

# Adventist World

12/2021

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Correction: We apologize for inadvertently misspelling the name of Yemi Osinbajo, vice president of Nigeria, that appeared in the News Moment of the October issue.

# The Christmas Marriage Plant

BY BILL KNOTT

On a snowy December afternoon 40 years ago, a bride took scissors to the cascade of red roses she was preparing to carry down the aisle minutes later. Hanging oddly from the bouquet were several “spider babies,” as she called them—outgrowths from the greenery, *Chlorophytum comosum*, the florist had added to her bouquet. The deed was done; the greenery discarded; the bride happy; the ceremony unblemished.

Unbeknownst to her, a bridesmaid had witnessed this moment of private pruning and retrieved the snipped greenery from the trash. She took the fragments home, rooted them, and on our first anniversary offered Debby and me a healthy “spider plant”—a living piece of Debby’s bridal bouquet.



Photo: Adalto de Paula

At first it was a novelty, and a funny story to tell friends and family. Soon, keeping that plant alive took on a kind of urgency, for who would let the living symbol of their marriage wither and die? We watered it, changed the soil, protected it from chewing pets—and took it with us whenever we moved, sometimes positioning it atop the luggage as we drove thousands of miles to new ministry locations.

Eight major moves later “the marriage plant” has survived two cats; two dogs; two active sons who knocked it over several times; and years of less-than-stellar sunlight in north-facing houses. It has taken tending—frequent tending—to keep the plant healthy. Potted plants get root-bound if not repositioned every year or so. Regular water and even plant vitamins are necessary to keep the greenery green and the plant producing—ah, yes—“spider babies.” Like the marriage plant, the family has also produced: both sons are married and living near us, and we cherish one grandson, with another on the way. Multiple friends and colleagues have taken cuttings through the years, so there is no telling just how far Debby’s bouquet has now traveled.

Forty years along, we watch with gratitude what God has grown—in the marriage plant, yes, but mostly in the marriage and the family. He who heard our vows has tended the marriage He ordained, keeping it funny, growing, and sacred. “Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations” (Ps. 90:1).

Today it flourishes in the ample southern sunlight just outside my editorial office, where every day I am reminded of the power of love and sacred continuity.



Photo: William Fagal

**A technician works on the sound board to support members' participation in real time during the 2021 Annual Council of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Technology played a vital role in the October 7-13 meetings.**

Photo: Brent Hardinge / Adventist Media Exchange (CC BY 4.0)



# 189

The number of boxes collected for displaced Afghans arriving in the U.S. In August a call went out to the state of Wisconsin's Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster group. Alice Garrett, Wisconsin Adventist Community Services director, reached out to churches to collect such necessities as underwear, socks, and other new clothing items. Within one month more than 3,300 items were collected, and volunteers helped sort, label, and box up all the items.

**“It’s especially hard for international [students]. They haven’t been home in 18 months. Our youngest boarder just turned 14, so he hasn’t seen his mom and dad since he was 12 years old. It really takes a toll.”**

—Brooke Davidson, Longburn Adventist College House (LAC) volunteer, about the lockdowns in New Zealand and the impact on students. LAC is located in Longburn, New Zealand, and has been greatly impacted because of the country's COVID-19 lockdown. LAC staff gave up much of their Christmas holidays to look after the physical and emotional needs of 25 international students who couldn't return home.

## Finding Balance

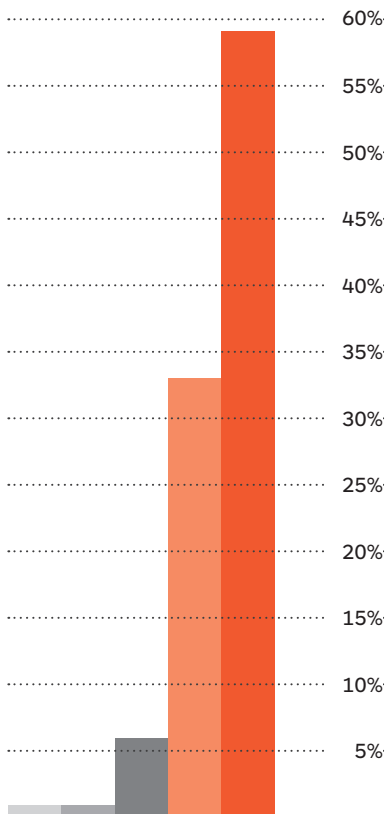
As part of the 2017-2018 Global Church Member Survey, researchers asked the question: Does the Adventist health message emphasize physical health, mental health, emotional well-being, social support, and relationships as a part of spiritual growth?

- 1% Strongly Disagree
- 1% Disagree
- 6% I'm Not Sure
- 33% Agree
- 59% Strongly Agree

Source: ASTR Research and Evaluation Team, n=56,715



Interested in reading the full report? Use the QR code, or go to <https://bit.ly/3v3IqPR>



**“We are here as a church to complement the work of the government on such issues as substance abuse, health challenges such as HIV and AIDS, [and] family morals, to mention just a few, as we all fight behavior change in our communities.”**

—Moses Munyunda, Namibia North Conference (NNC) president, about part of their “Go 1000” project. NNC partnered with Adventist World Radio and distributed 2,000 electronic gadgets called “Godpods” that were distributed to the second-largest population group of Namibia, the Rukwangali, in October. These devices are loaded with an audio Bible in the local language and in English, along with Voice of Prophecy Bible lessons and music in local languages, as well as an FM radio receiver.

# 40

The number of years that Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, has been running Project Impact. Every year, Union College takes a day off classes to spend on service projects in the nearby Lincoln community. This experience allows students to develop relationships with the community. During the past four decades, the program has expanded to include serving those who serve Lincoln all year—nearly 40 local nonprofit organizations.

“My dear brothers and sisters, let us commit ourselves to Christ and the proclamation of His last-day three angels’ messages, through the power of the Holy Spirit, as we approach the impending conflict and Christ’s soon coming.”

—Ted N. C. Wilson, General Conference president, during his Sabbath morning address to the 2021 Annual Council. This year’s meeting saw some members attend in-person while others attended the meetings virtually.

# 26

Number of persons baptized after the first evangelistic meetings held on the island of Araki, Vanuatu, from August 15 to 28. These meetings were an initiative of the Enra Basket ministry. The ministry was launched in 2019 by Franklyn William and his wife, Rose, church members from Espiritu Santo. The ministry combines caring for other church and community members to provide for their physical and spiritual needs.

“It is a miracle that a square in Poland’s second-largest city has been named after Michael Belina Czechowski, an Adventist.”

—Marek Rakowski, executive secretary of the Adventist Church in Poland, about the public square that was named after the first Seventh-day Adventist missionary to Europe as part of the 100th anniversary celebrations of the Adventist Church in the city. Czechowski, who was born near Krakow in 1818, became a Seventh-day Adventist after immigrating to the United States. On his own initiative, he returned to Europe in 1864, becoming the first unofficial Adventist missionary to the continent. ➔



Photo: Grzegorz Sroga

## Secretary Outlines Challenges and Blessings

By Marcos Paseggi, *Adventist World*

In his October 10 report to the 2021 Annual Council of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, secretary Erton Köhler said he wanted to share “the vision of a church bigger than the crisis of the pandemic.” He acknowledged that during the past 18 months the church has suffered, but that “it has reinvented itself.” He added, “As a church, we are learning to deal with this reality, looking for the best opportunities to serve, minister, and fulfill the mission in this context.”

### CHANGES IN EVANGELISM

The pandemic also affected how Adventists do evangelism, Köhler said, and how they minister to members and those in need. At the same time, it triggered great resilience and helped Adventists to change the way they do things. “We adapted, but most important, we kept serving the world,” he said, “and God blessed all our efforts.”

Despite extensive lockdowns and ever-present restrictions, he reported, the Adventist Church planted 1,736 new churches and baptized 781,389 people in 2020.

### HEALTH CARE AND COMMUNICATION

Köhler highlighted the vital role of Adventist hospitals, which in many places were at the front line of the fight against the pandemic. He also referred to the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), the humanitarian arm of the church, which in 2020 increased the funds invested and the number of projects and people positively impacted.

The pandemic also marked an impressive increase in communication reach, primarily through official online media outlets. The Adventist Church also launched various regional initiatives to support the mental health of churches and communities, he said.

### PUBLISHING AND EDUCATION

Köhler reported that the Publishing Department quickly adapted to the new reality to fulfill its mission. Adaptation included rapid development of digital platforms in various regions of the world to increase offers of Adventist literature.

The Adventist educational system was severely affected by

“God blessed our efforts.”  
—Erton Köhler

the pandemic in many places. “The need to adapt was enormous,” Köhler said, “requiring schools at all levels to switch to virtual classes almost overnight.”

### AT THE LOCAL CHURCH LEVEL

However, the most significant challenges were faced at the local church level. “Our ability to worship was the first and main problem when the pandemic started,” Köhler said, “but our members immediately switched to technology.” In many areas of the world people quickly got tired of online services and found new ways of being together. After just a few weeks some churches introduced the concept of drive-in churches, conducting services in church parking lots as they followed social distance protocols from their cars.

Local Adventist churches also stepped up to support those members and community residents who lost their jobs. Local church pastors also did a great job, Köhler reported. They were “brave and bold” before an unexpected crisis.

