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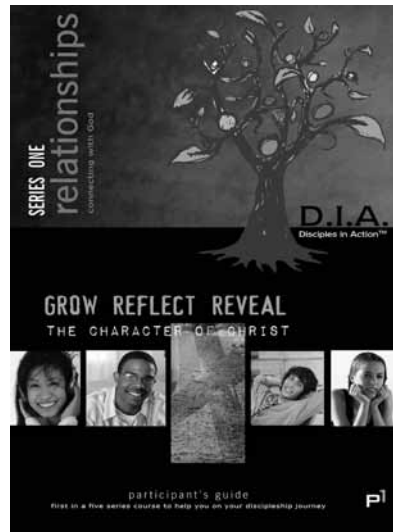
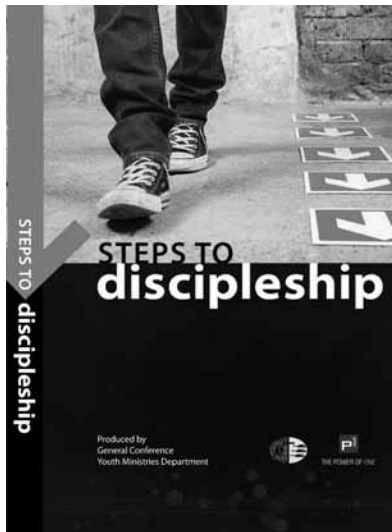
FOR THE SENIORS

justice and mercy
2013 senior youth week of prayer

HELP YOUR YOUTH GROUP GROW CLOSER TO GOD

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A New Way of Understanding

I remember learning it as a child. I've prayed it dozens of times. I've recited it at countless church services and even in my home. It's printed on a bookmark sitting beside my bed and it's something I plan to start teaching my four year old son. *"Our father in heaven, hallowed be your Name, Your Kingdom Come, Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven . . ."* (Matthew 6:9-13).

You would assume I had this one figured out.

But I believe that it is only recently that Jesus has been revealing to me what He meant by "Your Kingdom Come." And not just in this prayer, but in all those stories and parables where He said over and over, "the Kingdom of Heaven is like . . ."

We know relatively little about heaven. But we do know that it is a place of unity and peace where He is sovereign and where His will is done and where His entire character is seen and felt everywhere and in everything.

Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven . . .

There is much responsibility with this prayer. Am I really ready for what I am asking for? For God's will to be done here on earth as in heaven? Imagine what that would actually look like! The principles and values of heaven . . . here?

His plan is for humanity to live in harmony with Him, with each other, and with His created earth. 'His will be done' would mean everyone would have daily bread, we would live in perfect community and compassion, and would be delivered from evil and temptation. Obviously that's the idea of heaven . . . but it's also the idea for now. Here. Today.

This has become a new way of understanding all of Scripture for me. I feel like I've been given new eyes. I have a new way of seeing God's plan for His Kingdom on earth and how it applies to my daily life, actions, and choices. Each day I can be part of bringing Kingdom come. With the help of the Holy Spirit, I can be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. This is justice living. This is the kind of living that focuses on restoration of our relationship with God and with others and with the earth. It's the kind of living that reveals the true character of God to the world. And it's the kind of living that changes everything—me, and my church, and my world.

"Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Imagine that! ●



Joanna Darby loves Jesus and loves studying the Word of God to find more and more revelations of His love. She is an artist and preacher who lives in Australia with her husband and two sons.

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Editorial Matters

Unsolicited manuscripts are welcome, as well as letters to the editor, youth ministry tips, youth volunteer service reports, programming and story ideas. Send manuscripts to YMA Editor at the address below.

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2013 Senior Youth Week of Prayer

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Read This First

START YOUR PLANNING NOW.

We know that leadership sometimes changes at the end of the year, but please, if you will no longer be the AY leader next year, do not let that stop you from planning for this special week. Start your planning, develop your target, get your team together, and make sure your pastor is a part of that team.

GLOBAL YOUTH DAY

INFORMATION. Get information on the Global Youth Day project. This day will be the launch of the Youth Week of Prayer. Please visit our website, www.gcyouthministries.org, or contact your local youth director to find out how you can participate.

CHOOSE A THEME SONG.

Involve your youth choir. If your church does not have a youth choir, this is the perfect time to get one started. Pick out songs that you all like and which fit the topic of each evening, or choose a song for the entire week.

START A PRAYER JOURNAL.

Nothing is greater for your personal spiritual growth than

time spent in prayer. Your youth group will grow as you grow. Prayer journaling will help you encounter God in new and exciting ways. You will be able to “track” your walk with God as you go back and review answered prayers and see how He has lead you step by step each day. New, fresh ideas will come to mind as you spend time in His presence journaling your prayers. You can find many ideas online on starting and keeping a prayer journal. Just go to www.google.com and type in the words “starting a prayer journal.”

FORM A WEEK OF PRAYER DEVELOPMENT/ REVIEW TEAM.

Depending on the size of your church, this group can be four to eight persons who will go through all eight days’ readings with you. Include on your team only interested and committed young adults and youth ministry leaders (Pathfinder, Sabbath School, etc., your pastor/s); this is important because it gives ownership to the entire group, rather than just you and your assistant. Ask the group to commit to

meeting for at least three weeks—at least one week for four lessons, and an extra week to wrap things up. Be sure to identify the goal and direction you want to go, preferably at the first meeting, and choose a young person to speak for each day. ●

Especially for you... Free!

*A journal for Seventh-day Adventists
who like to think!*



Dialogue is a 36-page journal published three times a year in four parallel language editions (English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish) under the sponsorship of the General Conference Committee on Adventist Ministry to College and University Students (AM-iCUS). For more information send email to 105541.3200@compuserve.com or if you are in North America call 301-680-5060/66

Making Small Groups Work

If you are just skimming through this material, then **STOP! STOP RIGHT HERE!** And read the information on page two about getting the most out of your Youth Week of Prayer.

In this book are eight outstanding messages on revival and getting closer to God and staying there. These messages are some of the best from Signs Publishing's editor, Nathan Brown, and are written in conversational style to make it easier for you and the members of your group to present them to the listeners. To encourage interaction we have included discussion questions at the end of each day's reading. These discussion questions are very important in the process of adapting and applying the lesson to their daily lives.

For example, they can be done together as a large group, or you can break down into smaller groups of 10-15; however, we are suggesting that you break into small, core groups of three to five persons and get together in these same small groups each night. Please remember that no two small groups will be the same. Each will have its own dynamic character, reflecting the varying characteristics of the members. The common thread running through the entire group will be

Jesus Christ, and it is in His name that the group will meet each night of this special week.

Start your planning now!

Global Youth Day is set to launch the official week of the Youth Week of Prayer meetings. Ahead of time please contact your pastor or conference youth leader to see what projects your church will be involved in on this day, March 16. On the first night you may want to take some time to discuss or talk about the events that you just participated in.

So what is a Small Group Covenant (SGC)?

Small Group Covenants provide relational ground rules. They help foster a safe environment for spiritual exploration and are a very good way to help your groups affirm and remember their commonality. Creating a covenant together as a group will require that the members consciously and intentionally commit to growing with each other as Christians and will help in keeping the group healthy and focused.

As you create your small group, keep in mind that churches are different and what may work for another church may not necessarily work for your church or youth group. Some groups may want to do a formal covenant that is typed and given to each member to sign and keep. Or you may choose to do an informal



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covenant such as a verbal agreement that you review orally when there are new members.

Below are some guidelines to consider when creating a small group covenant for your youth group.

1. Purpose of the group: To create a safe place for you to be yourself, wrestle with questions regarding your faith, and to be supported and encouraged in your walk with God. To support one another in prayer and worship together so that group members glorify and honor God through their lives.
2. Duration of the meeting (how long will the meeting be)
3. Time and frequency of the meetings (set by church or youth leader.)
4. Location: Will the meetings be at the church, someone's house, or be on rotation?
5. Mission and Service: We will serve the church and the community by encouraging the mutual discovery and application of talents and gifts so that group members embrace and serve people in families, their small groups, schools, churches, and community. Engaging in service is a way of learning together as well as giving.
6. Growth and development "We will develop and grow by..."
7. Participation: There are no "dumb questions". Everyone is given the right to their own opinion and all comments are encouraged and respected
 - a) **Spiritual growth:** We will endeavor to grow in mutual submission and in the application of spiritual truth, so that as a group, and individually, we can become more like Jesus in attitude and behavior.
 - b) **Confidentiality:** Anything of a personal nature that is said in the meeting is not repeated outside the meeting.
 - c) **Openness:** As we are able, we will be honest and forthright with one another. Non-judgment zone!
 - d) **Accountability:** We give each other permission to hold each other accountable for the goals we set as a group or our personal pledges (you may want to document accountability pledges in a log book).
 - e) **Graciousness:** We will not speak about a person when he or she is not present.
 - f) **Courtesy:** When the group meets, we will come on time.
 - g) **Relationship-building:** We will be honest and open with each other and pray for one another between meetings.
 - h) **Community:** We will commit to join the global church in repositioning mission at the very heart of who we are and what we stand for as Christians (depending on what your acts of kindness were you can use this time to debrief after the Global Youth Day event)
8. Roles and Responsibilities. We will seek to share the following roles and responsibilities: Leader, co-leader, subgroup leaders (depending on the size of the group/church), host/hostess, prayer coordinator, Global Youth Day service project coordinator (you will need this if you will be using the Global Youth Day to launch your Youth Week of Prayer).

Some of the information on creating a small group covenant was adapted from the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church Small Group Ministry website: <http://data.mppc.org/files/communitylife/Sample%20Small%20Group%20Covenants.pdf>

On page 55 is a sample of a small group covenant. You can make copies for your church, or you can use the guidelines above to create your own.

This Week is about Next Week



Nathan Brown is book editor at the Adventist Church's Signs Publishing Company near Melbourne, Australia. He is author of five books, including *I Hope* and *7 Reasons Life is Better With God*, and is currently writing monthly short stories for www.SpectrumMagazine.org. Nathan is one of the conveners of the Manifest Creative Arts Festival (www.artsmanifest.info) and has worked on a number of projects with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency in Australia. He also is a continuing university student, plays basketball in an "old man's league," assists his wife with gardening, and takes his big dog for regular walks.

A week of prayer is often described as a mountain-top spiritual experience. For a focused period of time we worship together, study together, and pray together, feeling God's presence and enjoying the encouragement of a community of fellow believers. But the temptation we face is to think such an experience is what our lives should be about, what it most means to live as a person of faith. "If only we could stay in that place, in that time or that experience," we think to ourselves in our desire to experience and serve God more fully.

This was Peter's response on the Mount of Transfiguration. Faced with the most wonderful spiritual experience of his life, "Peter said to

Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters . . .'" (Matthew 17:4). His intention was to stay in that moment, in that experience. But Jesus came alone to the awestruck disciples, without His obvious glory or illustrious companions, touched the disciples and told them to "Get up" because it was time to go back down.

As another translation puts it, "at the foot of the mountain, a large crowd was waiting for them" (Matthew 17:14, NLT). Their mission was not on the mountain top, it was among the crowd at the foot of the mountain. There, people needed to be healed and helped. There were those who needed rescue and others who simply needed to be listened to and cared for, some in simple ways,

some in complicated and costly ways.

