



Seeking First The Kingdom

STEWARDSHIP WEEK OF REVIVAL
2021

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Introduction

As we approach the end of the year, we invite you to pause and reflect on some major life issues. From a global perspective, for many of us, 2020 will go down in history as a terrifying and disruptive year. The events took us by surprise, though we are attentive to the unfolding of biblical prophecies. A significant amount of energy was mobilized to adapt to new realities and to shift into a protective mode. Too much for just one year! Going through such a whirlwind has the capacity to drift us away from our anchor points. A spiritual check-up is necessary for our wellbeing.

The Stewardship Revival Week, written by Pastor Ioan Câmpian Tâtar, the Stewardship Ministries director of InterEuropean Division, serves as an instrument for a thorough introspection exercise. He probes into some Bible stories and leads his

readers to ask the fundamental life question: Am I seeking God first in the nitty-gritty of my existence?

This year's World Stewardship Emphasis Day will be held in December 2021. The week prior is recognized as Stewardship Emphasis Week, a time when Adventist stewardship leaders around the world will lead out in the morning worship service and conduct afternoon seminars; encouraging members to put God first in all aspects of their lives.

We encourage each local church to plan and organize the "God-First" week of prayer to nurture God's stewards for their journey to eternity. The GC Stewardship team prays that this program will serve as a refreshing and refilling stop for each of us.

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Pastor Tâtar initially served as pastor of several churches in the Bacău Region. Since 1992, he has served in leadership positions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Romania: first as treasurer until 2009, and from 2009 to 2015 as general secretary. Pastor Tâtar is married to Aurora, who is working as a physician, and together they have a daughter, Lidia, 32,, and a granddaughter, Nina, who is 2 years old.



Day 1

From Sadness to Singing

“For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition which I asked of Him” (1 Sam. 1:27).

We all have an image of how a family of believers, the local church, or even the church as a whole should look. We want church members to be eager to study the Word of God, like those in Berea (Acts 17:11), with an active prayer life and involvement in mission. Of course, a living and spiritually powerful church is made up of consecrated families, families that study the Word of God and make a daily habit of praying to and praising Him. I invite you to go in your mind to the time of the judges. It was one of the most troubling periods in the history of the people of Israel. The moral and spiritual deterioration is obvious; this period can be called the Dark Ages of the Old Testament.

The first two chapters of the book of 1 Samuel present the real life, without retouching, of a family of those times. Elkanah gathers all the members of his family every year and goes to Shiloh, the spiritual and religious centre of Israel, “to worship and sacrifice to the Lord (1 Sam. 1:3). Seeing the whole family heading to the place of public worship was something to be appreciated in those days, as it is today.

Instead, the reality beyond the appearance was different. According to the customs then, if a family did not have children, some would take a second wife. All such examples in the Bible speak of the negative consequences of such a wrong step, and Elkanah’s case is no exception.

A Family and a Nation in Crisis

The narrator presents the tense relationships within this family. Exactly when they most needed a joyful attitude for their worship to become a real heartfelt experience, everything turned to bitterness, strife, and disappointment. Elkanah had two wives—Peninnah and Hannah—and there was much tension between the two of them. Even at the place of worship, Peninnah continued to denigrate Hannah because Hannah was childless in words that hurt her soul (1 Sam 1:6). The only thing Hannah could do was to withdraw from the celebration in tears. A family in spiritual and relational crisis actually showed what was happening at that time on a different scale, at the level of the whole nation.

Pilgrims from all over the country came to Shiloh for one reason, to worship. Those there who should have led all the people in the holy act of worship “did not know the Lord” (1 Sam. 2:12). This is the main reason for the moral and spiritual crisis that the people of Israel were experiencing. Compromise led to conflict and chaos. External enemies attacked the nation (1 Sam. 4-7), and corruption prevailed within. The sons of Eli, the high priest, were guilty of a great sin because they “abhorred the offering of the Lord” (1 Sam. 2:17).

From this sad story, we see that the devil’s strategy is to ruin God’s children. When worship is absent or becomes a failure at a personal, family, or church level, the devil’s victory is assured. For this reason, “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was

no widespread revelation” (1 Sam. 3:1). Like Hannah, who could not have children, Israel had become a fruitless people, a barren and fruitless land.

God Still Works

The strongest proof that God does not give up on us is the book of Judges, the books of Samuel, the entire Bible, and especially the cross at Golgotha. God is working, but He chooses people to carry out His plans.