Despite all these shifts and the increasing role of social media in the life of local churches, Köhler emphasized that face-to-face interactions are important and should not be replaced. “Technology came to stay in the church’s life but not to replace the life of the church,” he said.

Another word that needs to be at the top of our agenda is commitment, he said. “We need to find ways of bringing members together, understanding they are the main asset of the church. Jesus came for people, led people, died for people, and will return to take people to heaven.” ©



General Conference secretary Erton Köhler presents the Secretary's Report during the 2021 Annual Council meetings.

Photo: Brent Hardinge / Adventist Media Exchange (CC BY 4.0)

# Church Financial Picture Improves

By Marcos Paseggi, *Adventist World*

The treasurer of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Paul Douglas, told members of the General Conference Executive Committee (GCEXCOM) that he was happy to report that the state of church finances at the end of August 2021 is much stronger than it was a year ago.

“Several areas on our financial statement show positive trends year over year,” Douglas said, “for which we can only give God the glory.” Douglas’s report, his first since he was elected to his new position in April 2021, was part of the second day of business sessions of the denomination’s Annual Council on October 11.

## POSITIVE TRENDS

Among the positive signs, Douglas mentioned a 26 percent increase in cash and investments (to US\$53 million) and a 31 percent and a 66 percent decrease in accounts and notes receivable, respectively.

Douglas also emphasized that tithes are 5.2 percent ahead of August last year (7.4 percent over the amounts budgeted). Offerings are ahead 14.2 percent, he added (30.4 percent over the amounts budgeted). Support expenses (those needed to operate the GC headquarters and conduct activities to serve the world field) are 8.4 percent less as of August 2021 than they were a year ago (16.9 percent less than budgeted).

According to Douglas, the positive trends will continue. “Many of the treasurers from our world divisions are reporting year-over-year increases in tithes and offerings,” he reported. Those increases are positive not only against 2020 (a very unusual year), but 2019, he said.

“We can only give God the glory.”  
—Paul Douglas



General Conference treasurer Paul Douglas shares that the state of church finances by the end of August 2021 was stronger than a year before.

Photo: Brent Hardinge / Adventist Media Exchange (CC BY 4.0)

## A CONSERVATIVE BUDGET

Undertreasurer Ray Wahlen then discussed the budget for 2022, which, according to Douglas, follows a conservative approach while keeping a focus on the church’s mission.

In his opening remarks Wahlen said he believes that God has brought the General Conference “to a position that we didn’t even dare to dream about at this time last year.” It is something, he acknowledged, that has eased the picture for the 2022 budget, though some challenges remain.

According to Wahlen, one of the items that will most impact the 2022 budget is that the percentage of funds the General Conference receives from the North American Division is projected to decrease from 49 to 46 percent (equivalent to \$13.5 million), primarily a result of scheduled tithe percentage reductions.

The office operating budget, or the money the world church headquarters spends to fund programs and activities onsite and around the world, has been capped at

\$45.6 million, which, according to policy, is 2 percent of gross world tithe from the previous two years. As a percentage, it has remained constant, Wahlen reported.

Finally, he explained that the result of the income and expense allocations is a projected loss of \$16.4 million, which results in a deliberate plan to absorb from GC reserves (or net assets) a significant portion of the negative impact of the recent financial disruption. It represents, however, a \$5.3 million improvement from 2021.

## MISSION, A PRIORITY

In the last part of his presentation, Douglas reminded Adventist leaders and church members that amid uncertainty and turmoil, the mission stays the same. “All church leaders and members must remain faithful in their support of God’s mission with their means,” he emphasized. “When we make God’s mission our number-one priority, He [will send] tokens of blessing to encourage our efforts.” ©

## Technology, a Key Player at Annual Council

By Marcos Paseggi, *Adventist World*

From October 7 to 13, around 340 General Conference Executive Committee (GCEXCOM) members met for a week of presentations and to discuss and vote on reports and initiatives of the world church and its departments. The meetings, known as the Annual Council of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, were different this year because of pandemic-related travel restrictions and other logistical challenges.

“This has only been possible thanks to [their] strong support.”

A synchronous display across more than a dozen time zones and in five languages demanded major technical conversations and trial runs with various actors, leaders said. “When we approached Zoom, they told us it was the first time they would attempt something like that,” associate secretary Hensley Mooroven told GCEXCOM mem-

**Most delegates followed the proceedings and voted items on Zoom.**

lie Castillo coordinated five virtual Zoom rooms or stations—one for each language. “These stations facilitate and help members and special guests access and follow the proceedings in the language of their choice,” she said.

Castillo shared that when members and invitees logged in, they could opt for one of the Zoom rooms. According to her, the English Zoom room had 172 members who were not onsite and followed the proceedings online in that language. “The Spanish room had 30 members, and there were 25 members in the French room, 15 in the Portuguese room, and 12 in the Russian room.”

She explained that when members raised their hands to comment, they were added to a queue on a screen available to the chair of a particular session. Once the chair acknowledged the member, he or she could start talking while all the others were muted. Everyone else, be it at the GC headquarters or around the world, could hear the member speak in English or any of the other four languages.

Castillo also explained how the chair and other members knew who was speaking. “When we place the name of the member in the queue, it acts as a badge,” she shared, “so as soon as they speak, the name and the region or entity the member is representing appears on the screen.”

Leaders believe this hybrid format could serve as a model for other church meetings in the future. “By now it is clear that it works,” they said. “We thank God and our technical support team for it.” ©



**Zoom Master Control Robert Baker monitors the connections during one of the sessions at the 2021 Annual Council.**

Photo: Brent Hardinge / Adventist Media Exchange (CC BY 4.0)

Sessions took place in a hybrid format, with only some GCEXCOM members attending in person at the Adventist Church headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, United States. Most members attended, discussed, and voted on issues via Zoom.

Church leaders said that the hybrid format, a first for the General Conference (GC), created significant logistical challenges and required carefully planned technical teamwork. “Our technical team has done a tremendous work,” GC president Ted N. C. Wilson told leaders following the public proceedings.

Leaders said they were happy to report that everything proceeded without a glitch.

The meetings were held in English. For years they have been translated to Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Russian to help non-English-speaking committee members understand and participate. Simultaneous interpreters—two per language—worked in eight different interpretations booths, Roger Esteves, who helped coordinate the service, said.

In the hall of the GC building outside the main auditorium, Mil-



# 5,455

Membership of the Middle East and North Africa Union Mission (MENAUM) as of June 30, 2021

**“Here in the 10/40 window we can personally and dramatically see how God uses the smallest of offerings to change the lives of those who seek Him. Every day we pray for God to pour out visions and dreams on the people of this territory, dreams leading people to ask a Seventh-day Adventist about Jesus and His soon return. Our prayers are being answered. It is the stories of changed lives that tell how much my offering still matters.”**

—Rick McEdward, Middle East and North Africa Union Mission president, in an article for Adventist Mission in which McEdward shared his journey in ministry and how Adventist Mission helps the mission field.

**“It is a great endeavor, what ADRA has done to support the Lebanese health-care sector and namely our two hospitals, who suffered more than many others and are still struggling in the aftermath of the explosion of August 4, 2020. The consequences of this disaster with the difficult economic and financial complications we are experiencing represent a serious threat. . . . We will use ADRA’s donated items to support our community and population who seek care at our medical center. . . . We highly appreciate ADRA’s contribution.”**

—Dimitri Haddad, chief administrative officer for Saint George Hospital University Medical Center, about the medical supplies the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) shipped. ADRA distributed more than \$US1 million worth of medical supplies.

**“We wanted to remind the Iraqi government and the people of Iraq that Christianity is the oldest religion in Iraq by presenting the beauty of old church buildings through the stamps. Christianity coexists with other religions in this country. It is not a foreign religion.”**

—Garabet Manskan Armenak, former general director of the Christian, Yzidi, and Sabian Mandaean Endowments Divan (Council) in Baghdad, Iraq. He initiated the project for the special stamps. The Baghdad Adventist Church is one of the eight churches in this stamp collection, which was included because it is part of the most beautiful churches in the city. ⬇



Photo: Sara Calado

Focus

# Conspiracies and *the* Conspiracy

How should we relate?

BY DAVID ASSCHERICK

It wasn't so long ago that the phrase "conspiracy theory" was one you'd hear only irregularly, if at all. Today it seems nearly everyone—from news anchors to your neighbor—is talking about conspiracy theories of various stripes and types. Even more concerning is the weaponization of the phrase—the charge that "they" (whoever "they" may be) are advocating for or otherwise advancing a "conspiracy theory." I believe these trends of both the mainstreaming and the weaponization of conspiracy theories should be concerning to Seventh-day Adventists.

Two decades ago I preached a sermon called "Jesus and Conspiracy Theories." I'd had one too many DVDs (this was pre-YouTube) exposing some dark conspiracy pressed urgently into my hand by a well-meaning saint. So, as a preacher, I did what I could: I wrote a sermon about it. Even as a new Christian, I sensed that a robust biblical faith was incompatible with the various conspiracy theories that were in vogue in the early 2000s. Happily, the sermon was always well received, and it seemed that cooler and wiser heads tended to prevail. But the early 2000s feel a long time ago, given the unrelenting pace of modernity. Since then, conspiracy theories have morphed and multiplied.