Inspired by the time they spend together on the mountain top, by what they have seen, heard, and felt, the disciples' call is always to enact that kingdom reality at the foot of the mountain. So a week of prayer is important and valuable, but it is not merely about experiencing another week of prayer. This week on the mountain top is about living the days between—and next week and beyond—at the foot of the mountain, among the people who need our love, care, energy, and resources. It's about helping bring the kingdom we experience on the mountain top to our everyday crowds, to our communities, and to our world. ●

Y O U N G A D U L T S W E E K O F P R A Y E R : D A Y O N E

REVIVAL *that* **COUNTS**

Perhaps the leaders initiated the call for revival. Or maybe the people themselves sensed the need for reformation across their community. They had been called to be the people of God in their past and they rightly felt it was time to refocus their lives on God—and that God should bless them more obviously.

They began to meet together daily to worship, praying for God's power and presence to be with them. They studied the Scriptures and encouraged each other in their spiritual practices. The people even fasted for periods of time, going without food to express their devotion and their desire for greater holiness.

But somehow it seemed God did not notice or respond. Despite their apparent earnestness, seemingly fervent prayers, and many worship services, the people did not feel any closer to God—or God to them. At first, they re-doubled their efforts. God must want greater commitment, they thought, a more whole-hearted 24-7 kind of faithfulness. Pray harder. Study harder. Worship more. Give more. Give up more.

But some of the people began to tire of these spiritual exertions. While some continued to fast regularly, others began to give up and return to their former routines. If God would not recognise and respond to their prayers and offerings in more powerful ways, perhaps He was not so interested in them after all—maybe they were not His people anyway. Who were they to think they could be anyone special?

Then the prophet arrived. Isaiah was known around the nation for his strident pronouncements and his claims to speak on behalf of God. He certainly caught the people's attention when he arrived at the temple and his proclamations echoed around the city like a trumpet blast. He had a message from God.

"Why have we fasted," the people asked God, finally able to voice their frustrations with their recent faithfulness, "and You have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and You have not noticed?"

Isaiah reported that God had noticed their efforts to catch His attention but He was not impressed. Their hard spiritual work was noted, but not appreciated. Their religious endeavours were somehow missing the mark of what God longed to see in His people.

The problem with religion

Like all of us, the relationship and faithfulness of God's people went up and down across the years encompassed by the stories of the Old Testament. During the better times in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the people would return to the temple and the worship of God from time to time. But, according to the prophets, sometimes even the people's most focused attempts at religion were not enough to turn them from the injustice and self-centredness in their daily lives, how they failed to care for, help, and serve others. And no matter how hard they worked at being

religious through their rituals of worship, they could not drown out the cries of the poor and oppressed by the music of their hymns.

The prophet Amos described the people of his day as those who "trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land" (Amos 8:4). He imagined their anxiousness to be done with worship in the form of Sabbath and the New Moon festival so they could reopen the market and get back to their dishonest trade, "buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals" (Amos 8:6). Why bother with this form of religion, Amos said to these merchants, if it only gets in the way of the exploitation and profit that is your real focus in life?

While we might not run a business, deny paying wages to our employees, or seem to actively oppress others, do we take the opportunities we do have to care for, help, and encourage those who are hurting, disadvantaged, lonely, unwell or forgotten?

Through His prophets, God used strong language to express His disappointment with religion and worship that is disconnected from the things that were wrong in the world around them, the people who were hurting and the wrong that was done to them. We read of God saying that He “hates,” “despises,” and is generally disgusted by their worship. Their gatherings are described as a “stench,” and their offerings and music are dismissed as less than worthless.

In Micah 6, we see a series of increasingly inflated suggestions as to how we can most appropriately worship God. The prophet offers the suggestion of burnt offerings, then increases the offering

to “thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil” (verse 7) before going to the horrific—but not unknown—extreme of suggesting sacrificing his firstborn child to gain God’s favour and forgiveness.

But the answer is more simple, more profound, and more worshipful: “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Back to Isaiah 58

Speaking through Isaiah, this is how God responds to His people in search of revival: the kind of worship I want from you is to serve those who need your help. Help people be released from the things that

hold them back, help them live as freely as possible. Feed the hungry. Provide shelter to the homeless and those who need it. Share clothes with those who don’t have enough (see Isaiah 58:6, 7). Even if we have only a little, it might be more than someone else has, and God calls on us to be generous with any resources we have to those who we can help.

Such service is not merely a “nice” thing to do; these verses describe it as a way to worship God. It is not the only way to worship but, speaking through Isaiah to His revival-focused people, God urged them to try this seemingly different approach to worship. In God’s view, it seems this form of worship might be preferable



to some of the people's more traditional worship practices, especially if that worship is conducted while ignoring the needs of others.

Worship is not inwardly focused but something that brings a blessing to all those around the worshippers of God. It is remarkable that the spirit of Jesus and the heart of faithfulness to God are so other-focused that even our spiritual renewal is not about us—reaching out instead to the poor, the oppressed, the hurting, and the hungry. “The true purpose of religion is to release men from their burdens of sin, to eliminate intolerance and oppression, and to promote justice, liberty and peace” (Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Vol 4, page 306).

In Isaiah 58:8-12, God promises blessings in response to this form of worship. In effect, God is saying that if the people were less focused on themselves they would find God working with them and through them to bring healing and restoration. This

was the revival the people were seeking, a renewal of their hope and purpose as found in God with a real sense of His presence in their lives and community: “Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I” (Isaiah 58:8, 9).

Sabbath sharing

Interestingly, Isaiah 58 also connects this serving-others kind of worship with a renewal of “delight”-filled Sabbath keeping, which is something that should catch our “Seventh-day” attention. Compared to their religious strivings described earlier in God’s response through Isaiah, Sabbath is a gift. It arrives each week and we are called to remember and honor it. Sabbath is a symbol of God’s grace by which our salvation

is not earned but received. This is an important symbol of our humble walk with God (remember Micah 6:8).

But, as well as being a valuable element of our relationship with God, there is something about Sabbath that should transform our relationships with others. In the form of Sabbath, this same grace and goodness is to be shared with others. Reflecting on these verses, Ellen White commented, “upon those who keep the Sabbath of the Lord is laid the responsibility of doing a work of mercy and benevolence” (Welfare Ministry, page 121).

One of the obvious things from a quick reading of the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20) is that the fourth commandment is the most detailed by far. While some of the commandments are recorded in as few as three words in some translations, the fourth commandment gives space to the why, how, and who of “remembering the Sabbath day.”

Significant among these Sabbath details is the focus on others. In *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*, Sigve Tonstad describes how this kind of command is unique in all the cultures of the world. The Sabbath commandment, he explains, “prioritizes from the bottom up and not from the top looking down, giving first consideration to the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Those who need rest the most—the slave, the resident alien and the beast of burden—are singled out for special mention. In the rest of the seventh day the underprivileged, even mute animals, find an ally” (*The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*, pages 126-7).

The fourth commandment urges that Sabbath is a day to be enjoyed by everyone. From the view of Sabbath, we are all equal. If you are an employer during the week, you have no authority to make your employees work on Sabbath—God gave them a day of rest. If you are a

student, an employee, or even a slave for the rest of your days, the Sabbath reminds you that you are equally created and redeemed by God, and God invites you to celebrate this in ways other than your usual tasks or duties. Even those outside the Sabbath-keeping people—“any foreigner residing in your towns” (Exodus 20:10)—should benefit from the Sabbath if it is within our capacity as Sabbath keepers.

Little wonder that Isaiah would describe the Sabbath as a delight as we set aside a day to focus on things that are more important than all the other things that keep us busy for the rest of the week (see Isaiah 58:13). Again these verses come with a promise of renewal, delight, and an ever-growing closer relationship with our God (see verse 14).

Jesus and the religious people

Of course, it should not surprise us that Jesus knew a lot about the message of Isaiah 58. He

lived a life of caring and service. His interactions with others, His healing miracles, and many of His parables demonstrated and urged that a life lived in such a way was the best kind of devotion to God. But the religious leaders were both His greatest critics and the target of His harshest criticism.

Like the religious people of Isaiah’s day, these people worked hard at being religious and believed they ensured their special relationship with God because of their religious practices. But at the same time they were exploiting the poor and ignoring the needy (see Mark 12:38-40). Their worship was out of step with their justice and Jesus did not hold back His condemnation of such hypocrisy.

Perhaps Jesus’ most frightening sermon—particularly for religious people—is that found in Matthew chapter 23. Not only did Jesus describe their religion as not helping people who are disadvantaged in life, but He considered such religion as adding to their

burdens. By their actions, or at times their lack of action and caring, Jesus said, they “shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces” (Matthew 23:13).

But echoing the prophets of centuries earlier, Jesus also directly addressed the gap between their serious religious practices, and the injustices they condoned and profited from. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23). Jesus was quick to add that religious practices and observances are not wrong in themselves, but they should not take the place of “doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly and faithfully with God,” echoing Micah’s call to true worship and truer revival.

Isaiah’s call and promise

We don’t know how those first hearers of Isaiah’s call to truer revival responded. As demonstrated by the fact that Jesus confronted these same religious issues, perhaps there are always those who are content with mere religion, while others hear the call to worship in a way that truly changes us and those around us. Perhaps that is why Isaiah’s voice like a trumpet blast still echoes today.

Ellen White urged that the principles and action described in Isaiah 58 were important for the church she cared about: “Read this chapter

carefully and understand the kind of ministry that will bring life into the churches. The work of the gospel is to be carried by our liberality as well as by our labours. When you meet suffering souls who need help, give it to them. When you find those who are hungry, feed them. In doing this you will be working in lines of Christ’s ministry. The Master’s holy work was a benevolent work. Let our people everywhere be encouraged to have a part in it” (Welfare Ministry, page 29).

If we are serious about following Jesus, we will also focus on others. If we are serious about Sabbath keeping, we will allow its grace to benefit everyone through us. If we are serious about revival, we will be serious about service. ●

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- 1. How would you explain what has gone wrong in the relationship between God and His people as described in the early part of Isaiah 58?**
- 2. Have you ever thought about doing justice and loving mercy as acts of worship? How might this change your approach to caring for others? How might this change your approach to worship?**
- 3. Do you think your relationship with God could be renewed through more “active” worship such as that described in Isaiah 58? How could this happen?**

Y O U N G A D U L T S W E E K O F P R A Y E R : D A Y T W O

THE GOD WHO **SEES, HEARS—AND FEELS**

Imagine the scene: You are visiting a family member in the hospital. He has been sick for some weeks, with your extended family unsure as to whether he will recover. You have been away and this has been first opportunity to visit your suffering family member. You talk quietly with the patient's wife at the bedside of your sleeping loved one. She has been spending many long days and nights at the hospital during the past weeks and you urge her to go home to get some rest, assuring her that you will stay by the bedside for the evening.

She says she is doing OK but seems thankful for the opportunity for rest, though at the same time she is still hesitant to leave. She gathers her things and prepares to go, pausing to kiss the cheek of her sleeping and unwell husband. She gives you a quick hug and leaves the room, replaced almost immediately by a nurse who has come to check on the patient.

You step away from the bed to the window at the end of the room while the nurse goes through her routine. Looking out on the street in front of the hospital, you watch the traffic for a few moments, listening to the sounds of the busy hospital behind you. In the early evening light, you notice a distant but familiar figure emerge from the front of the hospital building and step out onto the street.

She was in the room with you a minute ago, now she is making her way home alone. Her shoulders are slumped, her head bowed, barely noticing the traffic around her. She walks slowly and, as you watch her, you can almost feel her tiredness and sorrow.