He chose Hannah, an ordinary woman who was not a prophet like Deborah or Hulda, but who had a spiritual sensitivity and fear of God. Her name appears on the pages of the Holy Scriptures along with the great men of faith for the simple reason that she prayed. As a result of her prayer, the history of the people of Israel turned and took a new direction. If she had not prayed, would we be talking today about Samuel, the prophet and judge, whose leadership resulted in real moral and spiritual reform? He is the one who ensured the transition from the period of the judges to the monarchy. He wept for Saul, but he had the privilege of anointing David, a man “after His own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14), as king.

Hannah longed to become a mother, and the lack of children was a shame in her culture, a sign of divine displeasure. Little by little, however, this dream of hers died and had become the object of Peninnah’s mockery. This time, though, when Peninnah mocked her, Hannah did something completely unusual. She rose from the table, not to mourn in solitude, but to carry the burden of her soul before God in prayer. The expression repeated many times regarding

this event is, “before the Lord” (1 Sam. 1:12). “Before the Lord” she prays and cries; she makes a promise; here, she stays for a long time, and maybe she would have stayed longer if she had not been interrupted by Eli, the high priest.

This expression is one consecrated in the Old Testament; the worship had to take place before the Lord. God and not man should be in the centre of worship. What a need we have today of such a worship, in which singing, praying, preaching, or any other element of worship is done to the Lord and not for other people.

Hannah asked God for a child, and the reason she asked for this was clearly expressed. It was not for the mockery to cease or to have the shame of infertility removed, but to give God a gift, the most precious gift, a child. Hannah knows that a true relationship with God, like any relationship, develops not only by asking but also by giving. This is why her prayer is unique in the Bible and becomes a vow (1 Sam. 1:11). Hannah’s gift, just like Mary’s gift (John 12:1-8), is so precious because it is a gift of sacrifice. She promises and fulfils it with all her heart.

A Promise Before Owning

Staying “before the Lord,” Hannah makes a promise to God that she will return the child even before having him. A vow is an initiative of the worshipper it is an act of worship. During the Old Testament period, most of the elements of public worship were conditioned by the presence of priests.

One could not offer a sacrifice without the intercession of the priests.

But the promise, or the vow, was then and continues to be today something done in direct relationship with God, without the intercession of any person. True worship costs. It costs time, preparation, offerings, and tithe. David said he could not bring God “a sacrifice that would cost him nothing” (2 Sam. 24:24). But, most of all, worship does not cost us, it costs God, by giving His Son. The One who first promised an offering is not us, but God Himself (Gen. 3:15). Worship without offering is not worship!

Hannah’s promise is the promise of faith and love. Ellen White tells us that in those times, “such a prayer could rarely be seen. Eli’s reaction is obvious in this regard” (1 Sam. 1:14). I believe that on her behalf, God could say the words: “O woman, great is your faith!” (Matt. 15:28).

Hannah promised that the child would be “consecrated to the Lord” (1 Sam. 1:11).

In special words, Ellen White expresses Hannah’s faith, love, and consistency: “When separated from her child, the faithful mother’s solicitude did not cease. Every day he was the subject of her prayers. Every year she made, with her own hands, a robe of service for him; and as she went up with her husband to worship at Shiloh, she gave the child this reminder of her love.”¹ Hannah not only makes promises to God, but she also keeps her word! (1 Sam. 1:26, 27).

Hope For Difficult Times

There are many precious truths that we can learn from Hannah’s example. We can see

how God can use the negative experiences in our lives to create something great. He can use the most painful trials to teach us what trusting in Him means.

Hannah learned to trust God in all those things that were beyond her power to control. Now, as I write down these thoughts (April 2, 2020), almost the whole world is in quarantine, worried about what could come next. The fear of contamination and of what will happen tomorrow has covered all humanity. For Hannah, suffering and the trial she was going through was a call to prayer and trust in God. She prayed, and when she left the place of prayer, “her face was no longer sad” (1 Sam. 1:18). On her face there were no more tears, but a smile of joy. Through trust and hope before the Lord at Shiloh, Hannah found peace even before receiving an answer to her prayer. Imagine Elkanah’s home the day Hannah saw the divine intervention and the answer to her prayer in her life—when Samuel was born!