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES— THEN AND NOW

Today there are conspiracy theories on "the right" and "the left," and everywhere in between, too! Do you want to summarily dismiss and even discredit someone? Simple. Call them a conspiracy theorist. *Voilà*. It's as easy as that.

Not very long ago the main conspiracy theories in circulation were such things as "Who killed John F. Kennedy?"; "Was 9/11 an inside job?"; or "Did NASA fake the moon landing?" Those days feel almost tranquil by current standards. In 2021, there's seemingly a conspiracy theory to fit every political, social, medical, and finan-



cial situation. Conspiracies abound regarding everything from COVID-19 and vaccines to such billionaires as Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos, to geopolitical alliances, to the flat earth, to U.S. presidential elections, to the government controlling the weather, to QAnon, to airplane “chemtrails,” to UFOs, etc.

The Internet has created the ideal climate for the proliferation of conspiracy theories by connecting fringe ideas to people and people to fringe ideas. This has given rise to the phenomenon known as “trutherism.” “Trutherism” is the idea that certain truths are being concealed from the public knowledge by a grand and orchestrated

conspiracy theory. Worryingly, this is similar to first-century Gnosticism, which significantly threatened the early church. In both cases, the initiated know what is really going on, while the ignorant masses don’t. This desire to be “in the know” (a phrase belonging to the Gnostic dictionary) has an undeniable and, for some, irresistible allure.

Mainstreamers usually dismiss truthers, and truthers dismiss mainstreamers. But strangely, these categories can easily blur and shift, depending on the subject or situation. Since there are so many conspiracy theories to choose from, almost everyone can find one, or more, such theories that appeal to them. Polarization and partisanship prevail. Ideological and religious tribalism becomes the rule rather than the exception.

### JESUS AND CONSPIRACIES

So how should we relate to this as Christians? The answer to this crucial and timely question is found by looking at Jesus. When Jesus was on earth, *He too* was surrounded by conspiracies. Not just conspiracy theories, but actual conspiracies. I can think of at least four.

**1. The Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees were conspiring together to kill Jesus:** The Pharisees, who were religious traditionalists, were the ideological enemies of the Sadducees—the modernists—who were the ruling, priestly class positioned and privileged as such by Rome itself. But their mutual hatred of the outsider Jesus brought them together to plot and plan His demise (John 11:45-57; Matt. 12:14; 26:3-5; 27:1, 2).

**2. Herod and the Herodians wanted Jesus dead and conspired with the Pharisees to kill Him:** Like the Sadducees, the Herodians were unlikely allies of the Pharisees. This Jewish political party

avored the rule of King Herod Antipas, the ruler who had John the Baptist beheaded (Matt. 14:1-12). The Herodians are mentioned three times in the Gospels (Matt. 22:16; Mark 3:6; 12:13) and each time they are described as conspiring to trick and trap Jesus. “And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him” (Mark 3:6).

**3. Judas Iscariot conspired to betray Jesus into the hands of His enemies:** Not only were hostile outside forces plotting against Jesus, but one of His own disciples conspired to betray Him to His enemies (cf. Luke 22:4-6). J. B. Phillips’ translation of Luke 22:3 is particularly chilling: “Then a diabolical plan came into the mind of Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve.”<sup>1</sup> There it is: “A diabolical plan,” that is, a conspiracy. A member of Jesus’ inner sanctum was conspiring against Him, and Jesus knew it.

**4. Behind it all, Satan was conspiring against God’s goodness and government:** The conspiracy *behind* all the other conspiracies was more than human, more than natural. One of God’s own high-ranking angels, Lucifer, had defected and rebelled against God’s goodness and government. This rebellion is reflected in numerous biblical passages (Gen. 3; Isa. 14:12-17; Eze. 28:12-19; Job 1; 2; Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 10:18; John 12:31, 32; Rev. 12). It forms the backdrop for the Great Controversy motif found from Genesis to Revelation. Lucifer’s rebellion constitutes the primary conspiracy that Jesus came to combat and ultimately conquer. I believe this satanic conspiracy against God’s goodness and government is the capital “C” Conspiracy. *All* other conspiracies—whether real or merely alleged or imagined—are little “c” conspiracies.

## HOW DID JESUS RESPOND?

Jesus was acutely aware that nefarious forces were at work to thwart His efforts in fulfilling God's redemptive plan. How did Jesus relate to these cruel conspiracies? We find an excellent example in Luke 13. Remember, my thesis is that we should follow Jesus' own example in relating to evil and manipulative conspiracies, both actual and alleged.

This chapter opens with an ominous tone: "There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" (verse 1). This dark passage seems to suggest that Pontius Pilate, the infamous Roman governor, and no friend of the Jews, had Jewish pilgrims slain while they were in the act of offering their sacrifices in the temple. Apparently, their own blood was mingled with that of their sanctuary sacrifices. This terrible scene would have been utterly discouraging and repulsive to any Jew. Jesus' referencing it seems to suggest that this was a recent event, perhaps even "breaking news." The message is clear: it could be unsafe to be a devout Jew in a Roman world.

Following Luke's ominous opening, a little later in the chapter we come to verse 31: "On that very day some Pharisees came, saying to Him, 'Get out and depart from here, for Herod wants to kill You.'" Though a Jew, Herod wielded the power of Rome as a vassal ruler over Galilee and surrounding regions. Like cruel Pilate in the opening of the chapter, unscrupulous Herod was undoubtedly willing to eliminate political enemies, overly devout Jews, or would-be messiahs. Recall that the king's father, Herod the Great, had once ordered the destruction of all the Jewish males 2 years old and under in Bethlehem and the

surrounding area (Matt. 2:16-18). Clearly Herod and his followers were a force to be reckoned with.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees' warning was perfect. It was remarkably brave and profoundly revealing. "He replied, 'Go tell that fox, "I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal"' (Luke 13:32, NIV). Jesus' flat dismissiveness of the not-so-veiled threat of conspiratorial violence from a ruthless and corrupt government is immensely instructive for us today. He basically says, "So what, I've got work to do." Jesus' response continues in verse 33: "In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day" (NIV).

Let's take a closer look at Jesus' words. Each phrase, although brief, reveals much about how Jesus related to conspiratorial threats.

**"Go tell that fox."** Here Jesus reveals that He is *aware* of Herod's reported threats and intents. He is hardly absorbed with the situation, though He understands it. This is an important distinction. Jesus' use of the image of a fox communicates that He is aware of Herod's reputation for cleverness and cruelty, but is nevertheless unmoved, as the other key phrases reveal.

**"I will reach my goal."** Jesus is marching to a different Drummer. Jesus' identity and mission transcend Herod's conspiring just as the sun soars incomprehensibly high above the clouds. Jesus is on a mission, and there is nothing Herod can do to stop Him.

**"In any case."** A similar phrase would be "Well, nevertheless" or "Be that as it may." Jesus' focused dismissiveness is on full display here. This dismissiveness would not have been lost on the Pharisee messengers, His own disciples, or the ever-thronging crowd, who likely expected Jesus to retreat in fear.

**"I must press on."** Jesus is operating on an entirely different level than His enemies. His identity and mission utterly transcend the apparently urgent and dangerous conspiracies swirling around Him.

Let's return to our earlier question: How should a Christian relate to all this? The short answer, and the best answer, is: What else? *As Jesus did.*

Jesus understood the difference between conspiracies and *the* Conspiracy. He kept the big picture big. Was Jesus aware of the conspiracies that surrounded Him? Of course He was. But was He consumed by them? Quite the opposite. As we have noted, He was essentially dismissive of their *relative* significance when contrasted with His infinitely more important mission and identity.

Jesus' words in another conversation with the Pharisees offer more insights: "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things. And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him" (John 8:28, 29). Jesus was on a very specific mission. He lived a life of uninterrupted worship and loyalty—always seeking to "please" His Father. And He is our unflinching example.

## WHAT ABOUT US?

Are some of today's conspiracies real? Undoubtedly. Are others fanciful, speculative, and ultimately untrue? Undoubtedly. Neither of these answers should be surprising to the biblically literate Christian. The world is fallen. Corruption, greed, and injustice are the rule, not the exception. As Paul reminded young Timothy: "But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13, NKJV). We

live in a time, not unlike most of history, when power—military, financial, societal, institutional—is consolidated in the hands of a few. This being the case, conspiracies and injustice should be *expected*. We should not be surprised that unconverted and unscrupulous people crave power and control. They will work through any available means—illegal, unethical, or otherwise—to increase their power and control. This is the world we live in. But it’s also the world Jesus came to illumine and save.


Evil is real, but so are righteousness, grace, and mercy. Jesus has established a kingdom on earth built on the immovable foundation of God’s goodness and government. We are called to be earthly citizens of that heavenly kingdom, to be *in* but not *of* the world (John 17:11, 14-16).

We are called to resist the allure of the ever-changing and often all-consuming lower “c” conspiracies and remember, as Jesus Himself did, to calibrate our identity and mission according to the capital “C” Conspiracy. Lucifer launched a cruel conspiracy in heaven’s own courts, seeking to malign the loving and just character of God and His government. But God “conspired” to win the war with love.