It's a lonely walk that she has done many times during the past few weeks and on many of those occasions no-one has seemed to notice. Removed from the street but also knowing the story behind her lonely walk and caring deeply for this suffering wife and her husband in the bed behind you, it occurs to you that this might be a glimpse into how God sees and has seen every one of her lonely walks out of that hospital during the past few weeks. And that He sees every one of the countless such walks taken by tired, sad, and worried relatives out of that hospital door each day. And all of the many patients—at every hospital . . .

For a moment, you want to rush after her, just to give her another hug and remind her

that God sees her too. But she has crossed the street and you cannot catch up with her for now. The nurse has finished with the patient and you seat yourself next to the bed. In that moment, you pray for this husband and wife in each of their struggles, you also pray for the nurse and the hospital and anyone else you can see at that moment. And while your heart aches with the enormity of the pain, you thank God that we are never alone, even in our darkest times.

The God who sees

It is a natural human response to suffering and injustice to cry out. Even if we are not sure to whom or what we cry, the act of crying out is a starting point in itself. But such cries are more pointed when directed at a God we believe to be good, who loves and wants the best for us. When experiencing tragedy, the "silence" of God can seem to mock the faithful sufferer. In the story of Job, for example, his physical sufferings

and losses were compounded by the questions raised about the nature of God and whether God had noticed His pain.

Yet, while we hear these questions echoing throughout the Bible and through human history, we also see God repeatedly introduced as a God who does see and hear the suffering of even "the least of these" (see Matthew 25). Amid all His creation, He notices even the fall of a single sparrow and, Jesus assures us, "you are worth more than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:31). It is a theme that returns through many stories of the Bible.

Hagar was in a difficult and traumatic family situation. She was an Egyptian by birth but we know nothing of the circumstances that found her taken away from her home country. As a servant in the household of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar was not able to choose where or how she would live. And when Sarah suggested her desperate plan for Abraham to have children, it is unlikely Hagar had any

choice in the matter. As bad as that idea seemed, it only became worse when the plan seemed like it was working. Sarah began to resent the pregnant Hagar and, as the situation became unbearable, Hagar ran away—a pregnant woman, alone in a foreign country, in the desert, perhaps fearing for her life.

But even in the depths of this injustice done to her and her extreme physical situation, Hagar was not really alone or forgotten. An angel came to her with a message that God had seen her predicament and she was not abandoned. He assured her that God was with her and working things out. The angel even gave her instructions about the baby she would have: “You shall name him Ishmael”—which means “God hears”—“for the Lord has heard of your misery” (Genesis 16:11). In her years of motherhood, every time she called her son’s name she would be reminded that in the worst situation of her life, God had witnessed her despair.

Hagar responded by giving a name to her God in return: “She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: ‘You are the God who sees me,’ for she said, ‘I have now seen the One who sees me’” (Genesis 16:13).

Not that everything went smoothly or fairly for her after this experience because a few years later she found herself in a similar situation, this time with her young son and about to die of thirst in the desert. Again an angel spoke with her, assuring her that God had seen her situation and “heard the boy crying” (Genesis 21:17).

And from these experiences, we have one of the most profound and comforting names given to God—“the God who sees me.” It’s a name that anyone throughout history can call, whatever their circumstances, distress, or suffering. God sees.

The God who hears

A few centuries later, a whole group of people—descendants

of the same family—were suffering, kept as slaves, abused by the Egyptians. Four hundred years is a long time to wait, especially when waiting in conditions of increasingly harsh slavery. God had promised that He would return to His people and bring them out of Egypt, but generation after generation was left to build the wealth and prestige of their idolatrous oppressors—and God seemed silent. Did He even notice their suffering? Had He forgotten them? Did He care?

Then God turns up. He appeared in a burning bush out in the remote desert to an unlikely leader—a fugitive prince and humbled shepherd named Moses. God gave the reluctant Moses a job to do and the first part of that job was to go back to the Israelites in Egypt with the message that God had heard and seen their oppression: “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering” (Exodus 3:7).

Yes, God did care. In fact, He was about to do something to dramatically change their situation. Not that it was automatic or instant. Their conditions in Egypt became worse before they were able to escape with God's leading, and the fulfilment of the plan God had outlined to Moses took many years more. But, like Hagar, the realization that God had heard their cries for help was a significant turning point in their experience and in their relationship with God despite their circumstances: "when they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped" (Exodus 4:31).

The God who feels

That God is a God who sees and hears the cries of the poor and oppressed is comforting. That God is a God who, in Jesus, has experienced and endured the worst of our world's inhumanity, oppression,

and injustice is astounding. Despite all the compassion and goodness Jesus demonstrated in His life and ministry, His death came as a result of hatred, jealousy, and injustice.

From Jesus' anguished prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane to His arrest, "trials," torture, mocking, crucifixion and death, He endured a gruelling ordeal of pain, cruelty, and evil, oppressive power. All of this was exacerbated by the innocence, purity, and goodness of the One who suffered it. Through the lens of salvation's story, we see the beauty of Jesus' sacrifice for us, but we should not forget the brutality of the suffering and injustice He experienced.

While the priests and religious leaders hated Jesus, they needed to find a charge they could press against Him. The trial they conducted contravened many of their established legal practices. It was a farce—conducted with haste and expediency to reach their desired outcome. "Many testified falsely against him, but

their statements did not agree" (Mark 14:56). Even when the leaders brought Jesus to Pilate's court, they still had not agreed on a relevant crime and Pilate "knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him" (Matthew 27:18).

That Jesus was crucified after such strong statements from His judge confirming His innocence underlines the horrible injustice done to Him (see Isaiah 53:8). In Jesus, God knows what it feels like to be a victim of evil, injustice, and violence. God has so identified Himself with us in our broken and fallen condition that we cannot doubt His empathy, compassion, and faithfulness: "For we do not have a high priest [Jesus] who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (Hebrews 4:15). In Jesus, God has experienced the depths of the pain and sorrow of this world. He sees, He hears, and He knows what our worst experiences feel like. He's been there.

Breaking the silence

Throughout the Bible's story, there is a repeated call from God's people—particularly those experiencing slavery, exile, oppression, occupation, poverty, or other injustice or tragedy—for God to intervene. The slaves in Egypt, the Israelites in Babylon, and many others called out to God to see and hear their suffering and to intervene to right these wrongs.

The Psalms are full of laments about the apparent prosperity and good fortune of the wicked, while the righteous are abused, exploited, and poor. The psalmist repeatedly calls on God to intervene, trusting that the world is not presently working in the way God created it or desires it, and taking up the cry of the prophets and oppressed. "How long, O Lord?" (see, for example, Psalm 94:3-7). The people of God will always have a sense of impatience about injustice and poverty—and God's seeming inaction is another source of impatience.

But when we have heard God's voice and trusted in His care, mercy, and compassion for us—and all those who suffer in whatever ways—we become a voice for God amid the suffering and injustice of others. We might not be able to remove or remedy the suffering of others—ultimately, some situations and circumstances will only be set right in the process of God's final judgment and re-creation. But as people who know and trust a God who sees, hears, and feels, we are also called to share their pain, and to shine the light of God's mercy and love into their darkness. God hears, and we are one of the ways in which He speaks in response.

Imagine God watching that wife cross the road on her sad and lonely journey home. Imagine God walking through the corridors of a hospital in your community. Imagine God watching a TV news broadcast and how He might respond. Imagine God hearing the stories of your neighbours who are going through a difficult time in their family's life. Imagine what He would like us to do to serve in our family, our community, and our world. ●

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- 1. How important is it to you that God is a God who sees the suffering of people in the world and hears their cries for help? What does this tell you about God?**
- 2. How does reflecting on the suffering and injustice Jesus experienced help you face suffering and injustice?**
- 3. How does God's compassion and concern for the "last, the least, and the lost" affect our attitudes and actions toward those in need around us?**

Y O U N G A D U L T S W E E K O F P R A Y E R : D A Y T H R E E

THE GOD *who* **STOOPS**

Washing another person's feet is one of the most profound symbols and memorials of the Christian faith. It is also a pattern for how we should put our faith into practice between the times when we might do it literally in a church or worship setting. As disciples of the God who stooped, Christian believers should be people who stoop in service to their fellow human beings, particularly to those in need.

It is Jesus who was first to stoop—and to set this profound example of attitude and action: “It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end... he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him” (John 13:1-5). Another Bible translation makes it more explicit, that on this night and in this act, “he showed them the full extent of his love” (NLT, margin note). (Also see Psalm 18:35 and Philippians 2:5-7.)

Throughout John's apostolic writing—his gospel and letters—the love of God is a constant theme, particularly because he had experience in knowing Jesus; so it is interesting to note what John regarded as the crescendo of this refrain. This was the moment that showed the “full extent” of that love.

God, washing the feet of His dusty and doubting disciples one by one. According to John, this was the greatest, most profound expression of the love of God—demonstrated in an act of incredible humility and service.

Note: Washing feet was a social custom of the first century because people wore open sandals on very dusty roads. It was a humble duty, usually done by a servant.

Jesus—“God with us”

We will never understand the dramatic stooping action of God in becoming human in the person of Jesus. The Creator of the universe became a creature. The unlimited Ruler of the universe became a human baby with all our physical limitations. What all that means is a profound mystery—but a wonderful and world-changing mystery. Even just before John tells us about what Jesus did on that night, he pauses in the story to remind us of exactly who was doing this: “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things

under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God” (John 13:3).

We need to remember this reality whenever we hear the stories of Jesus. The most profound stories about Jesus are not the big crowds, the great stories, and the public miracles, but the time He spent with individual people—the woman at the well, Nicodemus in a late-night conversation, conversations with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in their home, the time and attention He gave to each of His disciples in different personalized ways, intimate conversations with people as He healed them, calling Zaccheus down from his tree, Mary in the garden the morning of the resurrection, the walk to Emmaus with two disappointed believers, cooking breakfast on the beach for a few of His disciples. In each of these moments, we see the God of the universe interacting personally with one person at a time, as if they were all that mattered to Him in the whole universe. By so many standards, it’s terribly

inefficient, perhaps even risky and wasteful, but a remarkable insight into what God is like and the love He has for every one of us.

And this is the same Jesus who stoops to wash the disciples’ feet one by one. A most personal act, as well as a powerful symbol—an enactment—of what Jesus as “God with us” (see Matthew 1:23) was about: demonstrating the full extent of His love.

Stooping to wash feet

There is still another element in John’s introduction to this story of Jesus the great servant. He realized that Jesus knew what was going on in the dark background to that night: “the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus” (John 13:2). Jesus “knew who was going to betray him” (verse 11) and where that would end for both Him and for Judas. Within a few hours, their fates would be finalized.

But for now, the meal was already in progress, yet no one had arranged for or offered to wash the feet of the group. So Jesus, the Son of God, performed an act of great humility and wonder. The picture of the God of the universe stooping to wash the feet of a group of ordinary men is amazing. Added to this wonder is the cultural stigma attached to foot-washing in those days—it was the work of the lowest servants—not to mention the fact that the feet He washed included those of the one who was about to betray Him to His enemies and another who was going to deny knowing Him later that night.