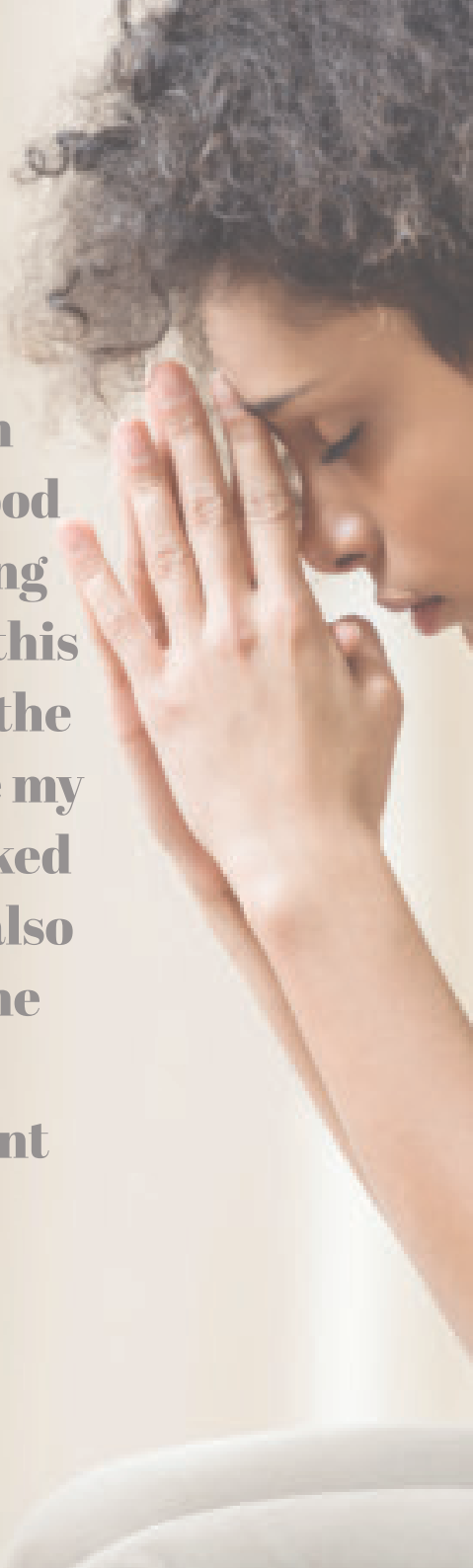
When we come “before the Lord” through prayer, we recognize His sovereignty; nothing is out of His control. There is hope for times of crisis in the family, in the church, and in the whole world. We have a God who takes care of and wants to work for those who trust Him. Hannah’s song (1 Sam. 2:1-11) talks about this. When you see God’s intervention, you cannot stop singing!

Questions:

1. If a single prayer could change the history of a nation through God’s intervention, what could happen today if we pray?
2. Standing “before the Lord,” what are the things we promise, personally, in the family or as a church?
3. Are there ways through which we can also express our hope and trust in God today?
4. Why do you think Hannah was able to fulfil her vow and bring her precious offering when she realized the corrupt spiritual condition of religious leaders at that time?

I Promise

To SET APART the first moments of each day to commune with the Lord-through PRAYER, the STUDY of the Bible, Spirit of Prophecy and the Sabbath School lesson, and in FAMILY WORSHIP.



“And she said, Oh my lord, as thy soul liveth, my lord, I am the woman that stood by thee here, praying unto the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him: Therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord.”

1 Samuel 1: 26-28

Children’s Story: Johnny’s Faithful Prayer

“Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, will by no means enter it” (Mark 10:15).

Jesus loves children in a special way, and He always likes to answer their simple, honest prayers. There is a true story about a low-income family going through a serious financial crisis and struggling for their daily needs. The father had lost his job shortly before winter, and he had no money to cover the needs of his family. His wife and two young children did not complain, even as the amount of food became much less each day. The mother would cook bread from the little flour they had left, and they rarely had anything else other than that on the table, until one morning, when she sadly announced that she had used the last flour to cook that day’s bread. With a worried expression, the father told her that in a few days they would also run out of wood to set the fire in the stove, and he was concerned because they expected the winter’s low temperatures to last a few more weeks.

Little Johnny, who was just 4 years old, looked at his parent’s worried faces and understood that the situation was serious. When his father called him and Sarah, his little sister, who was only 2, to come to the evening family worship, Johnny asked if he could say the prayer. “Dear Jesus,” he prayed, “thank You for taking care of us! Please send Daddy some wood for the fire,

some flour for Mommy to cook, and ...”—after he paused a few seconds, he added: “... and two bananas for Sarah and me. Amen!”

When his mother put him to bed that evening, he told her: “I can’t wait to get Jesus’ gifts!” His mother smiled as she kissed him good night, wishing she had his strong faith and confidence.