#### WRAP-UP

To summarize, here are some simple tips to help you relate to the conspiracy theories you encounter:

**1** As a Christian, remember *who* you are and *why* you’re here. Keep your God-given identity and mission in sharp focus. Jesus knew *who* He was and *why* He was here (cf. Luke 19:10; Matt. 20:28). We should too! Consider that Jesus was so focused and committed to His life’s work that He could say at in His early 30s, “I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the



## Jesus understood the difference between conspiracies and *the* Conspiracy. He kept the big picture big.

work which You have given Me to do” (John 17:4)!

**2** Keep the big picture big. Yes, some conspiracies may be more than just theories, but as Bible believers, we should be focused primarily on *the* great conspiracy between good and evil. This is the only conspiracy we should be absorbed with.

**3** Obsession with unprovable allegations and never-ending speculation can lead one down a rabbit hole that is not easily escaped. Remember the church’s prophetic calling and message. As students of Daniel and Revelation, we are privileged to know what the real issues are and, by extension, what they aren’t. Stay riveted to the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14.

**4** Think evangelistically, not combatively. We are not called to win arguments, but to win hearts and souls to the wonder, beauty, and righteousness of God as revealed in His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

I believe Ellen White said it best when she essentially summarized

all four of these points in the following statement. This is a good one to ponder, memorize, and share: “In a special sense Seventh-day Adventists have been set in the world as watchmen and light-bearers. To them has been entrusted the last warning for a perishing world. On them is shining wonderful light from the Word of God. They have been given a work of the most solemn import—the proclamation of the first, second, and third angels’ messages. There is no other work of so great importance. They are to allow nothing else to absorb their attention.”<sup>2</sup> ©

<sup>1</sup> From J. B. Phillips: *The New Testament in Modern English*, © J. B. Phillips 1958. Used by permission of Macmillan Publishing Co.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), p. 119.

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Focus

# Can We Talk?

BY CARLOS FAYARD

How to avoid useless debate and find balance between conviction and kindness.

**H**ave you found yourself frustrated when reading, hearing, or talking on a topic that “pushes your buttons”? If so, you are not alone. It seems as if there is no dialogue anymore. Or at least, conversation with a civilized tone feels rare. I do not mean talk about the weather or your favorite food. Talk about politics, religion, and now the pandemic engenders fiery exchanges. Add to the topic our use of social media, and you soon have a wildfire.

Sound bites, anonymity, and the confusing overabundance of information from different sources—each of them contribute to strong proclamations of conviction, even when what is offered is just an opinion.

The church and its members are no exception. Can we talk when positions seem to you to be extreme? Can we talk when what you hear appears to be a conspiracy theory? Can we avoid useless debate? Can we find a balance between honest conviction and kindness? Of course we can.

## TALKING PAST EACH OTHER

Truth be told, we can maintain a civilized tone and still talk past each other. I remember watching a church business session online in which a vote was to be taken on a topic that had divided the church for years. Delegates made their points without any acknowledgment as to the “other side’s” value or perspective. *These people need a family therapist more than a session chair*, I thought. The vote was taken, and one side had more votes than the other. However, was there a sense that we were still part of the same family? I didn’t think so.

Perhaps it might be helpful to consider an extreme case example to highlight some of the dynamics you may want to take into consideration before you have a conversation: conspiracy theories. According to psychologist Karen Douglas, conspiracy beliefs are “attempts to explain the ultimate cause of an event . . . as a secret plot by a covert alliance of powerful individuals or organizations, rather than as an overt activity or natural occurrence.” She adds, “It can be difficult to persuasively present evidence to refute these types of ideas, especially because experts are often seen as part of the conspiracy, and new pieces of contrary evidence can be rationalized into an existing narrative.”<sup>1</sup>

A brain-imaging study showed that the cerebral regions responsible for representing different perspectives tend to shut down when beliefs are held tightly.<sup>2</sup> Douglas identified the drivers for conspiracy theories: *epistemic* (what the narrative explains), *existential* (how critical it is to core values, and even survival), and *social* (how it gives the person a



sense of belonging). If you are going to enter an honest and respectful conversation, particularly with someone you love, it might be helpful to keep these drivers in mind.

### TALKING TO ONE ANOTHER

Ellen G. White wrote, “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’”<sup>3</sup> Not all conversations are meant to persuade others, but ideally, all conversations should have the elements mentioned in this beautiful quote. When you mingle with others in a respectful way, you are implicitly addressing the *social* driver of a person’s belief system. When you desire their good, you are connecting with the *existential* component.

If the difficult conversation is with someone you are close to and you wish to preserve the relationship, you may want to practice the recommendations made by psychiatrist David Burns. He calls them “the

five secrets of effective communication.”<sup>4</sup> First, Burns advises to listen carefully before offering your opinion, and work hard to honestly find as much common ground as possible. Then he suggests trying to see from the other person’s perspective, as you seek to understand the experiences that have shaped the other person’s life. Third, gently ask questions that can help you get an understanding about the other person’s thinking. Fourth, own your experience—instead of saying “you,” use “I” statements to convey what you feel. Finally, he reminds us to pepper the conversation with genuinely positive comments about the other person’s perspective as you convey your perspective.

### WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT?

However much you may try to talk to and convince someone who holds views you perceive as extreme or conspiratorial, you may not succeed. It was not for lack of trying or compassion that Jesus Himself could not hold productive conversations with individuals who held extreme views, such as the Pharisees (see, for instance, Matt. 3:7; 19:3; 23:15, 23, 25). The book of Proverbs contains clear advice about how much of your time you need to spend on those whose minds are closed (see, for instance, Prov. 14:3-13). Ecclesiastes reminds us that “to everything there is a season” (Eccl. 3:1).

Here are a few suggestions. Before you engage, it might be helpful to know your own “buttons.” There may be topics dear to you that do not merit strong reactions. Consider also how central to your values and faith are the issues of disagreement. Another good piece of advice is to focus on the big picture and not yourself. Sometimes the escalation to an argument may be more about your feelings than being right.

It’s usually also helpful to determine what is more important to you: either stay in grace and be

## When you mingle with others in a respectful way, you are implicitly addressing the social driver of a person’s belief system.

consistent with the heart of your Christian faith, or have “the last word.” Finally, keep in mind that it is better to be “a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city” (Prov. 16:32, NIV).

Talking together as Christians will take more than awareness and understanding of the psychology of conspiracy theories or even the “right” technique for effective communication. We need the mind “which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). By His grace we can be united with Christ, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind, doing nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, “but in lowliness of mind [esteeming] others better than [ourselves],” not looking out “only for [our] own interests, but also for the interests of others” (see Phil. 2:1-11). ©

<sup>1</sup> “Speaking of Psychology: Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories,” available at <https://www.apa.org/research/action/speaking-of-psychology/conspiracy-theories>.

<sup>2</sup> M. Schurz et al., “Common Brain Areas Engaged in False Belief Reasoning and Visual Perspective Taking: A Meta-analysis of Functional Brain Imaging Studies,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* (2013), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00712>.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1905), p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> D. Burns, *Feeling Good Together: The Secret to Making Troubled Relationships Work* (New York: Broadway Books, 2008), pp. 95-175.

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# Please, Let's Stop the Food Wars!

Let kindness prevail.

BY FRED HARDINGE

**A**s the guest preacher at a country church in North America, I was invited to eat lunch with the members at the fellowship meal. After the worship service I went downstairs to the fellowship hall. The woman in charge of organizing the meal requested that I come to the front of the line and ask God to bless the food. As I opened my eyes following the prayer, a plate was held in front of me, and it was clear that the woman wanted me to be the first through the line.

I felt uncomfortable with this because several children who were far hungrier than I were lined up behind me; but reluctantly I took the plate and moved forward down the table. As I did so, the woman pointed to the first dish and in a stage whisper dripping with criticism that everyone in the room could hear, she said, "This dish has *r-e-a-l c-h-e-e-s-e* in it."

Had nothing been said, I probably would have skipped this dish, as it wasn't a favorite of mine. Now every eye was watching to see what I would do. While tempted to pass it by, I was impressed to take a small spoonful. As I did, the woman who'd pointed it out to me loudly exclaimed, "Oh, no!"

## **SMALL GESTURE—BIG DIFFERENCE**

I filled my plate from the many delicious, healthful dishes available and enjoyed sweet fellowship with the people I sat with at one of the tables. Most of the group was already gone by the time I left the room, but as I entered the hallway, I noticed a woman quietly weeping.

No pastor or elder was present, so I asked her if she needed some help. More tears coursed down her cheeks as she said, "I'm waiting for you, Dr. Hardinge! I'm the person who made that dish with real cheese. I was just baptized a few weeks ago, and this is the third time

something negative has been said about the food I've brought. I didn't include the ham that the recipe called for, so why are the people critical?"

We walked upstairs to the foyer to talk. What had happened was inexcusable, but at least it provided me an opportunity to share with this dear sister the purpose, beauty, and balance found in the Seventh-day Adventist health message.

We prayed together, and she thanked me for taking the time to talk with her. Then she said tearfully, "I told my husband this morning that if it happened again, I would never come back to this church. But you took a spoonful of it and ate it, and then you talked with me. I will be coming back!"