The “servanthood” of God is one of the most profound realities of the Christian faith, something that we who should know too easily take for granted. Even in the most faithful of His saints, this example of humility is a struggle. It is a kind of love that transcends the best humanity can offer or even fully understand. “The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful

thing—the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world. The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing—to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich . . . The world is always bewildered by its saints. And then there is the love for the enemy—love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens and inflicts pain. The tortured’s love for the torturer. This is God’s love. It conquers the world” (Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, page 105).

The ultimate stoop: Jesus, the God-Man was dead

This act was the beginning of a 24-hour ordeal that ended with the tortured, crucified, and dead Jesus being placed in a borrowed tomb as the sun set that Friday evening. In one

sense, His stooping to wash the disciples’ feet was the prelude to stooping lower still to lift the whole world toward resurrection and hope: “He goes down to come up again and to bring the whole ruined world up with Him. . . . He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders” (C S Lewis, *Miracles*, page 179).

Sampling from various Old Testament passages to build the argument, the whole of Hebrews 1 is a testimony to the absolute Godness of Jesus. “Through the Son he made the universe and everything in it. The Son reflects God’s own glory, and everything about him represents God exactly. He sustains the universe by the mighty power of his command. After he died to cleanse us from the stain of sin, he sat down in the place of honour at the right hand of the majestic God of heaven” (Hebrews 1:2, 3).

Jesus was God—eternal, Creator, Sustainer. Some of the disciples and friends of Jesus who stood watching His death from a distance had heard that affirmation from among themselves (see Matthew 16:13-16) and from the voice of God Himself (see Matthew 17:5). Now—on that hill just over there—God-Man was dead.

It was a humility, a nothingness that stooped as low as non-existence. Death always brings shattering and shuddering, but the death of the God-Man was so much more—world-shattering, universe-shuddering, but also world-changing and world-redeeming.

Author Douglas Coupland was once asked his greatest fear. He replied: “That God exists, but doesn’t care very much for humans.” In Jesus and His crucifixion, God reversed this great fear: God does care very much for humans—so much that He was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice to demonstrate that care, and to make possible our eternal

reconnection, rescue, and relationship with Him.

The stooping attitude

It is little wonder Paul uses these pictures of the humility and servanthood of a God who stoops as the greatest expression of God’s glory and love—and how we are to live them out in our lives: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8).

In response to this goodness and overwhelming humility, we are to hold, practice, and share our faith with that same humility. We expend

ourselves—personally and corporately—in serving and seeking the best for those with whom we share our lives and our world. It is little wonder the prophet Micah linked the quest for justice and mercy with the imperative to “walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8, NLT).

The temptation of God’s followers is to seek to reside with God on the mountaintops of spiritual experiences. This was Peter’s ill-informed suggestion on the Mount of Transfiguration that they should set up shelters in that time and place (see Matthew 17:4). But this is not God’s way. Practical humility is about coming down from the mountain to walk amid and with people who are lost, threatened, or suffering—risking ourselves for their healing, helping, and saving.

He stayed

Carl Wilkens had been the country director for the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in Rwanda for about four

years in April 1994 when he found himself in the midst of one of the most horrific situations of recent history. During the following 100 days, more than 800,000 Rwandans were murdered in a frenzy of ethnically motivated killing as the rest of the world ignored it or merely looked on.

Church, ADRA, and United States government representatives urged Wilkens and his family to escape the unfolding genocide, but he knew his departure would leave members of his staff in serious danger. While his wife, children, and parents evacuated to Kenya, Wilkens stayed and did what he could to help and protect others caught in the madness of those three months.

Wilkens's experience during that time was published in his 2011 book *I'm Not Leaving*. But this is not a history of the Rwandan horror; rather, it is a more personal story. Wilkens tells stories of working to save lives in ordinary and extraordinary ways, and

he reflects on how these experiences changed his relationships with his family, God, and others.

As such, *I'm Not Leaving* is a story of hope, rather than horror—although the horror is only just out of sight. Wilkens's task is to personalize the people who endured these tragedies, undoing the work of the murderers whose method was to objectify their victims. His is a story of courage and faith, demonstrating that these virtues do matter even in the most brutal of circumstances, where life was both heartbreakingly tenuous and stubbornly resilient. Amid these extremes, Wilkens lived out what it means to put everything on the line for others, simply because it was the right thing to do.

Wilkens's story is a call to live courageously, faithfully, humbly and compassionately, whatever the cost, and to trust God with our lives and our service to Him and others. It's a story of someone who demonstrated "the same

mindset as Christ Jesus" in a remarkable way.

God still stoops

Jesus demonstrated His love by serving as "God with us" in a historical time and place in the messiness of our world. That is what He does in our lives, in our various challenges and troubles. And that is what He is still doing in our world today, if only we look out for Him. God still stoops to serve—you, me, us, everyone—even when we betray and deny Him. As both John and Paul described it, it is Jesus' greatest act, showing the "full extent of His love."

After He had washed their feet, Jesus invited His disciples—as He also invites us—to join Him in this attitude and action: "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now

that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (John 13:14-17). ●

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **In what ways does something as simple as washing the disciples' feet show "the full extent" of God's love?**
2. **It is not a natural human attitude, so how can we "have the same mindset as Christ Jesus"?**
3. **How can we make this "same mindset as Christ Jesus" a reality in our lives?**

"Many feel that it would be a great privilege to visit the scenes of Christ's life on earth, to walk where He trod, to look upon the lake beside which He loved to teach, and the hills and valleys on which His eyes so often rested. But we need not go to Nazareth, to Capernaum, or to Bethany in order to walk in the steps of Jesus. We shall find His footprints beside the sickbed, in the hovels of poverty, in the crowded alleys of the great city, and in every place where there are human hearts in need of consolation. In doing as Jesus did when on earth, we shall walk in His steps" (Ellen G White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 640).



Exiting the building to be the Church
Leaving the barracks to be the Army

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Y O U N G A D U L T S W E E K O F P R A Y E R : D A Y F O U R

FOR GOD
so **LOVED**
the **WORLD...**

If you have been around a church for a while, it is something that you might have heard many times. It is a personalized “version” of John 3:16. Sometimes used as part of an appeal to accept Jesus as “your personal Saviour,” it goes something like this: “For God so loved [insert your name here] that He gave His one and only Son, so that if [insert your name here] believes in Him, [insert your name here] shall not perish but have eternal life.”

For all the wonderful complexity we find in the Bible’s story of God, the heart of the gospel can be summarized in a single sentence that even a child can memorize and begin to understand. And this personalized version of this well-known Bible verse is a valuable way of emphasizing the personal love of God for each of us and the choice each of us has to make to accept God’s gift offered through Jesus. As such, this adaptation of the well-loved verse portrays an awe-inspiring and life-changing truth.

Perhaps it is also a world-changing truth. In acknowledging our sinfulness and lostness, we take a significant step in acknowledging the primary problem in our world—ourselves—our selfishness and reluctance to accept that we are part of the problem. In retelling a conversation with a friend about the need for confession in growing a relationship with God, writer Don Miller suggests, “Perhaps you can see [confession] as an act of social justice. The entire world is falling apart because nobody will admit they are wrong. But by asking God to forgive you, you are willing to own your own [rubbish]” (Blue Like Jazz, page 53). As John 3:16 emphasizes, both sin and salvation are realities we need to take personally—and seriously.

But we also must remember that this personalized version of John 3:16 is not what the verse says; if read in only this way, we can be tempted to a shallow embrace of salvation and risk missing so much more that is involved with a deeper reading of this Bible verse.

That old argument

Too often salvation—as we often talk about it—seems to be all about getting me into heaven one day. It’s surprising to think that even our theological discussions might be self-centered. If we are driven by “value for money” and “what’s in it for me?”—unless we exercise great care—such attitudes can flow into even our most devout reflections. In this sense, too often it seems we are looking for salvation at the cheapest price possible.

Undeniably, we are saved only by the grace of God: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no-one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8, 9). But Paul continues in the next verse and recognizes another aspect of this relationship: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (verse 10).

James expands on this facet of salvation: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? . . . In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:14, 17).

In the big and eternal picture of salvation, we are saved by what Jesus has done for us and we take hold of that by faith. But in the practical aspect of living life today, that salvation should trigger a life lived in partnership with God as a member of the present kingdom of God. The call of God repeated throughout the Bible is to a life of faith and a life of faithfulness. It is not so much about gaining salvation as it is about living and serving joyfully in the light of salvation.

When we begin to appreciate the wonder and mystery of the unfailing love of God, we respond with faith and gratitude and we seek His goodness in our lives and for those around us. We live with as much faith and as many good “works” as we can muster, realizing these are themselves gifts from God and that neither of them adds anything to our salvation or to God’s abundant provision.

Read it again

John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world . . .”—and the original Greek word for “world” is kosmos, meaning “the world as a created, organised entity” (Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Vol 5, page 929). That “John 3:16 is about me” is an important starting point; that the plan of salvation so neatly summarized in this verse has implications for everyone and the whole of creation is something we need to spend more time exploring.

Of course, this is not about mounting an argument for universalism—that everyone will be “saved” regardless of their choices for or against God and His plan. Instead, the focus is on God’s love that reaches out to all and His purpose of working through those who choose to cooperate with Him to redeem and ultimately recreate the whole creation. It is a broader understanding of salvation, stepping away from the temptation to self-centeredness that sometimes mars the understanding of

salvation that can arise from individualistic ways of thinking.

Yes, salvation is about me and my saving relationship with God—but it is not merely about me. Theologian N. T. Wright puts it like this: “Justification is not just about ‘how I get my sins forgiven.’ It is about how God creates, in the Messiah Jesus and in the power of the Spirit, a single family, celebrating their once-for-all forgiveness and their assured ‘no condemnation’ in Christ, through whom his purpose can now be extended into the wider world” (Justification: God’s plan and Paul’s vision, page 248).

We can, perhaps, readily accept that God loves people other than just ourselves. He loves those we love and we can rejoice in that. He also loves those people we reach out to in our communities, and our realization of His love for everyone should be a motivation for reaching out to let them know of His far-reaching love. But He also loves those we are afraid of, those we don’t know how to

show and share God’s love to. God loves people—all people, everywhere, all the time. God’s favor is not limited to our favor.

Creation is one way we see this demonstrated. The Bible consistently points to the world around us as evidence of God’s goodness. Paul urges that all people have an opportunity to encounter God through His creation: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20). Jesus also referred to the natural world and the created order as evidence of God’s love and a means by which all people are recipients of His grace: “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). As well as all the goodness of the natural world, life itself is a gift from God and, regardless of the individual’s response or attitude to God, every person is a recipient of that grace.

Renewing relationships

But even this reading does not do justice to the breadth of John 3:16's "for God so loved the world . . ." The second half of this verse places the focus of God's plan of salvation as a way of offering eternal life to "whoever believes in him" (John 3:16b). The real danger of "perishing" results from the relationship with God being broken by the first human sin. We can only ever personally come to God as fallen human beings. When we accept this gift of salvation, our relationship with God is restored. In response to how much God has loved us, the gift He gave us in His Son and the promise we have of eternal life, we are made new and we grow toward all the right relationships God created us to enjoy, including our relationships with others and the world beyond ourselves.

