are there will have learned to bury themselves completely in Jesus’ perfect righteousness, perfect wisdom, perfect love, and will be fitted to reign. Forever!

Glorious King, it’s unbelievable! When we cast our crowns down at your feet, we’ll mean it. The righteousness, wisdom, and love are *Yours*, not ours! But, at Your side, we will do anything You ask, now and always.

"I saw an Angel descending out of Heaven. He carried the key to the Abyss and a chain—a huge chain. He grabbed the Dragon, that old Snake—the very Devil, Satan himself!—chained him up for a thousand years, dumped him into the Abyss, slammed it shut and sealed it tight. No more trouble out of him, deceiving the nations—until the thousand years are up. After that he has to be let loose briefly." Revelation 20:1-3, The Message

FB 27. "Millennium and the End of Sin: During this time the wicked dead will be judged; the earth will be utterly desolate, without living human inhabitants, but occupied by Satan and his angels."

Again, this is one place where Revelation makes its chronology quite clear. Of course, others disagree with us about the identity of the abyss. We call it earth. Almost any theologian would agree that the best definition of hell or the abyss is a life totally separated from God, and in this scene, that's what the devil has—he will be even more separated from God than he already has been for thousands of years.

Imagine it. Nobody to harass but the horde of evil angels he originally deceived, and what harassment there will undoubtedly be, with everyone blaming everyone else, but ultimately blaming Satan, and with good reason.

Meanwhile, the righteous are learning what it means to be immortal—how to live, what to eat (the Tree of Life, for one), and asking all the questions they've ever wanted to ask. It seems like too long a time, but for probably millions of humans from every age of the earth, looking into the records of possibly billions—well, just remember, even though the righteous are now immortal, they still can only be in one place at a time, unlike God. They'll all have to take their turns at the great Books, and talking with the Son.

Here's one of my questions I want to have answered at that time: why resurrect the unrighteous? They have already been slain by the glory of Christ at His second appearing, and they are unable to hurt or destroy ever again. Why do it? I absolutely refuse to accept the idea of a vengeful God who just wants to punish, with no longer any possibility of good ever coming from it.

Why then?

Tomorrow we'll consider a possible answer.

Perfectly Just Judge, I trust You. This is the part I do know—like You, I want sin *never ever to arise again!!* So whatever it takes, do that. I'm with You.

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations . . . They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. Revelation 20:7-10, The Message

FB 27. "Millennium and the End of Sin: At its close Christ with His saints and the Holy City will descend from heaven to earth. The unrighteous dead will then be resurrected, and with Satan and his angels will surround the city; but fire from God will consume them and cleanse the earth. The universe will thus be freed of sin and sinners forever."

We've now come to a place where the chronology is not as clear. The earlier passage clearly stated that everyone was either dead or in heaven, so whom is Satan going out to deceive? It is not until the next chapter, Rev. 21, that we see the New Jerusalem, and all the saints with it, coming down.

If you wish to understand the end-time prophecies, there are a number of great books and studies. These small devotionals can't do it for you. Suffice it to say that when the New Jerusalem comes down, that's when the unrighteous are resurrected, and Satan has his last chance. Instantly, he takes it. Being who he has consistently, by his choices, made himself to be (the same as all of us), he has thought of nothing but revenge for the whole 1,000 years.

He's read the Book, too. You'd think he'd know . . . but the most powerful feature of sin, especially cherished, practiced, repeated sin, is its incredible capacity for self-deception. Presumably, Satan really thinks he can win! He gets together all the historic tyrants and generals and masterminds of earthly sin, and together they bring all their hosts to take God's eternal city.

It boggles the mind.

This is where I find my possible answer to the question I ended with yesterday. Is it possible that it's a kind of final proof for God's contention that these angels and people really are unredeemable? Is it as if He's saying, "See? I resurrect them, and the second they get their eyes open, all they want to do is destroy Me."