## **BE A FRIEND**

About 18 months later I talked with the pastor about the incident, and I learned that his wife had made a point of befriending the woman and had given her some cooking lessons in their home. Today she is a solid, faithful member of the church—and is now the one in charge of potlucks! Even better, her husband has since been baptized.

What a difference one small serving made! Praise God! We must always ask ourselves, "Do we love people more than we love health principles?"

## **A PRECIOUS HEALTH MESSAGE**

As Seventh-day Adventists, we've been blessed with a most precious message regarding health. It was given not only for our own personal health and well-being, but equally for the purpose of sharing healthful-living principles with others in a way that will attract them to Jesus Christ and His soon return. The primary goal of health





ministry activities is to lead people to Jesus as the agent of transformation in their lives. People are to be taught that it's the power of God that provides a miraculous change in the life.

Earnest health reformers can learn much from Joseph Bates, one of our early pioneers. Even prior to the disappointment of 1844, the crusty old sea captain had given up alcohol, tobacco, rich foods, and grease, and had become a vegetarian. D. E. Robinson in his book *The Story of Our Health Message* said this of Bates:

"Sometimes his friends would ask him why he did not partake of flesh meat, or grease, or highly spiced foods; and he would quietly reply, 'I have eaten my share of them.' He did not make prominent in public or in private his views of proper diet unless asked about them. Naturally he was gratified when many of his fellow laborers at a later date adopted and began to teach the principles of health reform. He then heartily joined them in speaking freely upon the subject."<sup>1</sup>

Extreme views and practices of health reform have plagued our church from the earliest times. This caused Ellen White to write, "These extremists do more harm in a few months than they can undo in a lifetime. They are engaged in a work which Satan loves to see go on."<sup>2</sup> It seems there are always some people who take good and correct principles to the extreme.

### MAINTAINING BALANCE

Ellen White was very balanced and loving in her outlook. In a sermon preached on May 16, 1884, she said, "We don't make the health reform an iron bedstead, cutting people off or stretching them out to fit it. One person cannot be a standard for everybody else. What we want is a little sprinkling of good common sense.

Don't be extremists. If you err, it would be better to err on the side of the people than on the side where you cannot reach them."<sup>3</sup>

Paul pleaded for the same! "So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up. Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat" (Rom. 14:19, 20).<sup>4</sup>

"In teaching health reform, as in all other gospel work, we are to meet the people where they are. Until we can teach them how to prepare health reform foods that are palatable, nourishing, and yet inexpensive, we are not at liberty to present the most advanced propositions regarding health reform diet."<sup>5</sup> Oh, that all would exhibit this balance and understanding.

You can visit the General Conference Nutrition Council site<sup>6</sup> for valuable and balanced information on nutrition—and even on potlucks!<sup>7</sup>

Health reformers should always bear in mind the words of Paul: "*Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone*" (Col. 4:6). ©

<sup>1</sup> Dores E. Robinson, *The Story of Our Health Message* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1943, 1955), p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Health* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1923), p. 154.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *Sermons and Talks* (Silver Spring, Md.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), vol. 1, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 7, p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.healthministries.com/gcnc/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.healthministries.com/planning-fellowship-meals/>

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Global View

# Jesus and Doctrine:

Inseparably  
United

Let's face it: "Doctrine" is not a very popular word today. There are movements that want to minimize doctrine and emphasize Jesus only. For some, doctrine conjures up the idea of cold church creeds, stale traditions, boring discourses, and "proof-texting"

While some contend that Jesus and doctrine should not, cannot, be spoken of in the same breath, Scripture makes plain that Jesus and doctrine—meaning Jesus and His teachings—are inseparable. To take one away is to take away both.<sup>1</sup>

Almost everything we know about Jesus comes from the Bible, especially the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. And a lot of that content consists of His teachings. The careful reader of the Gospels recognizes they are saturated with the teachings of Jesus, and that it is impossible to separate what Jesus did from what Jesus taught, because His whole life is a lesson book. If we don't know and accept Jesus' teachings, how can we really claim to know Him?

Some may be surprised that the early church emphasized doctrine. The thousands baptized on the day of Pentecost "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship" (Acts 2:42). This emphasis on doctrine they learned from Jesus Himself (see Luke 24:27, 44).

## EVERY DOCTRINE CHRIST-CENTERED

We are told, "Every true doctrine makes Christ the center, every precept receives force from His words."<sup>2</sup> Some might wonder if that can really be said about *every* doctrine of Seventh-day Adventists. Let's look at three doctrines as examples, showing how Jesus is at the heart of each:<sup>3</sup>

**The Remnant.** Is Jesus really at the center of our doctrine of the remnant? Absolutely. Let's keep in mind that the entire book of Revelation was revealed to John *by Jesus* (Rev. 1:1), and therefore Jesus teaches us what the two distinguishing characteristics of the remnant are—they "keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 12:17). Several other passages describe in symbolic terms the events leading to the rise of the remnant (Rev. 10:1-11:1) and the message they proclaim (Rev. 14:6-12; 18:1-4). In essence, that message, which includes "the everlasting gospel," applies Jesus' Great Commission, given to the early Christians (Matt. 28:18-20), to an end-time setting. It also makes clear that "the faith of Jesus" is the only way they can keep the commandments of God (Rev. 14:12). In this verse, Jesus answers a question He had asked but left unanswered at the time: "When the Son of Man

comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). There will be a people of faith on the earth. Of the remnant who live to see Jesus come (cf. Rev. 14:14-16), John is told, “Here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12).

**The Sabbath.** A crucial part of this final message is the Sabbath because we are commanded to “worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water” (Rev. 14:7). This is an almost word-for-word quotation of the Sabbath commandment (see Ex. 20:11). Who created all things? According to the New Testament, Jesus did (John 1:3). “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16). It was Jesus who finished the work of Creation in six days and rested on the seventh day (cf. Gen. 2:1-3).

According to the Gospel of John, as Jesus completed His saving work on the cross that Friday afternoon, “He said, ‘It is finished!’” and rested in the tomb over the Sabbath (John 19:30-42), rising from the dead on “the first day of the week” (John 20:1). So the Sabbath has been doubly blessed by Jesus—first at Creation and then at the cross. Far from being legalistic, keeping the Sabbath is the most *Christ-centered, gospel-oriented* thing we can do! It symbolizes that, just as we did not create ourselves (Ps. 100:3), we cannot save ourselves either: “So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his” (Heb. 4:9, 10, ESV).<sup>4</sup>

**The Sanctuary.** We can see now that keeping the Sabbath is an important part of the everlasting gospel. But how is it connected with Christ’s ministry in the heavenly

sanctuary and why is it singled out as part of the end-time message to be given just before He comes again?

First, this message results in a group who “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.” Second, it directs our attention to Jesus’ work of judgment (Rev. 14:7; cf. John 5:22) in the most holy place of the heavenly sanctuary, where the commandments of God are enshrined (Rev. 11:19). Third, by that law all will be judged (James 2:12; Eccl. 12:13, 14). When the issue of true versus false worship is brought clearly to the forefront, the saved at the end of time will be those who worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24), shown by their observance of the true Sabbath, which is His seal (Rev. 7:2-4; 14:1), while the lost will worship the beast and receive his mark (Rev. 14:9-11).

The fourth reason is that Jesus’ work in the heavenly sanctuary corresponds to the work done by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. This was the only day of the year, other than the weekly Sabbath, on which the Israelites were required to rest completely from all their work (Lev. 23:26-32). Just as the Sabbath points us to Jesus’ work, so every phase of the ministry in the earthly sanctuary points to Jesus (see 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 John 1:9; 2:1). Every phase is *Christ’s* work and *His* righteousness, *not* our own.

### THE TRUTH AS IT IS IN JESUS

Some might call this presentation of Bible texts in support of each doctrine proof-texting. But it is really just what has been “taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus” (Eph. 4:21). Without a clear understanding of this “truth as it is in Jesus,” we have only a superficial Christianity and little genuine commitment. That is why, on the road to Emmaus, rather than just *telling* the disciples who He was, Jesus *showed* them from the Scriptures (Luke 24:27). He cited texts from the Old Testament

## “If we don’t know and accept Jesus’ teachings, how can we really claim to know Him?”

to prove His points, as did all the New Testament writers. Were Jesus and the apostles proof-texting? Of course not, because they always quote Scripture in harmony with its original intention. In describing the Christ-centered focus of these doctrines, we have simply followed Jesus’ method of interpreting Scripture to show how they all revolve around Him.

The entire Bible is a witness as to who Jesus is. Jesus *is* the living Word to which His written Word witnesses. The only way to distinguish the real Jesus from a fake Jesus is by “the word of truth” (Ps. 119:43; 2 Cor. 6:7; Eph. 1:13; 2 Tim. 2:15; James 1:18), inspired by the God of truth “with whom is no variability, neither shadow of turning” (James 1:17, KJV). That is why God urges us to be faithful to the Word: “Give diligence to present yourself approved by God, a workman who doesn’t need to be ashamed, properly handling the Word of Truth” (2 Tim. 2:15, WEB).<sup>5</sup> ©

<sup>1</sup> This article is adapted from Wahlen’s chapter in the forthcoming book *Prophetic Call to Faithfulness*, © 2022, Review and Herald Publishing Association and Hart Research Center. Used by permission.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 6, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> A description of 28 Bible doctrines held by Seventh-day Adventists is available at [www.adventist.org](http://www.adventist.org).