Obviously, human beings have a special place in salvation and Creation, and more attention is given to human creation in Genesis 1 and 2 than to the rest of the story. But the first "definition" of what it means to be human includes being created in the image of God and situated in relationship to the rest of creation (see Genesis 1:26). Creation is important to who we are as human beings in relation to God and, while humans are the central part of Creation,

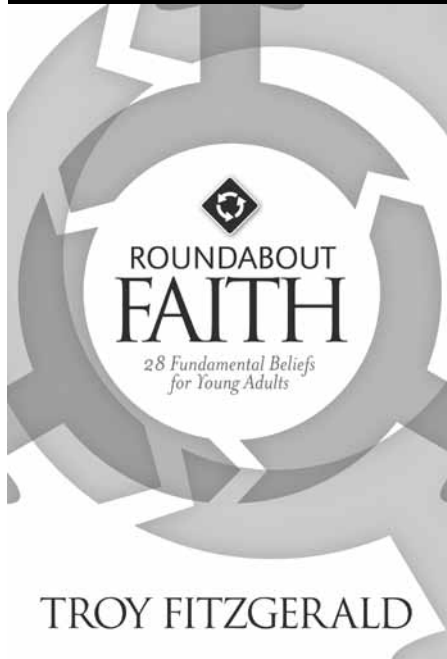
it is clear God also has a special concern for the rest of the created world.

When Adam and Eve chose to disobey God, all of creation was affected. The reality of sin changed the relationships between God and humanity, between humanity and nature and, it seems, between God and all His creation (see Genesis 3). God is still the Creator, and He still orders and sustains all of life. But perhaps in similar ways to the change in the relationship between God and His people, God's relationship to Creation is rendered less direct and more difficult.

Not that there are not still glimpses of God in the created world. As noted above, God still speaks and works in and through the natural world. And somehow, the creation and the creatures themselves have voices that offer praise to God and echo the relationship for which they were created: "Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds. . . . Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens" (Psalm 148:7-13).

But even in this ordered praise the tones are muted, the celebration is incomplete, and the brokenness is evident. The praise is mingled with groans (see Romans 8:22). Life is punctuated by death. Creation is beset by decay—and somehow yearns for re-creation: "For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will

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be liberated from its bondage to decay" (Romans 8:19-21).

In a sense, the dislocation of creation because of human sin was most visibly demonstrated at the Crucifixion. C. S. Lewis described the Resurrection as the "great miracle" that introduced an entirely different kind of possibility into the world, but the death of the world's Creator within the confines and limitations of that world must be no less a magnitude of "anti-miracle." It is little wonder that nature turned away and violently revolted at this darkest moment in human history (see Matthew 27:45-51). But even in this darkest of moments, the Creator was working to recreate—even the Creator's death opened the way for re-creation. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son . . ."

Agents of re-creation

When we are invited into a new life in relationship with God because of what

Jesus has done for us by His death, we are also called back to our relationship with God that originally saw human beings established as "stewards"—as caretakers and gardeners—of His creation. God's ultimate plan is for the world to be restored to its original goodness. Death will be defeated (see 1 Corinthians 15:26) and the impacts of sin and death will be removed (see Revelation 21:1-5). As such, we are called not only to accept His offer of salvation, but to live for and share that salvation in our world today in anticipation of the complete re-creation promised by God. We are saved by grace as a gift of God and recreated as "God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). When we are saved, we are also called to the roles He created us to live out in our world.

This has significant implications for how we understand our response to God's salvation and our relationship to the world in which we have been

created and recreated: "We are not saved from the world of creation, but saved for the world of creation (Romans 8:18-26). Humans were made to take care of God's wonderful world, and it is not too strong to say that the reason God saves humans is not simply that he loves them for themselves but that he loves them for what they truly are—his pro-creators, his stewards, his vice-regents over creation" (N. T. Wright, *Justification*, page 234). The whole world should benefit from the renewed relationships between God and His people.

Because God so loved us, we are called to love what He loves. Because "God so loved the world"—"as a created, organized entity"—so must we. Because we have accepted God's gift of salvation, we seek that same salvation and re-creation for our fellow human beings and ultimately look forward to the re-creation of the whole created world. And in a specific and special way, we are now God's agents for serving, preserving, helping, and healing in our world. ●

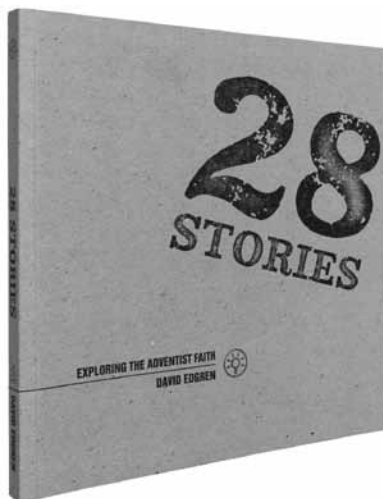
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. How would you explain salvation to a non-Christian friend?**
- 2. How important is God's grace in our relationship with Him?**
- 3. What are some of the ways in which God's grace extends even to those who might not believe in Him?**
- 4. What does it mean to be a "steward" of creation? How does our care for creation affect other people?**

From the author of the 2013 *Junior Youth Week of Prayer*

28 STORIES

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Y O U N G A D U L T S W E E K O F P R A Y E R : D A Y F I V E

THE GREATER COMMISSION

When German forces occupied Hungary in March of 1944, the Holocaust machine went into overdrive. The genocide was swift, claiming 600,000 lives. More than 450,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to the Auschwitz death camp in the seven weeks between May and July, the fastest rate of deportation of the Holocaust. Most were sent to the gas chambers on arrival. One-third of Auschwitz's Jewish victims were Hungarians.

In the midst of this madness, Laszlo Michnay's reputation grew. Hungarian Jews believed the president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Hungary was nothing short of saintly. At extraordinary risk to his life and his family, he fed, hid, and saved numerous Jews in his home and church during this time of extreme persecution.

Pastor Michnay's determination to help the Jews was sealed when, during his attendance at church conferences in Germany in 1936 and Poland in 1941, he witnessed the anti-Semitism and atrocities beginning to become evident in those nations. Surmising it was only a matter of time before the Nazis steamrolled into Hungary, he prepared for the impending local holocaust: with the aid of church donations and an inheritance, he stockpiled non-perishable food and planned a network of safe houses.

In the early 1940s, Pastor Michnay implored his congregation to help the oppressed Jews. People walked out of the church because they were sure he was going to be arrested. They were afraid, but he was never harmed. However, the Hungarian Seventh-day Adventist churches ultimately were closed as the German SS heard about and focused on Pastor Michnay's seditious sermons.

Near the end of World War II, an order was issued from the local German headquarters that they were going to execute every member of the Michnay family the next day because they were hiding Jews. But that night the Germans, in the misguided belief the Russian army was dangerously close, left the street. In the subsequent chaos, the family escaped their fate. This was just one of many times the family was miraculously saved.

The church basement was filled with Jewish people who

were provided with mattresses and blankets. Some were falsely taken in as relatives. Pastor Michnay turned no one away. Everyone—including the family—ate one meal a day, usually a bowl of soup.

The number of people the Michnay family hid fluctuated according to available space and the danger in Budapest. He sent many to the countryside to safe houses belonging to a network of Seventh-day Adventist ministers who were never detected.

Acting a sermon

Some 60 years after these events, this story of Pastor Michnay was printed in an Australian national newspaper, coinciding with an exhibition at the Sydney Jewish Museum that included his story as someone who had migrated to Australia in later life. While his sermons may have been remembered for their effect, the content is less remembered. But his greatest sermons are those actions that demonstrated God's

concern for the persecuted and the oppressed, the hungry and the homeless, putting himself on the line to serve and save.

It's a kind of "preaching" that deserves greater attention and practice. The verses known as the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) are among the best known in the Bible—by Christians. They have been often described as the "Christian's mission statement" and have been emphasized, analyzed, and prioritized to explain all kinds of mission and evangelistic projects; mostly these focus on going, making, baptizing, and teaching—a formulation that has been picked apart and put together in various ways.

But sometimes we detach or skip the opening and closing statements of this commission: "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. . . . And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'" (Matthew 28:18, 20b). This commission begins and ends

with Jesus. His personality, power, and presence are the context in which His disciples are to accept and fulfil His mission. As such, we need to remember that these instructions to Jesus' first disciples were not so much a new assignment but more a continuation of the mission Jesus had already been working among them.

The mission of Jesus

Whether it was the prescribed reading for the day or Jesus intentionally found the relevant verses (Isaiah 61:1, 2) in the scroll He was given to read, it was no coincidence these verses were the text for His first public sermon: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18, 19). Neither is it a

coincidence that the story of Jesus' short sermon—"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21)—begins Luke's record of Jesus' public ministry.

Jesus—and Luke in his retelling of Jesus' story—used the prophecy of Isaiah to explain what Jesus was doing and was about to do. These verses from Isaiah 61 were adopted as Jesus' mission statement. His ministry and mission were to be both spiritual and practical, and He would demonstrate that the spiritual and practical are not as far apart as we sometimes assume. For Jesus and His disciples, caring for people physically and practically was at least part of caring for them spiritually.

Sometime later, Jesus' cousin and forerunner, John, sent messengers to Jesus to ask the key question: "Are you the One?" While John may have had mixed motives for the questions, perhaps even hoping to prompt Jesus to action on his behalf—he got the question right.

Yet Jesus' response might be different than what we expect—except that it echoes what we have already seen, what Jesus said He had come to do: "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Luke 7:22). For Jesus, it seems His practical ministry—care for those in need and practical love in action—should have been enough to convince or at least remind John that Jesus was the One whom John had previously declared Him to be.

The first commission

In Matthew's story of the commissioning of the disciples, when Jesus finalized the group of twelve special followers it seems the first thing He did was to send them out. He gave them an assignment with specific instructions: "As you go, proclaim this message: The

kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 10:7). This was the good news He wanted them to practice sharing—in this first instance, working only in their local communities. So when He left them with His final instructions to go and evangelize, to be His witnesses, to share good news (see Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8), it was not a new undertaking but rather a broader field for the mission they had already been learning and doing.

About 2,000 years later, we find ourselves as part of the same story and the same mission. Jesus also instructs us to share the good news. But the key to evangelism—and how we do evangelism—is considering what it is that we are to share.

Obviously, the good news is a message. We tell of how God created our world and that, after it went wrong, He has worked—and is still working—through history toward recreating it. We tell of how we were hopeless but that something changed in our lives when we somehow

connected with the reality of God, and we now live by different motivations and priorities. We tell of how Jesus came to announce that “the Kingdom of Heaven has come near” and how we live in anticipation of that kingdom being made complete when He returns.

One of the ways to do this is to realize that the good news is also an action. Jesus’ further instructions to His disciples were to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give” (Matthew 10:8). These instructions repeat Jesus’ mission statement in Luke 4:18, 19. This good news was to make a real difference in the lives of the poor, the oppressed, the hurting, and the hopeless. And, if it doesn’t, can it really be considered good news?

Not only is this a vital component of the good news taught and practiced by Jesus, it is also key to its effectiveness and attractiveness: “The world cannot argue with a

church that lives in the pain of society’s poor. The integrity of this form of Christianity silences the harshest of critics, because they know genuine love and compassion when they see it” (Tony Campolo and Gordon Aeschliman, *Everybody Wants to Change the World*, page 13).

As the disciples went from town to town, announcing the kingdom of heaven and healing the sick, helping the poor and giving of themselves, it is easy to imagine that the obvious question they would be asked in each community they visited is why they were doing these things and who had sent them. In answer, they would have enthusiastically told the people about their Teacher and Friend—a man called Jesus—and begun to explain to them the little they understood about who He was and the difference He had made in their lives.