For once, for the last time, in fact, God's brilliant glory is completely unveiled, and sin cannot survive. Those who cling to it, die, too. Forever.

Mighty God of love, I know You will be weeping then. I will weep with you, and so will all who love You. Then, we will weep no more forever.

Even so, come! Thy eternal will be done.

But there was no sign of a Temple, for the Lord God—the Sovereign-Strong—and the Lamb are the Temple. The City doesn't need sun or moon for light. God's Glory is its light, the Lamb its lamp! The nations will walk in its light and earth's kings bring in their splendor. Its gates will never be shut by day, and there won't be any night. They'll bring the glory and honor of the nations into the City.

Revelation 21:22-25, The Message

FB 28. “New Earth: On the new earth, in which righteousness dwells, God will provide an eternal home for the redeemed and a perfect environment for everlasting life, love, joy, and learning in His presence.”

We've come to the last of our 28 Fundamental Beliefs as Adventists, and this is the one that is the reason for all the rest, the final, glorious answer to all questions, the eternal destiny that God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—have been tirelessly working for throughout the ages!

A perfect world! Just try to imagine it. We can't, of course, but we like to try. In the Bible times, people's highest imaginings included their own vine and fig tree, and a home no one could take away. Jesus spoke of many mansions, or of many rooms in His Father's mansion. In more recent centuries, people have imagined non-polluting space ships, their own cabins and gardens, and riding on animals. John, of course, spoke of golden streets, pearly gates, and foundations of jewels.

Here's something that has dawned on me only in recent years: if this is now the new dwelling place, forever, of God, and there is no temple, because He's there, then this earth, the new one, will now be heaven! Did you ever think of that? God (who is, of course, everywhere throughout the universe at once) moves His actual headquarters, His throne, *here!*

We do *not* deserve this honor. It's enough to bring tears to the eyes.

Here's an interesting exercise to try: We are told that Lucifer's original questions were not sin, just questions. Suppose that, a million years from now, some newly created individual asks you, “Why do we have to obey God without question?” What would you answer, out of your experience of good and evil? Write down what you would say to that person. Then keep it, and read it yourself when you are tempted to rebel.

Sovereign-Strong and the Lamb, I long to see You! I long to live in that city with You, and I don't much care what else is in it, as long as You are there and pain and tears are gone. Keep me by Your side until that day.

I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, gone the sea. I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband. I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: “Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They're his people, he's their God. He'll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone.” The Enthroned continued, “Look! I'm making everything new. Write it all down—each word dependable and accurate.” Revelation 21:1-5, The Message

FB 28. “New Earth: For here God Himself will dwell with His people, and suffering and death will have passed away.”

No matter what marvels we can imagine, and no matter what marvels we actually discover and experience there, only one thing really matters. We will live with God. We will live with God!

Those who are there will have already learned to live with Him every day, through every kind of darkness and light, pain and joy, and now . . . they will see His face. *See His face!* Get actual hugs from Jesus! Walk with angels and get to know them.

You will get personal time with Jesus, who will hold you and wipe away your tears because of all the times you've doubted Him. He will wipe away the grief that some people you cared about chose not to come. You and He will make new plans together, most of which can't even enter your mind now.

No more death. No more death!

Just life, true and eternal, new every morning.

Words simply dry up at the thought.

If you wish, use this space to write your own prayer of praise and longing.

Light of the world, now as then, teach me to walk with You now. Teach me to stick to You like a burr on Your robe. Teach me to never, ever let You go. Because I long to be there. With You. Forever and always.

The seventh Angel trumpeted. A crescendo of voices in Heaven sang out, The kingdom of the world is now the Kingdom of our God and his Messiah! He will rule forever and ever! The Twenty-four Elders seated before God on their thrones fell to their knees, worshiped, and sang, We thank you, O God, Sovereign-Strong, Who Is and Who Was. You took your great power and took over—reigned!

Revelation 11:15-17, The Message

FB 28. “New Earth: The great controversy will be ended, and sin will be no more. All things, animate and inanimate, will declare that God is love; and He shall reign forever. Amen.”