<sup>4</sup> Scripture quotations marked ESV are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>5</sup> Texts credited to WEB are from the *World English Bible*, published in 2000. The *World English Bible* is an update of the American Standard Version of 1901, and is in public domain.

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Faith in Action

# Triumph Over Tragedy

God makes  
the difference.

*“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you” (Jer. 1:5).*

I’m confident that God is my Creator and that He’s been with me throughout my life. He’s given me power to overcome obstacles and has comforted and strengthened me during the painful seasons of my journey.

## EARLY LIFE

I was born and raised in Mdantsane, South Africa, the youngest of six children and the only daughter. My father was not like other fathers. He would be gone for long periods of time. When I grew older, I realized that he was actually living elsewhere and not with us as a family.

My mom never discussed Father with us children; she just quietly took care of us and worked hard to put food on the table. She sold pancakes and ginger beer at the local market, and we children would help to carry baskets of these items to market each morning before we went to school.

I was a good student at school and attended church each week, but I became involved with kids who weren’t living a Christian lifestyle, and joined in their activities. My mother, however, did her best to keep me away from them and from harmful practices.

## THE ASSAULT

Then tragedy struck. It was May 1996, and I was a young teenager in high school. I remember the day as if it were yesterday. It was early evening but already dark outside. I was walking home from the local supermarket when three young men grabbed me and dragged me behind a bush. One

was holding a gun and one a knife. They took turns raping me, and then argued whether to kill me. The one with no weapon told me to run home.

I raced home and found my father there. I didn't tell him or my mom what had happened and instead went straight to bed. Soon, however, police officers knocked on our door. Apparently someone had seen what had happened and reported it to the police. But when the officers asked if the boys did anything to me, I replied, "No." I wasn't lying; I'd blocked the traumatic experience from my mind and didn't remember it at all. Then for some reason, after the police left, my parents beat me, and I ended up sleeping in the bathroom.

The next morning the boy who had reported the attack came again with the police and asked the same question. Again, I answered, "No." Now that I'm a parent, I realize that my parents should have contacted a professional counselor to talk with me to determine what had really happened.

### REMEMBERING

Fast-forward four years. I was with friends, and we were discussing rape and other related issues. I said such things as "No one is the cause of their being raped; no one invites someone to rape her based on what she's wearing"—and then I collapsed. My friends took me to a nearby hospital, where I was treated for shock and trauma.

The memory of what had happened to me that night in 1996 came flooding back as vividly as if it had just happened. Every detail, even the smell of those who'd raped me, filled my mind and nose. I was a mess emotionally and felt terrified.

I finally told my mother and family about being raped. That was when I began my healing journey.

At first I thought those boys had taken away four years of my life, but then I realized that God had sustained my life throughout those years. He'd shielded me from the knife and gun the boys carried, and gave me strength to continue by blocking the tragedy from my mind until I was able to face it.

I began sharing my story with others. Some responded with cruelty that deeply pierced my heart. Others were compassionate and comforting.

### MOVING FORWARD

When it came time to go to college, my father promised to pay my tuition. In the end, however, he wouldn't provide the money. Instead he physically attacked me, and I feared for my life.

I had to drop out of college because of a lack of funds, but God didn't give up on me. James 1:12 gave me encouragement: "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (NIV).

The Lord then opened the heart of one of my cousins, who paid my college tuition fees for three years, and I completed my national diploma.

### A RAINBOW APPEARS

When I graduated, my mom was overwhelmed with joy, and we rejoiced over what had been achieved.

In time, I received a call asking me to apply for a job in the finance section of the Department of Health in Bisho, the capital of the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. That's when the rainbow appeared in my life. I was now able to provide for my mother financially.

God's blessings continued. I met and married my handsome and warmhearted husband, Sakhi,

**I began sharing my story with others. Some responded with cruelty that deeply pierced my heart. Others were compassionate and comforting.**

and we're now blessed with three wonderful boys. We began attending the local Seventh-day Adventist church and were baptized.

My life journey hasn't been easy, but God has given me strength and courage to triumph over hardships. He's also helped me to learn to forgive. I'm so grateful for the healing and forgiveness that Jesus offers to me, and I now realize that forgiving others helps us to heal personally as well.

God doesn't give up on or leave His people. He loves us and does what's best for us. I praise Him every day for His love, mercies, and forgiveness.

*"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Cor. 1:3, 4, NIV). ©*

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**Khanyi Blayi** is married to her husband, Sakhi, and the couple has three sons: Zingce, Ntsika, and Awande. The family lives in **East London, Eastern Cape, in South Africa.**



**What We Believe**

*The Son*

# The Son of Light and Love

His light still changes lives.

**W**hat happened in heaven on the day that Gabriel spoke to Mary? Gabriel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.’ . . . ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God’ (Luke 1:30-35, NRSV).

The majestic, glorious, and all-powerful member of the divine Trinity was about to become the Son for us and with us. He who was robed and resplendent in the dazzling light of heaven could see the dark and humiliating future that awaited Him on our broken planet. What must He have felt as He said goodbye to

perfect and magnificent beings in heaven, who adored and worshipped Him? What went through His mind and heart as He and His beloved Father embraced before He disappeared into the silent darkness of Mary’s womb for nine months?

## **THE MYSTERY OF THE GOD-MAN**

At the moment of conception He was alive in a new form, visible only to God. The Son of God was becoming the Son of Man. The infinitely old “I AM,” the Creator, was becoming a newly created baby. The Word was becoming flesh. The Light was coming to shine in the darkness. He was coming to His own, but would they receive Him? Would we receive Him?

God’s amazing gift to our world of His only beloved

Son so that “whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, NIV) explodes the boundaries of what we can express by the word “love.” This is a kind of self-sacrificing unselfishness that’s not natural to us. It appears strange, foreign, and mysterious, but overpoweringly desirable as something that we once had but lost after the Fall. That Jesus Christ was willing to give up the glory and security of heaven, where He was one with God, and become a human being already shows unfathomable humility that rebukes our self-absorption.

Choosing to be born into poverty as the son of Mary and Joseph and growing up in a poor neighborhood of Nazareth demonstrates Christ’s humility. But His choice to display God’s full justice while granting full mercy by suffering the most degrading and cursed death on a cross goes beyond our human understanding of humility to something that words cannot express (Phil. 2:5, 8; Isa. 53:4, 5). By doing this, Jesus showed us what God’s love, which we are to emulate, is made of: “To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8, NRSV).

### THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

All things were created through Christ, the living Word (John 1:1-5). The first thing created on this earth by His word was light (Gen. 1:3). Light is necessary for human, animal, and plant life to exist. But we need more than physical light. We need the light of God’s love, the essence of His character (1 John 4:8, 16), which He shows to us through the life of His Son, “the light of the world” (John 9:5). “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (John 1:4, NRSV). This is the light that God wants to share with us through His Son, guiding us back to Him: the glorious brilliance of who He is. As Isaiah put it: “Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord” (Isa. 2:5, NIV). But the sharing of His glorious character (compare Ex. 34:6, 7) is more than showing—it is becoming. By experiencing Him—the source of light, which is love—we can reflect it from within us.

The radiant light of the Son is a blinding force that breaks through the encrusted, hardened heart of humanity. The murderous Saul of Tarsus was stunned by the light of Jesus Christ (Acts 22:6-8). In that blinding moment of encountering the One he had misjudged to be his enemy, the persecutor of Christ’s followers met his Savior. Saul was told to get up, and, as Isaiah prophesied that God’s people

## My heart was heavy with a desperate need to know that God had not abandoned me.

should, “Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you” (Isa. 60:1). In every encounter with Christ we experience the light of His love, which transforms us as it changed Saul, who became the apostle Paul. If we choose to live in Christ’s light as Paul did, our interactions with others will also be driven by God’s love, as John explains: “Anyone who loves their brother and sisters lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble” (1 John 2:10, NIV).

### HIS LIGHT STILL SHINES TODAY

God’s light continues to shine today. At a very difficult time in my late teens God parted the heavens for a brief moment and spoke to me. I was riding in a rickshaw in Pune, India, on my way to town. My heart was heavy with a desperate need to know that God had not abandoned me. My face was upraised to God in prayer when I was suddenly surrounded and engulfed by the blazing glory of God’s presence in a visible and overwhelming encounter with the Divine. I heard God’s voice talking to me, not audibly, but clearly in my heart. I immediately recognized the indescribable, iridescent rays of light with the color of a pastel rainbow as the glorious presence of God. That encounter, a powerful outflowing of God’s love, has stayed with me ever since. It continues to be an assurance that God really does hear me when I cry to Him.

Christ invites us to join Him in reflecting His perfect light and love. He says, “You are the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14). In reflecting the light and love of the Son, we will let our light shine in such a way that others will know that we have been with Jesus. They will see the way we live, and they will glorify our heavenly Father, who is in heaven (cf. Matt. 5:16). ©

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**M**odern biblical scholars have offered many suggestions as to what idea represents the theological “center” of the Scriptures. Some have said it is the covenant; others believe it is God as Lord. Some argue it is faith; righteousness; a four-part combination of deliverance, community, knowledge of God, and abundant life; or the mission of God. Other scholars say there is no central theme. With so many ideas swirling about, how does one decide which, if any, is correct?