Ultimately, the good news is a Person. Jesus selected His disciples “that they might be with him and that he might

send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14), and that friendship and commission became the foundation of any and all evangelism they were to do. They came to recognize in Jesus a life-changing Godness and a world-embracing love—and they couldn’t stop talking about it (see 1 John 1:1-3).

When we spend time getting to know Jesus, we begin to discover a Friend and a friendship we would be telling others about even if Jesus had not specifically instructed us to do so. The good news is about Jesus. Indeed, the good news is Jesus. And that’s why it’s worth sharing and living out.

Therefore, go . . .

As a result of their mission, training, service trips, and personal experiences with Jesus, His followers were instructed, “therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have

commanded you” (Matthew 28:19, 20). Their ministry in His name was to reflect and enact the values and principles of Jesus’ ministry and the kingdom He invited them to. They were to join with Jesus in His mission to lift up the last, the least, and the lost.

Church discussions sometimes seem to get stuck on the apparent need to choose between a focus on service or witnessing, justice or evangelism. But when we better understand each of these concepts and observe the ministry of Jesus, the difference breaks down and we realize that kingdom action—particularly serving others—is a form of proclamation and leads naturally to an invitation. Pastor Michnay preached his most enduring sermons in the lives he saved and what it cost him and his family to protect others. Perhaps our opportunities to serve might not be so dramatic or life-threatening, but we don’t choose one action or another. Rather, we work with God in working with people, meeting their real needs using

whatever resources God has entrusted us with.

In one of Ellen White’s best-known statements, she explained it like this: “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior 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.’ . . . The poor are to be relieved, the sick cared for, the sorrowing and the bereaved comforted, the ignorant instructed, the inexperienced counselled. We are to weep with those that weep, and rejoice with those that rejoice” (The Ministry of Healing, page 143).

As we have seen, these two kingdom actions—service and evangelism—were closely entwined in Jesus’ first commission to His disciples, and that is how His later and greater commission should be similarly understood and lived out. At its best, evangelism—bringing the good news

of hope, rescue, repentance, transformation, and God's all-embracing love—is an act of service. And, rightly understood, service is evangelism, proclaiming and enacting the kingdom of God in ways people cannot help but notice in our lives—and theirs. ●

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Read Luke 4:16–21. Is this how you would respond to similar questions about the divinity, messiah-ship, and mission of Jesus?**
- 2. Why do you think we sometimes have the tendency to separate service and evangelism as alternative Christian activities?**
- 3. As Jesus described it, the good news was to make a difference in the lives of the poor, the oppressed, the hurting, and the hopeless. If the Gospel doesn't have these positive and practical results, can it really be considered good news? Why or why not?**



The poster features a large, semi-transparent '2013' at the top. Below it, the dates 'July 1-13' and 'Pretoria - South Africa' are displayed. The main title 'impact South Africa' is in a bold, white font, with 'Jesus in the city' in a smaller, lighter font underneath. Below that, it reads '3rd World Conference on Youth and Community Service'. The central graphic is a globe with a crosshair pattern overlaid on it. At the bottom, the website 'www.gcyouthministries.org' is printed in white.

2013
July 1-13
Pretoria - South Africa

impact South Africa
Jesus in the city

3rd World Conference on Youth and Community Service

www.gcyouthministries.org

Y O U N G A D U L T S W E E K O F P R A Y E R : D A Y S I X

AGENTS *of* **JUSTICE** *and* **BEAUTY**

The resurrection of Jesus changes everything. It is the core fact—the central event—of Christianity and, as such, sometimes kind of merely assumed rather than truly remembered and celebrated. But we cannot overestimate the significance of what happened that Sunday morning after Jesus was crucified, and we should take every opportunity to remind ourselves of this astounding reality and its implications for everything—all our lives, all our dreams, all our hopes.

So much of what we take for granted about life and death—what is important and meaningful—comes to us from the culture in which we are born, educated, and live. We simply breathe in so much of our worldviews from what others around us take for granted—which is another reason that remembering the Resurrection is so valuable; it is a story powerful enough to jolt our worldviews and taken-for-granted, opening us to not just a new way of looking at life but a new kind of life, with different ways of telling our stories, different values, and different priorities.

Perhaps the Resurrection has its most profound effect on how we measure our lives and our attitude to winning and losing. Christian writer Ron Sider puts it like this: “Those who understand the empty tomb can afford to lose now” (I am Not a Social Activist). Because of the sacrifice—the loss—of Jesus and His resurrection victory, faithfulness is always more important than success, no matter how we measure that success. Not only is what Jesus did the foundation for this reassessment of our lives, it is also the model: “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

When “we understand the empty tomb” we can confront our inevitable disappointments and losses in a different way. No longer do we have to win, guard, and maintain our image or be a “success” to justify our place in the world or our sense of worth. No longer does our opinion have to win every argument or have the last word. The last word—or

the Word that will be the last word—has already been spoken.

Of course, it is precisely this assurance that means we do not have to be so uptight about winning and losing today. So often contrary to the values assumed and imposed upon us in almost everything we are told and taught, the eternal realities of the Resurrection—life free us from the need for immediate results and instant wins. “Our response to the hope we have for eternity is to commit ourselves to working for God in the here and now, knowing that what we do has eternal significance” (Julie Clawson, *Everyday Justice*).

The Resurrection must change everything. In the Resurrection, Jesus turned the tide of history. It is a guarantee of new life and a new world to come but also the beginning of a new kind of life that has now broken into our world. The kingdom of God is already with us, even if not yet complete. With this realization, we begin to see this as a reality in which we can

participate and even contribute to today, perhaps particularly as agents of justice and beauty in a world that desperately needs more of both.

Justice

We believe God is going to judge the world and to return to set right the wrongs that are done in the world, so we should embrace the Bible’s call for justice and begin to live in ways that are consistent with how the world will be. In working and serving, we partner with God in how He serves the world today and in building toward His coming kingdom. As Creator but also as Someone who hears the cries of the poor, God is working to serve and care for us all, even those we might sometimes overlook: “He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the foreigner and

sustains the fatherless and the widow” (Psalm 146:7-9).

While we might feel overwhelmed by the needs we see around us and, at times, in our own lives, it’s God who does it—He gives, frees, upholds, watches over, and serves. Remarkably, one of the ways He does that is through His people—us. Again, we are invited to join in His mission to our world with what He is already doing—continuing what Jesus did and serving Him by serving others.

While we appreciate acts of kindness and goodness, acts of service and justice have a broader impact, announcing that the hurt and brokenness we are seeking to address are not the way God desires them to be. When people ask how God could allow suffering, we seek to work with God to change it. We might not be able to fix lives in our communities but, working with God in this way, we can change them.

In the power of the Resurrection and the humility of Jesus, serving others and

seeking their good is one way we can show what God is really like, when He can be obscured by the wrong we see around us: “Search heaven and earth, and there is no truth revealed more powerful than that which is made manifest in works of mercy to those who need our sympathy and aid. This is the truth as it is in Jesus” (Ellen White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*).

Beauty

We believe God created and is going to recreate our world in perfection and beauty, so we should practice our God-given role as stewards of creation and co-creators of beauty, and again begin to live in ways that are consistent with how the world will be.

In *Breath*, a story by Australian writer Tim Winton, one of his characters describes his first glimpse of surfing: “I couldn’t have put words to it as a boy, but later I understood what seized my imagination that day. How strange it was to see

men do something beautiful. Something pointless and elegant, as though nobody saw or cared. . . . We never spoke about the business of beauty . . . but for me there was still the outlaw feeling of doing something graceful, as if dancing on water was the best and bravest thing a man could do.”

But in describing surfing as “pointless and beautiful,” perhaps Winton misses the point of beauty—that in a world created and loved by God, beauty is never pointless. Beginning with a creation that was “very good” (Genesis 1:31) to the Old Testament poetry that exults in the wonders of the Creator to Jesus’ pointing to the flowers on the hillside (see Matthew 6:28-30), beauty is always a glimpse of the power, goodness, and love of God, and an awakened appreciation of beauty is a step toward connecting with that reality.

The pointedness of beauty is why theologian N T Wright insists on beauty as a key component of what the

church should be pursuing in the world today: “The church should reawaken its hunger for beauty at every level. This is essential and urgent. It is essential to Christian living that we should celebrate the goodness of creation, ponder its present brokenness, and, insofar as we can, celebrate in advance the healing of the world, the new creation itself” (Simply Christian).

As a first step, we need to find ways to encourage art in its many forms in our churches and communities. Our church foyers or halls can be exhibition spaces; our worship can be more than just singing and speaking. Our artists need our prayers and practical support; our engagement with the community can include shared projects of creativity and beautification. We need to make space for our painters and photographers, sculptors and poets, writers and filmmakers, musicians and storytellers, dancers and actors, scrap-bookers and knitters, designers and animators.

In turn, our artists must be serious and joyous, honest but redemptive and hopeful.

But our understanding of beauty also needs to expand beyond the arts to encompass so many other things we easily take for granted. Beauty is also created by our gardeners and cooks, our builders and homemakers, our tree-planters and professionals, our carers and counsellors, our surfers and explorers, our mothers and friends.

And we are all part of it: there is engagement with beauty—and a contribution to it—in any moment of recognizing and appreciating something beautiful. Then, in pointing out or sharing beauty with another, we become evangelists of beauty and thus agents of the kingdom of God.

As human beings, we create in these and so many other ways because God created, continues to create, and will recreate a world in which beauty is never pointless: “He has surrounded you with beauty to teach you that you

are not placed on earth merely to delve for self, to dig and build, to toil and spin, but to make life bright and joyous and beautiful with the love of Christ—like the flowers, to gladden other lives by the ministry of love” (Ellen White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*).

This includes the creation or appreciation of beauty that we might otherwise be tempted to consider pointless. Amid the pain, fears, and sorrows of life, perhaps dancing on water—or whatever is your creative gift or passion—is among the best and bravest things a Christian can do.

Sharing the invitation

And it is in the context of serving God and serving others by seeking justice and beauty that our mission becomes something different. N T Wright puts it like this: “If we are engaging in the work of new creation, in seeking to bring advance signs of God’s eventual new world into being in the present, in justice and

beauty and a million other ways, then at the centre of the picture stands the personal call of the gospel of Jesus to every child, woman and man” (Surprised by Hope). It is a different way of understanding our mission. What if we understood evangelism as a gracious invitation to join in with the kind of life Jesus had and that focuses on working for, creating, and celebrating justice and beauty in our world today and in the world God has promised to recreate?

Of course, resurrection and the ultimate redemption of creation is the work of God, but the mission of the church is about participation in that life now, between ourselves as a community of faith and as the family of God, and in the various roles we play in our church community. And from this community this kind of life and hope should spill into our wider communities, families, workplaces, and all our relationships and interactions.

It is not necessarily easy, but Paul assures us that

somehow acts of goodness, justice, beauty, and evangelism done in this life matter and even somehow contribute to building God’s kingdom in our world now and in God’s future.