I could not possibly write a better devotional for us to consider together than Mrs. White, who saw some of the glories we’ve been talking about with her own eyes, wrote at the end of *The Great Controversy*:

“And the years of eternity, as they roll, will bring richer and still more glorious revelations of God and of Christ. As knowledge is progressive, so will love, reverence, and happiness increase. The more men learn of God, the greater will be their admiration of his character. As Jesus opens before them the riches of redemption, and the amazing achievements in the great controversy with Satan, the hearts of the ransomed thrill with more fervent devotion, and with more rapturous joy they sweep the harps of gold; and ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of voices unite to swell the mighty chorus of praise.

And every creature which is in Heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, “Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever” [REV. 5:13].

The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love” (GC 678).

Oh, Lord, God, Redeemer, what can I say? I love You, but not as much as You love me. I long to see You, but not as much as You long to have me with You forever. Today, this morning, this afternoon, this evening, help me to practice Your presence, to live with You and for You now, so that when that day comes, I will be prepared to live with You always. And show me how to tell others, to help them long for it, and not fear or avoid it.

Since everything here today might well be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival. The galaxies will burn up and the elements melt down that day—but we’ll hardly notice. We’ll be looking the other way, ready for the promised new heavens and the promised new earth, all landscaped with righteousness.

2 Peter 3:11-13, The Message

What a trip we’ve been on together! We’ve traveled back in time thousands of years to Creation, and then forward to 1,000 years after the second coming. We’ve discussed enough details about our Source, our Heritage, our Core Values, and our Fundamental Beliefs to leave our heads reeling for another year to come.

But as all this vital and heart-stirring knowledge settles, it becomes clearer than ever that there is really only one thing needful: *cling to Jesus!*

He was the One who told us there is only . . .

One Great Command—Love God with all you’ve got!

And a Second Like It—Love everybody else!

And there’s only one HOW, too. Hang on. Don’t let go. The Spirit can hold us up and hold us together, if only we just don’t give up. While we wait, while we watch eagerly for the fulfillment of all things, we can see church unity such as we’ve never imagined it before if we do that one thing.

Because, you see, if we each, individually, commit to hanging on to Jesus and living in His Spirit, then some other things will automatically happen. We’ll hang on to each other as well. We’ll hold hands and walk together. We’ll help each other up when necessary. We’ll care for the earth and be good stewards and treasure the Sabbath and be kind. We’ll forgive and be forgiven, we’ll give and receive support.

We will know who we are.

This year, choose to live for Jesus. Look back only to see how He’s led in the past. Look forward in eagerness to find out how He’ll lead in the future. Maybe He’ll come this year!

Maker, Defender, Redeemer, Friend, I often don’t know *what* I am or *how* I am or *why* I am, but I know *who* I am. I am Yours! I am not his, not hers, not theirs, certainly not mine. I am Yours and Yours alone, now and forever. Thank You for each day’s new beginning.

Amen.

Have you ever written your name and address in the front cover of a textbook? Sometimes, just for fun, you may have written the longest, most complete address you could think of. When one student in the United States did this, his address looked like this:

*J. Smith
Apartment 605
431 Mayweather Boulevard
Commontown, CA
USA
North America
Planet Earth
The Solar System
The Milky Way Galaxy
The Universe*

What would your “complete” address look like?

It’s kind of interesting to think of yourself – one human individual – not just in the context of your street and city, but in the context of your country, your continent, our whole planet, and even the solar system and the universe itself. When you see yourself in that context, how does it make you feel? Tiny and insignificant? Or important and valuable?

What about in God’s eyes? Where do you fit in God’s universe?

My Identity in Christ seeks to help you answer these questions and more. All of us must choose for ourselves—What do we believe? Why be a Christian? We are made in the image of our Creator. And He thinks you’re valuable—in fact, He thinks you’re worth dying for.