In a regular nonfiction book, you discover the main idea by reading its introduction and conclusion. Why not with the Bible? God inspired the Bible to be written so it could be understood. Would He not have used a way familiar to us in reading other books to clarify its major focus? In my biblical study I have found that the central thrust of the Bible appears in its opening and closing chapters and has a multifaceted focus.<sup>1</sup> Ellen White’s writings seem to agree.

#### **MULTIFACETED AND COMPLEMENTARY**

Ellen White identifies several themes as elements of the center of Scripture. For example, this paragraph from the book *Education* highlights three of these ideas under the category of the “grand central theme” of Scripture: “The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, [1] of God’s original purpose for the world, [2] of the rise of the great controversy, [3] and of the work of redemption. He should understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to

#### Discovering the Spirit of Prophecy

# Finding the Center of Scripture

In the Writings of Ellen G. White

trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation. He should see how this controversy enters into every phase of human experience; how in every act of life he himself reveals the one or the other of the two antagonistic motives; and how, whether he will or not, he is even now deciding upon which side of the controversy he will be found.”<sup>2</sup>

Adventists have followed Ellen White’s lead in summarizing this central theme as the Great Controversy. Recent evangelical studies have also begun to recognize this “warfare worldview” as permeating and even central to Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

#### **THE MAIN ISSUE**

Ellen White makes clear that the major issue in the great controversy is the character of God. The first words of her five-volume *Conflict of the Ages* series are “God is love,” and the last words are “God is love.”<sup>4</sup> In between is an exposition of how this is true. This emphasis upon the character of

God is made explicit in *Patriarchs and Prophets*: “[In Scripture] The curtain that separates the visible from the invisible world is lifted, and we behold the conflict of the opposing forces of good and evil, from the first entrance of sin to the final triumph of righteousness and truth; and all is but a revelation of the character of God.”<sup>5</sup>

Several statements reiterate that Jesus is the center of Scripture: “Jesus is the living center of everything”; “Christ is the center to which all should be attracted”; “The great center of attraction, Jesus Christ . . .”<sup>6</sup> More specifically, Christ’s work of substitutionary atonement on Calvary is placed by Ellen White at the center of Scripture: “The cross of Calvary is the great center.”<sup>7</sup> “The sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster. In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of





**The central theme of the Bible, the theme about which every other in the whole book clusters, is the redemption plan, the restoration in the human soul of the image of God.**

Calvary.”<sup>8</sup> “The standard of truth is to be uplifted and the atonement of Christ presented as the grand, central theme for consideration.”<sup>9</sup>

The conclusion of the great controversy, occurring at the Second Advent and beyond, is described using a synonym of center: “The doctrine of the second advent is the very keynote of the Sacred Scriptures.”<sup>10</sup> Finally, utilizing another synonym, Ellen White highlights the role of the sanctuary in the great system of biblical truth: “The subject of the sanctuary was the key which unlocked the mystery of the disappointment of 1844. It opened to view a complete system of truth, connected and harmonious, showing that God’s hand had directed the great advent movement and revealing present duty as it brought to light the position and work of His people.”<sup>11</sup>

Ellen White also summarizes the center of Scripture using the phrase “the redemption plan.” “The central theme of the Bible, the theme about which every other in the whole book

clusters, is the redemption plan, the restoration in the human soul of the image of God. From the first intimation of hope in the sentence pronounced in Eden to that last glorious promise of the Revelation, ‘They shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads’ (Rev. 22:4, KJV), the burden of every book and every passage of the Bible is the unfolding of this wondrous theme—man’s uplifting. . . . He who grasps this thought has before him an infinite field for study. He has the key that will unlock to him the whole treasure house of God’s Word.”<sup>12</sup>

Some have suggested that simply to underscore their importance, Ellen White exaggerated the word “center” or one of its synonyms to describe certain themes of Scripture. From what I’ve seen in the introduction and conclusion of Scripture, where these themes emerge I believe that Ellen White is not overstating this idea. Rather, she pinpoints the very themes that Scripture itself identifies as constituting its multifaceted theological center.

I commend to all Bible scholars, teachers, pastors, and laity this *grand central theme of Scripture* as the key that will unlock the whole treasure house of God’s Word! ©

<sup>1</sup> For the biblical support for this multifaceted center of Scripture, see Richard M. Davidson, “Back to the Beginning: Genesis 1-3 and the Theological Center of Scripture,” in *Christ, Salvation, and the Eschaton*, ed. Daniel Heinz, Jiri Moskala, and Peter M. van Bemmelen (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Old Testament Department, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2009), pp. 5-29. Available for download at <https://andrews.academia.edu/RichardDavidson>.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1903, 1952), p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1890, 1908), p. 44; Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 678.

<sup>5</sup> E. G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 596.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), p. 186; Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958, 1980), book 1, pp. 259, 383.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen G. White letter 201, 1899, in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1955, 1977), Ellen G. White Comments, vol. 4, p. 1173.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1915), p. 315.

<sup>9</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 8, p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 299.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423.

<sup>12</sup> E. G. White, *Education*, pp. 125, 126.

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# The Mystery of Mysteries: God Became Human

Q

## What happened during the incarnation of Christ?

A

I wish I could answer your question! Theologians have struggled to understand the mystery of the Incarnation, but it remains a mystery. However, the Bible reveals some important aspects of it that help us gain a better understanding of God's love.

**1. *It Was the Work of God:*** The Incarnation was the work of God through the Spirit in the womb of Mary (Luke 1:35). Once more, God manifested His creative power in a unique and unfathomable way. He united the two natures, the human and the divine, in one person. This happened at the moment of conception and not at Jesus' birth. It was not the act of the Father adopting a human being as His Son. Neither did the Son of God take the exterior appearance of a human being without becoming human. We could carefully state that the two natures were mysteriously blended in the person of Jesus Christ.

**2. *One Person—Two Distinct Natures:*** The union of the two natures in one person did not eliminate the distinctiveness of each nature; each remained intact. The Incarnation was not the divinization of the human nature, and neither was the divine nature transmuted into a human nature. The creature could not become divine, and the divine nature cannot be downgraded to the level of the nature of a created being.

**3. *One Person, Two Wills:*** Since the two natures were mysteriously blended in Christ, we could suggest that in the one person there were two wills: the human and the divine. This confirms the reality of the temptations that Christ confronted and the constant need of the human nature to be willingly under subjection to the divine. In Gethsemane, Jesus expressed the desire of the human will, but was willing to submit to the will of the Father (Matt. 26:42). He could have fallen, but He did not.

**4. *It Was the Incarnation of God:*** In the Incarnation the Son of God did not lose any of His divine attributes. Had He left behind some of them, we would not have had an incarnation of God but a partial one. Paul says that Christ "made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant" (Phil. 2:7, NIV). Through this self-emptying Christ became a servant, thus placing the fullness of His divinity under the Father to be used as the Father would tell Him.

**5. *The Hiding of Glory:*** In the Incarnation the glory of the Son of God was hidden in the human. He who was rich became poor for us (2 Cor. 8:9). The glory of His preexistent state was no longer visible unless it flashed through the human body (Matt. 17:2). God was coming down to the level of sinful creatures, and He set aside the magnificence of His splendor.

**6. *Permanent Union of the Two Natures:*** What happened in the Incarnation—the union of the two natures—was not something that could be undone once it accomplished its purpose. The Son of God became a member of the human family forever. Paul writes that after all things are made subject to Christ "the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him" (1 Cor. 15:28, NIV). The sacrifice was indeed eternal, and consequently its efficacy will also be eternal.

**7. *Cosmic Impact:*** It is impossible to separate the Incarnation from the cross, and consequently it is a soteriological event of cosmic proportions. Their primary goal was to save not only humans but also the cosmos from the presence and influence of sin and evil. Its salvific power is found in its unique revelation of God's loving nature and power (John 1:14). This is the good news of the Christian gospel. ☺

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# The Light Bulb Conspiracy



**S**orry, I refuse to receive the COVID-19 vaccine!” the patient adamantly declared. I had already grown accustomed to such responses as a physician working in a hospital in the heart of Nairobi. This patient, however, was more insistent than most. “Daktari,<sup>1</sup> you will never convince me to get the COVID-19 jab. Why? Because I have heard that once I am vaccinated, my body will explode when I approach a light bulb!”

I froze.

I didn’t know whether to laugh, cry, or just keep a straight face, as I tried to contain the mixed emotions within me. I couldn’t believe that an unfounded belief in the light bulb conspiracy was standing in the way of my patient receiving a potentially lifesaving medical intervention. Couldn’t he understand that most of the COVID-19 patients in the critical-care units in my hospital were unvaccinated? My heart sank as I remembered how many patients have died from COVID-19 in my country, which had just experienced the fourth wave of the pandemic. Two of my family members had recently succumbed to this deadly disease, and the wounds of these memories were still fresh in my mind.