Almost paradoxically, our understanding of the Resurrection—meaning we can afford to lose—also means we can’t lose. 1 Corinthians 15 is one of the most profound New Testament chapters on the meaning of the Resurrection and the hope it offers us. It is a grand and sometimes lofty philosophical discourse, but Paul ends on a remarkably practical note: “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Living as part of the kingdom of God puts us out of step with the world around—in good ways. But it can also be difficult. When we serve others, we risk ourselves and we risk being disappointed. We can be

frustrated in working for justice. Our attempts at creativity and beauty might not seem to amount to much, but when we work in harmony with the kingdom of God, in the power of the Resurrection, nothing we do is in vain. ●



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Why do you think that Christians have sometimes overlooked the Bible’s calls to seek and create justice and beauty in the world?**
- 2. What activities, projects, or ministries are you already involved with that contribute to justice and/or beauty in large or small ways, even if you have not thought of them in that way before?**
- 3. What more could you do to create justice and beauty in your church and your community?**

Y O U N G A D U L T S W E E K O F P R A Y E R : D A Y S E V E N

ENERGIZER

beyond **ESCAPISM**

One of the long-standing criticisms of religion—and perhaps of Christianity in particular—is a tendency for this kind of faith to draw believers away from life here and now toward a longing for a better life in the hereafter, however that may be defined. The criticism is that the focus on another realm of life becomes a form of holy escapism and renders the believer of less benefit to the world and society in which they now live. In this line of thinking, the promise of the “sweet bye and bye”—to borrow from the traditional hymn—tends to dull the believer’s sensibilities to the joys and sorrows of living now.

Often believers have left themselves open to such criticism, even at times cultivating, preaching and practising these kinds of attitudes. There are many stories of sincere believers who, have been overwhelmed by the quest for holiness or the imminent end of the world, have withdrawn themselves from all active life to ensure their perfection or readiness.

Promises that change today

Perhaps Christianity is most open to such disparagement because of the Bible's strong focus on the promise of the second coming of Jesus and the hope of eternity in a perfectly recreated world. And, it must be said, there is an important element of escape in this promise.

In this worldview, our world is a fallen, broken and tragic place—and it would be absurd not to have some longing for a world made new. As we have already heard from Paul, all of creation “groans” for re-creation and “not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23). So an element of what might be criticized as escapism seems appropriate for those who embrace these promises. There is nothing wrong or misplaced in longing for the time when God will set the world right, will bring

an end to injustice, pain and sorrow, and will replace the current fear-filled disorder with His glorious and righteous kingdom.

In His sermon on the end of the world, Jesus spent the first half of his discourse—as we have it recorded in Matthew 24 and 25—detailing the need for escape, even getting to the point of saying that “if those days had not been cut short, no-one would survive” (Matthew 24:22). But this is more in the nature of an introduction to His explanation of the significance of these promises of God. To focus solely—or even primarily—on the “escape” aspect of the Christian hope for the future is incomplete for both the Christian and the critic.

Even in Matthew 24, Jesus repeats the injunction to live alertly in light of the promise of His return and He expands this in the second half of the sermon in Matthew 25, with three stories focused on how the believer should live while “waiting” for Jesus. It quickly

becomes clear that this waiting is not passive or escapist; rather it demands active engagement with life, others, and the world around us.

The first story is that of the ten bridesmaids or the wise and foolish virgins (see Matthew 25:1-13). This parable focuses on the need to build spiritual resources and resilience in our lives today, fitting us for life now and ultimately to be ready to celebrate and live with God when the world is recreated. But the focus is on the present duty in light of the potential delay of the return of the “bridegroom.”

Jesus' second story is the parable of the three servants, otherwise known as the parable of the talents (see Matthew 25:14-30). Three men are given different sums of money—representing the material resources and opportunities we are all given in different measures—and left to work with those on behalf of their master until he returns. Upon his return, they are to account for the use they have

made of what they were given. Two of the servants do well, but the other is too afraid to make use of his gift, leaving him open to the rebuke of his master and his being cast out of the household. Again the focus of the story is the time between the master leaving and his return, making the best use of the resources and opportunities we have.

The third story is commonly referred to as the parable of the sheep and the goats but has nothing to do with sorting or counting livestock (see Matthew 25:31-46). In short, this parable urges that how we live now, how we treat each other, and how we treat the less fortunate among us is important. This is the climax of Jesus' sermon. At the beginning of Matthew 24, Jesus' followers asked Him, "How will we know when the world is about to end and that You will return as promised?"—to which Jesus ultimately replies, "What matters most is how you live and how you treat people in the meantime."

Rather than being tempted to self-centred escapism, the promise of the Second Coming and a recreated world must be a call to a different way of living, serving and relating to those around us. Jesus' promises "fill the present with hope and this with energy. Because the future fills the present with meaning and purpose, we give ourselves to the needs of others, even to the reshaping of society. The Christian hope has vast social consequences. . . . We look back to see what the promises were; we look forward to see them fulfilled; we act now in the light of what is yet to be" (Peter Jensen, *The Future of Jesus*).

Living in the light of hope

The reality is that what we believe about the future has important implications on how we live now. Belying the caricature of the otherworldly believer focused only on a vague eternal bliss to come, a healthy reliance on the promises of God about His

future for our world should be the catalyst for energetic engagement, the spark for a life that is rich and deep and makes a difference to others.

By definition, Adventists—people who await this coming and this kingdom—are people of hope. But this hope is not about a distant spot of light. Almost counter-intuitively, hope is more about today than tomorrow. While hope looks to the future, a proper understanding of hope lights and transforms the present. With such hope, we begin to live now as we expect to in the future, and we begin working to make a difference now in ways that fit with how we expect the world will be one day

And this impulse is undeniably practical. Because we believe God's righteous intention will eventually become the ultimate reality for humanity, it makes sense for us to practise this way of living now and order our lives in such a way as to try to give reality to it. It is also something God's people will choose to do as those who

desire to live in the ways of God now.

Knowing that what happens to “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40, 45) matters to God, means it matters to those who are His people. And because we know that the political, economic, cultural and social power structures that perpetuate injustice in all its forms will be overthrown, we live in ways that by virtue of how we serve, how we forgive and how we love stands in striking and critical contrast to much of the world around us. By our lives, witness, presence and influence, we seek to undo the evil in our world. We know these forces and systems—and our participation in and benefit from them—are only ever temporary and, no matter how overwhelming they might seem, will not have the final word.

Undeniably, there is an element of escape in Jesus’ promises to come again. In a world with so much pain and sadness, it is appropriate to look forward to a better place

and a better way. According to the promises of God, that will come—but it is yet to come.

More importantly today, these promises change how we see today and energise how we respond. The promises of God call us to engagement with our world, doing what we can to confront the wrongs we see around us, heal the hurts in our human brothers and sisters, care for the world, celebrate the goodness we discover and share the hope that these promises give us.

As faltering and small as our efforts might be, we work with God to begin to recreate the world as—one day—He will ultimately and gloriously recreate it. When Jesus said, “I am going away and I am coming back to you” (John 14:28), He was also saying to His followers, “Live like it is true today—and that will make a difference.”

The hope of Judgment

But perhaps to really appreciate this impact of the promises of God and to be energised to living faithfully in such a way as to make a difference, we need to try to see the world as God sees it. When judgment is described in the Bible, most emphasis is placed on the goodness and the hope of God’s judgment. In Reflections on the Psalms, C S Lewis observes that the biblical writings of the Psalms and the Prophets “are full of the longing for judgment, and regard the announcement that ‘judgment’ is coming as good news.” This is the voice of the oppressed and the forgotten, crying out for the wrongs to be set right and for their complaints to be heard.

It is also a plea that someone should be taking note of the wrongs done in our world—and a reminder that Someone is. While suffering, oppression and tragedy are hard enough to bear in their own right, the injury or insult is harder still if it seems likely they are meaningless or unnoticed. The possible weightlessness of sorrow is heavier than its initial burden. A world without record or

consequences is the ultimate in cruel absurdity.

This is the essential argument of the Bible's Book of Ecclesiastes, a book that hardly fits with many attempts at neat formulations of faith. The philosopher's cry of "Meaningless! Meaningless!" echoes through the pages of this ancient wisdom literature, as item by item the various aspects of life as we know it are discounted as not worth the effort. Work, wealth, wisdom and pleasure are all dismissed as meaningless. Even the difference between good and evil is observed as often counting for little: "There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless" (Ecclesiastes 8:14).

But at the end of his diatribe, the philosopher takes a sudden turn. In the midst of his myriad of meaninglessness, he says, hold on a minute,

God is going to judge so everything is not meaningless; in fact, now everything and everyone matters. Therefore, "fear God and keep His commandments"—meaning love and honour God, and learn to do right and seek goodness (see Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14).

The hope of judgment comes down to what we believe about the core nature of God, life and the world in which we live. The Bible urges that we live in a world created and loved by God but which has gone wrong and in which God is working toward His plan for re-creation, pre-eminently through the life and death of Jesus. As we understand the story of our world, humanity has gone wrong and so many people are caught in the brokenness that has come with the victories of evil. So God's judgment is a key part of His setting our world right. For those on the receiving end of so many of the world's wrongs that is good news. And we only fail to appreciate this hope as we fail to hear the voices and see with the eyes

of those who are marginalised, brutalised and exploited.

But not only does this perspective give us a new appreciation of the hope of judgment, this hope then changes our view of others. "People who believe that God will turn the world upside down—people like Mary with her Magnificat, pulling down the mighty from their thrones and exalting the humble and meek [see Luke 1:46-55]—are not going to be backward in getting on with some world-changing in the present" (N T Wright, *Surprised By Hope*). As we look forward to God's promise to judge the world and join our lives with His mission to set our world right ultimately and forever, the hope of judgment begins to change the world today, even if now only by glimpses and in seemingly small ways.

To begin to see the world from God's viewpoint is the biggest perspective shift. As David James Duncan concludes in his afterword to the 20th anniversary edition of *The*

River Why, this kind of faith and our understanding of God's purposes in our world should be the foundation of how we live our lives: "And knowing justice is inescapable, and not in human hands, I want to ask, finally, Why judge? Why hate or rage? Why not just serve, wherever and however and for as long and as gratefully as we can, step by step, heart to heart, move by intricate move?" ●

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Why do you think Christians are sometimes criticized for being less concerned about what happens around them? Do you think this is a fair criticism?**
- 2. How would you explain the way that your belief in Jesus' second coming motivates you to serve others today?**
- 3. In what ways are the promises of God's judgment good news? Or do they sound to you more like a threat?**

"In a world increasingly infected by bombast and oversimplified generalizations, Nathan Brown uses words as a surgeon uses a laser to perform a delicate operation. I Hope is a book that examines current issues as they should be examined: carefully, deliberately and precisely." – Steven Chavez, managing editor, Adventist Review/Adventist World



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Y O U N G A D U L T S W E E K O F P R A Y E R : D A Y E I G H T

the THREE ANGELS' **STORY**

The official statement of the “Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church” comes in at just over 4,000 words. Of these, just part of one sentence—a total of eleven words, plus its scriptural reference—connects with “the three angels of Revelation 14.” Even the messages themselves are a mere half-a-dozen sentences in the midst of all the story, prophecies, symbols, drama, warnings, and promises of Revelation.

But wandering around our churches, it soon becomes obvious that these “three angels” are more significant to our identity and mission than one might assume. From stained-glass windows in our largest churches to over-photocopied bulletin covers, from fading church signs to freshly painted logos, the symbol of three angels is a recurring motif of Adventism around the world.

The three angels are also an important part of our church history and heritage. Writing more than fifty years after the initial urgent preaching that sparked the Adventist movement, Ellen White insisted the continuing relevance of the three angels: “All three of the messages are still to be proclaimed. It is just as essential now as ever before that they shall be repeated to those who are seeking for the truth” (Counsels to Writers and Editors, pages 26-7). And the proclamation of the messages of these three angels continues to be central to the Adventist church’s mission.