I remembered some of the responses I had received after I had given a health talk on COVID-19 and the vaccines at my local congregation: “Daktari, the COVID-19 vaccine is related to the mark of the beast of Revelation! How can you encourage the Adventist faithful to take it?” Social media had been awash with news on how the vaccine could supposedly alter human DNA and contained microchips aligned to the new world order as foretold in prophecy. Were all these balanced opinions?

Ever since the entrance of sin in the Garden of Eden we have all suffered the results of imbalance because we are imperfect human beings. The serpent challenged Eve’s belief system with the first conspiracy recorded in Scripture. “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1, NIV). Eve’s beliefs were tipped out of balance, and as a result, sin entered the world. The rest is history.

God sought to restore the balance in our belief system. He sent His Son, Jesus, so “that whoever believes in Him should not perish” (John

3:16). Not only is Jesus the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), but He is also our way to truth in our lives. When we focus on Him, we find balance, and doubts fostered by conspiracies are banished from our hearts. When we take our eyes off Jesus, we allow ourselves to be “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14), be it conspiracies, news, fears, or fads.

This isn’t something new. Jesus’ earthly ministry was obscured by false conspiracies, biased misconceptions, and unbalanced opinions. His identity was questioned (cf. Matt. 16:14). Some Jewish leaders stubbornly insisted that His miracles were enabled by the devil (Matt. 12:24).

Navigating the right path between truth and error, reason versus emotion, tradition versus innovation, demands a mental and spiritual reset that must be fueled by the Holy Spirit. Foreseeing our proclivity to skewed beliefs, Jesus told us that He would send the Holy Spirit to shape our belief system—the Spirit of truth, who would “take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is” (John 16:13, Message).<sup>2</sup>

Where is our focus today? Do we prayerfully allow the Holy Spirit to shape our convictions? Does Jesus form the true north of our mental compass? Or does society, news, social media, science, politics, and other worldly influences mold our beliefs? My patient reminded me of my most important belief: at the end of time my eternal destiny can be secure only if I heeded the call to step into God’s marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

I can do that without fear and trepidation. There are no exploding bulbs in God’s kingdom. ©

<sup>1</sup> Swahili term for medical doctor.

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# The Major's Christmas Prayers



“May I Tell You a Story?”

BY DICK DUERKSEN

**T**his train is as cold as Mount Everest, Major Victor thought. *Colder, maybe. Lord, please keep me warm.*

It was winter during World War II, and the troop train carrying Major Victor was racing north through the Sinai desert. The weather was wet and freezing, and the train cars had no glass in their windows. That meant the seats were covered with thickening ice, so the men had climbed into the luggage racks, where it was a few degrees warmer. Even there, huddled together, they were freezing.

U.S. Army Major Victor and his two companions, Sergeant Eaton and Sergeant Brennon, were traveling to Jerusalem and then on through the desert to Iraq. The major, a Seventh-day Adventist medical officer, was praying

for God to provide enough heat to keep them alive till they got to Jerusalem.

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When the train stopped for water and coal on a desert siding, Sergeant Eaton said, “Grab your gear and come with me.”

The two soldiers followed Eaton along the tracks toward the engine, where he stopped, took out his canteen cup, reached behind one of the huge wheels, opened a tap, and filled his cup with hot water. When he had filled his friends’ cups as well, he climbed up the ladder into the cab.

The engineer and fireman, busily checking the water and coal, had left their seats empty in the hot engine. Sergeant Eaton smiled, motioned for the others to join him, and sat down in the engineer’s chair.

Hot air blasted away the cold as they hit the top rung and stepped inside. “Prayer answered,” Major Victor breathed. “At least until the engineer throws us off his seat!”

Sergeant Eaton was playing with the controls, checking the gauges, feeling the brake levers, and testing the throttle. Waiting for the track signal to change. Smiling.

Before they could relax, the “real” engineer came up the ladder and began shouting loudly.

Sergeant Eaton waved for the engineer to come over to his seat. He came, still shouting and waving wildly.

Major Victor was praying, as was his habit whenever things got out of hand. He knew God was going to have to perform a miracle to get them through, so this prayer was fast and simple. *Help!* was all he could pray.

Sergeant Eaton, all six feet six inches of him, stood beside the steel seat and pointed to the name stitched onto his uniform and then to the steel wall behind the seat. “Eaton,” he said, pointing to his name and the wall again.

The “real” engineer looked at Eaton’s uniform and then at the wall where a name was scratched into the steel. “Eaton,” it read. *The same as the man now sitting in his chair.* “How can this be?” he asked in a sign language both men understood.

“The American government shipped several of these engines over here to help carry troops to the battlefields,” Eaton explained. “The engines came from the mountains where they had been pulling long trains of logs down to the ports. One of those engines was mine, and as engineer I scratched my name into the wall beside this chair. This was my engine!”

\* \* \*

The “real” engineer bowed, blew the train’s whistle, and watched as Sergeant Eaton drove the troop train on toward Jerusalem. Two “real” engineers were now sharing duties in the engine, where everyone was toasty warm.

Major Victor prayed a silent *Thank You!*

The train pulled into Jerusalem early in the morning of December 24. Major Victor thanked everyone for the warm ride, and then beckoned for the sergeants to follow him into the ancient city.

“It would be special to spend Christmas in Jerusalem,” he told his friends, “but for years I have dreamed of being in Bethlehem, the city where Jesus was born, on Christmas Eve. Do you think we might be able to do that?”

The sergeants knew how to make dreams come true. Brennon made sure their gear was secure while Eaton worked on transportation. Major Victor prayed. “It may not be an urgent need in heaven,” he whispered, “but it would be nice if we could be at the Church of the Nativity as the stars come out tonight.” Then he listed all the reasons he hoped God would answer his prayer.

Eaton returned with a taxi, and Brennon tossed their gear into the trunk. Christmas traffic was terrible, making Eaton wish they had stayed on the train, but just before sunset they drove through the crowd at the entrance to Bethlehem.

“Bethlehem on Christmas Eve,” Major Victor remembers. “Yes, I knew the date was probably wrong, and the manger a poor imitation of the one Mary used for Jesus, but it was still Bethlehem. A city packed with visitors. Filled with music and expectation. Eager to welcome the Messiah.”

“We left the car near the gate,” the major says, “and moved slowly through

**“It would be special to spend Christmas in Jerusalem,” he told his friends, “but for years I have dreamed of being in Bethlehem, the city where Jesus was born, on Christmas Eve.”**

the crowd of people and sheep. Three American soldiers, walking lightly as if on holy ground, listening to children’s choirs proclaiming the birth of God’s Son, singing songs that made us homesick for home—and for heaven.”

Entering the Church of the Nativity requires that you bow low to slip through the small doorway. The only light comes from flickering candles. The only sounds are whispered prayers and soft carols.

Major Victor made his way through the tiny sanctuary to the small back room that housed the manger.

“Beloved Jesus,” the major prayed, tears of thanksgiving salting his words. “I am here, near the very spot where You came into this world. I have come to worship, but I have no gifts. Nothing to give You except myself. But since I am already Your property, I simply ask You to fill me with Your presence and power. Give me the strength to stand for You, and the heart to love for You.”

Silence flowed softly through the manger, lightly replaced by the voices of children singing angel songs.

“That night God answered my prayer,” Major Victor says. “I knelt in the high and holy atmosphere of God’s presence, and my life was forever changed. The rich current of His love flowed through my soul. I am His. I belong.” ©

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Seventh-day  
Adventist Church



**D**o you journal? Just in case you have never heard of that term, a journal is a private collection of a person's thoughts, ideas, and even prayers. Journals can be kept in a small notebook or a special blank-page book created just for that person. Some people journal their daily activities and write down things that happened and how they made them feel. Others write their prayers and prayer lists in journals. You can even use your journal as a scrapbook of art, which can include photographs, drawings, and doodles. Or you can use a journal for a combination of all those things and more.



## Bible Treasure

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing”

(John 15:5).

For this activity you will need:

- a special notebook/or specific journal book
- pen or pencil
- colored pencils and stickers (optional)
- Bible

### WHAT YOU WILL DO:

This is a great thing to start as you head into the new year, so you may choose to start it on January 1. But you can start it anytime you like. The goal is to try to journal every day. If you skip or day or two, that's OK, but try to keep it consistent.

Start with prayer, then pick a Bible verse for that day. You

can have your parents choose one for you, you can randomly select one, or you can use the verses that come with your Sabbath School lessons or a devotional book.

Write the date at the top of the first page and then write down your Bible verse. After reading your verse, take a moment to think about it and then write down what thoughts come to mind. Did you like that verse? What do you think it meant? Did you learn something new, or was this verse one you were familiar with? How did this verse make you feel? And most important, did that verse help you understand Jesus better? Feel free to draw your thoughts

and ideas and add a sticker or two if you wish.

Try to get into this habit of exploring the Bible this way and let it be completely your own. There is no right or wrong way to do it! At the end of the year, go back and read what you wrote and make your last entry a recollection of the previous year and what you learned. You will see just how much your faith has grown and that a journal can serve as an encouragement for you for a long time to come.

Happy journaling! ☺

**10** DAYS OF  
PRAYER

Materials by  
Mark Finley

# THE THREE ANGELS CALL TO PRAYER

January 5–15, 2022

“Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.”

**REVELATION 14:6, ESV**

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