But like many aspects of our spiritual lives and belief, their commonness can degenerate to cliché, their proclamation loses urgency with repetition, and “present truth” fades into settled “understandings.”

So, if something is important to us, ever so often we need to spend some time thinking upon them, asking ourselves the old questions and asking ourselves a new set of questions. Without necessarily abandoning our inherited understandings, we also need to look back at the texts themselves to see if there is something we might have missed, something more for us to add to our picture of God’s message for us. And we need also to look at them again as part of the Bible’s bigger picture of God’s plan for our world and for His people in our world.

One such question about the three angels’ story was simply why angels come in threes. Of course, there are angels before and after Revelation 14:6-12, but these three angels are specifically introduced together, with three specific messages that fit together. So why three?

One possibility is that this is a literary device known as trebling. Remembered from first-year college English classes, this is a way of telling a story or explaining a truth that can be seen across a variety of literary forms. In many stories we see this pattern repeated. In the language of logic, we have a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis.

While some might be hesitant to read the three angels by a pattern “borrowed” from

storytelling, we should recognize that the Bible itself is primarily a story—the story of God and His dealings with people, from Creation to recreation. When we learn to read in this way, we soon realize that we are part of the story. It is also this story in which we can engage others, connecting them with God’s story in and for their lives.

Angel 1: Created (Revelation 14:7)

One of the constant refrains of the Bible story is God’s call for His people to remember Him, to return to Him, to give Him the proper priority in their lives. It is partly a reflection of the inconstancy of human nature—that we are always in need of repentance and reformation, always slipping back from our best intentions. It is also a reminder that God reaches out to each successive generation in new ways, meeting people in the time, place, and circumstances in which they find themselves at that point in history.

But it is perhaps also an indication that the claims of God on our lives and our world always call us beyond our current commitment, focus, and choices, whatever they might be and however good they might be. This seems particularly so as this call to “Fear God and give Him glory” is repeated by Revelation 14’s first angel. Verse 6 puts this message in the context of the “eternal gospel”—and this gives assurance, but without leaving room for complacency.

The angel calls us to a life of perpetually learning to live, love, and worship better. On occasions,

we have spent so much time and energy on the “rights” and “wrongs” of worship, forgetting—as one musician has described—that our worship is as finger-painting to God. He is pleased by it but not because of its merit, correctness, or artistic value. It is not what we do that makes our interactions with God special and eternally worthwhile, but what God has done: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

But the question almost asks itself: If all creation, redemption, and recreation emanates from God and, according to the Bible, God spends the whole of human history trying to get that through to us, why does God seem to be so preoccupied with us telling that back to Him? If God is who He says He is, why is He seemingly so focused on us worshipping Him?

Of course, this call to worship God is yet another expression of God’s love. Few people with any appreciation of the larger purposes of God would argue

that the world would not be a better place if more of us truly heeded the call to fear and worship God. The light of this message demands a radical re-invention of how we interact with each other and the world around us. That’s why the call goes out to “every nation, tribe, language and people” (Revelation 14:6). It’s not about making God feel better about Himself, if indeed that was either possible or necessary; it is about God wanting the best for His people and His creation.

In this way, the message of the first angel is also an assertion of the fundamental goodness of our world. Fallen and darkened though it is, the world still reflects the glory, goodness, and greatness of God. In the natural world, in the cultures of the nations, in the best humanity has to offer, we can perceive fingerprints and echoes of the Creator Himself.

Sadly, we as the people of God have not always done well at seeing and celebrating this present reality and expression of God in our midst.

Revelation 14’s first angel calls us to do that better. “Central to reclaiming creation and being a resurrection community is the affirmation that when God made the world, God said it was ‘good.’ And it still is” (Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, page 170.)

So—as it came to the generations before us, built on the assurance of the gospel and with the added urgency of judgment—the angel repeats God’s call to worship Him as Creator, Lord, and Redeemer for our good, for the good of our world, and in the cause of ultimate goodness.

Angel 2: Fallen (Revelation 14:8)

In his book *Life After God*, Douglas Coupland has one of his narrators describe TV footage of a zoo in Miami, Florida in the flooded aftermath of a hurricane: “There were pictures of ducks and tall elegant birds swimming in the wreckage except they didn’t know it was wreckage. It was just the world”

(page 85). He describes the same situation in which we find ourselves.

Much of the time we might swim placidly amid the wreckage of the world in which we live. We look at the brokenness, tragedy, sorrow, and evil by which we are surrounded and are tempted to assume it's "just the world." Indeed, we almost find it impossible to imagine life without the presence and influence of evil. We begin to take evil for granted, ignoring the fact that so much with which we are at least superficially comfortable is profoundly wrong.

Then every so often we are surprised by an obvious outburst that reminds us of the underlying malevolence of what evil has made of our world. A personal loss or grief, a national tragedy, a humanitarian disaster, or some violent outrage lays bare the fallenness and brokenness. From the terrifying and heartbreaking headlines to the quiet desperation of our

individual disappointments and despair, our eyes are opened again—albeit briefly—to the wreckage.

It is to this reality that the message of Revelation 14's second angel calls our attention. All is not right with the world. In fact, something is desperately, dangerously, and diabolically wrong. The story began with a world created wonderfully good by a great and loving God, but evil entered the story. We live among the fallout from that story. And the inevitable result of this trajectory is utter hopelessness and self-destruction.

In the context of the gospel story (see Revelation 14:6), this is exactly what we need saving from. In our honest moments, we can recognize this fallenness within ourselves. We can readily name the evil elsewhere but, before turning our attention to righting the wrongs around us, we must confess our own failings and admit we see at least the seeds of that same evil in our thoughts and actions.

But this story is also played out in the big picture of our world. In the presence of evil, the power structures of our world tend to work against God, His people, and His intentions for this world. The political, economic, religious, and social systems of our world are biased toward brokenness. The oppression, tragedy, outrage, and injustice of human history are the all-too-obvious results. And so—as people of God—we must resist and actively work to counter the forces in our world that seek to co-opt, subvert, exploit, and destroy all that God created and described as "good."

Yet, at the same time, the systems of this world also seek to hijack our allegiance, styling themselves in the position that belongs only to God as our Creator and Redeemer. The Bible regularly employs two images to describe the way evil works in the world. The prostitute or adulteress whispers seductively, tempting us to a life of self-centered pleasure and luxury, picking the best the world has to offer merely for our own gain and

amusement. Alternatively, the beast demands attention, threatening and often using violence to try to force its will, embodying a regime in which only the strong survive and those who don't are obviously too weak to be of any real value.

But another voice calls from heaven, "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues" (Revelation 18:4). God is not threatening, so much as—in His love—alerting us to what the end result of evil must be. Mercifully, evil can never be forever.

When we are tempted to complacency in the face of the horrific reality of our world, the second angel calls us to awareness of the fallenness in which we live and to lift our eyes beyond the wreckage we have mistaken for the real world to the "eternal gospel" God proclaims.

Angel 3: Recreating (Revelation 14:9-12)

The story of the first and second angels succinctly draws a stark distinction between the claims and call of God and the brokenness of this world and its systems of power—between good and evil. The third part of this story presents an unambiguous choice. Do we give our allegiance to the kingdom of God or the kingdoms of this world? Are we part of the problem or are we part of God's solution?

So many times through the Bible story, God calls people—and groups of people—to be His agents. They become participants in the continuing story of the gospel, to work for the good of the world and for the good of God's kingdom in the world, standing for truth and goodness in the face of almost overwhelming evil. This is the call repeated by Revelation 14's third angel.

And the outcomes of this choice are similarly divergent. While God's people are called to "endure" and "remain" in the face of the challenges of life, trials and persecution for a time, the fate of those who choose "fallen-ness" is grim.

We often shy away from reflecting on the "wrath of God." At first glance it doesn't seem to fit with our understanding of a God of love. But this is a symptom of our casual familiarity with evil. Confronted by the horror of war in his home country, one writer comments, "I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love" (Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, page 139). When we begin to understand the true evilness of evil, we will understand that for goodness to reign completely, evil—and, tragically, all who choose evil—must be destroyed completely.

Revelation 14's third angel gives us the eternal perspective. Because evil—even at its worst—is only ever temporary, we are called to stand against it in all its forms. Interestingly, the angel does not contrast wrath with glory,

but with a present, patient endurance and faithfulness. It seems our first concern is not so much to “escape” but should always be to discover what it means to live as the faithful people of God in whatever times and circumstances we find ourselves. Sometimes the call to “remain”—to be “remnant”—has been misconstrued as a call to a sanctified exclusivity and even a steadfast passivity. Instead, it should be a call to servanthood, seeking the good of others wherever and wherever they may be amid the evil, injustice, and tragedy of our world. Perhaps this patience—living God’s commands and following in the way of Jesus—should even be marked by a prophetic impatience with the fallen powers, systems, and evils of our world.

For God’s people—and for all people and places they can influence—that future kingdom of God starts now. Of course, it will only be completed when the world is recreated ultimately by God Himself (see Revelation 21:1-5). But we are called to be agents of

restoration and recreation here and now—and by so doing to alert others to the eternal choice they must make.

In the context of the “eternal gospel” and God’s promise of judgment, in light of the assurance of the gospel and the warnings against complacency and the many other temptations of evil, we are called to seek and stand for goodness—and to serve as Jesus did (see Luke 4:18, 19). ●

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- 1. In what ways is this “story” reading of the three angels different from other sermons, articles, or books you might have read about these verses?**
- 2. What aspects of mission and service can we see in the three angels’ messages?**
- 3. What do you believe are the most important things about what it means to live as people of God in your community today?**

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OUR SMALL GROUP COVENANT

I agree that this group exists as a safe place for me to be myself, wrestle with questions regarding my faith, and receive support and encouragement in my walk with God.

I agree to:

1. Support the members of my group in prayer and worship together so that we can all glorify and honor God through our lives.
2. Not share outside the group meetings anything that is shared within the group.
3. Pray regularly for my fellow group members.
4. Be respectful of everyone's opinion. "Dumb questions" will be encouraged and respected.
5. Keep my advice to the minimum.
6. Participate openly and honestly in group sessions and leave room for all members to share.
7. Not speak about group members when they are not present.
8. Do everything I can to support the global church in its mission to the world.
9. Grow in mutual submission and in the application of spiritual truth so that I can become more like Jesus in attitude and behavior.
10. Work together and in partnership with God to change our world.

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DATE

On Sabbath, March 16, 2013, youth will hear one less sermon in the morning. **THEY will be the sermon.** They will step out of the building to be the Church and reach out in the name of Jesus.

There will be six elements to Global Youth Day:

1. Young people from local churches, regions, or Conferences/Missions will meet for a time of consecration before spending the best part of Sabbath reaching out in local communities.
2. They will be involved in Sabbath friendly acts of kindness that will have been chosen and planned for in advance.
3. To provide a focus for the day after their diverse acts of kindness, youths around the world will donate blood as the symbol of the ultimate life-saving act of compassion.
4. To complete the day's activities, young people will congregate in their local churches, regions, or Conferences/Missions for a time of worship and sharing of experiences to mark the beginning of the Week of Prayer, which is based on Mission & Service.
5. Youths around the world will be connected through technology and live coverage as stories light up the world progressively through the different time zones.
6. A specially designed T-shirt will provide identification with the global initiative.

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