The next morning, the father decided to go to a friend’s house to ask him to lend him some money for the family’s needs. But when he walked out the door, he saw in front of the house a basket containing some chopped wood, and on the doorstep there was another big package. He immediately called his wife to tell her the great news. Johnny, who had already woken up and was feeling hungry, as he had gone to bed the night before without eating anything, ran outside in a hurry. He didn’t even blink as his mother opened up the package and pulled out a big bag of potatoes and another bag filled with white flour.

When she pushed the empty box away, Johnny looked at her, and with eyes full of hope, he said: “Mommy, can you please check one more time for our bananas?” His mother’s heart melted, and she felt like crying when she realized his faithful

expectation. "I'm sorry," she said as she hugged him, "there is nothing else in the box, Johnny." "It's OK," Johnny replied. "Maybe He will send another angel later with the bananas."

But as the mother went into the kitchen to pour the flour into the flour box, she found hidden inside the flour two—yes, exactly two—bananas. They had been put inside the flour so the potatoes could not smash them. With tears in her eyes, Mother called little Johnny and Sarah and gave them their much-awaited bananas! "I told you, Mommy," Johnny said with a sparkle in his eyes. "I knew Jesus hears all our prayers. He just has unique ways to answer them!"

Questions:

1. Why do you think children are special to Jesus?
2. Can we trust God even when He answers our prayers different than we expect?
3. Do you have an experience when God answered your prayer? Can you share it with the group?

Day 2

The Delight of Kindness in Real Life

"What is desired in a man is kindness" (Prov. 19:22).

Ben Maxson shared a discussion he once had with someone while traveling by plane. At the time, he was director of the Stewardship Department at the General Conference, and the interlocutor asked him about his occupation. His answer was: "I am a pastor, responsible for our church's stewardship department." Surprised, the person continued with a new question: "What does that mean?" "It's not an easy thing to explain it to someone unfamiliar with the Bible," Maxson said, then continued: "I suppose there are many Christians on this plane, but are they all true Christians?" The interlocutor's reply came immediately, "I don't think everyone is a true Christian."

"Even less-religious people have a picture of what it means to be a true Christian," said Maxson. "My full-time duty is to help people to practice Christianity. To be a faithful steward, or administrator, involves taking seriously the commandment that Jesus Christ said was the greatest: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'" (Matt. 22:37-39).

"Maybe someone asks: 'But still, how can love be defined? Even in the Bible, love is expressed in so many ways!'" Maxson said. "You can love by giving offerings; you can express love by serving, even listening. What is that fundamental characteristic through which I can transmit love, both to those close and to those I might meet only

once in life? We will find the answer in the love anthem, whose author is the apostle Paul. 'Love is' writes the apostle, 'full of kindness' [1 Cor. 13:4]. Through the kindness expressed toward others, we show that we love God [1 John 4:10, 11]."

Kindness in Little Things and Big Decisions

We can go back in history, thousands of years ago, and get acquainted with customs and laws that have governed social and religious life at that time.

The action begins in Bethlehem, moves to the land of Moab, and finally ends in Bethlehem. Because of the drought, Elimelech's family decides to move to the land of Moab for a while. In just ten years, Naomi, Elimelech's wife, buries her husband, witnesses the marriage and (later) the death of her two sons, and is left with her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Many things can happen in just ten years! Naomi decides to return home, and the two daughters-in-law accompany her. Three times these widowed women stop and cry. It's the only thing they can do in this situation. Three times Naomi insists that her daughters-in-law return to their own homes, and Orpah finally decides to go home to her people and her parents. These young women, Orpah and Ruth, have fulfilled their family obligations and are now free; they have no obligation to Naomi. Naomi clearly and logically argues that she has no way of assuring them a future.

Ruth, on the other hand, resists. She does not want to go home, and she expresses

one of the most beautiful statements in the Bible: “Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me and more also, if anything but death parts you and me” (Ruth 1:16, 17).

These simple but very profound words are expressed in a covenant language that shows love and faithfulness. Here is the essence of personal loyalty. Ruth’s attachment is voluntary, a free choice without expectation of anything in return from Naomi. Often in the Bible, we encounter the image of parents who love their children, even spiritual children, as in the case of the relationship between Paul and Timothy (1 Tim. 1:1-5). There are many cases in which children express their attachment to their parents. But for a daughter-in-law to show such an attitude toward her mother-in-law is something rarely encountered.

The narrative does not show why Ruth chose to make such a decision when Naomi repeatedly tells her that she has nothing to offer. There appears to be only one answer: Naomi’s kindness. Through this kindness, Ruth was able to understand God’s kindness. That is why she can say these words: “Your God will be my God.”

In Hebrew, the word “hesed” has a strong relational connotation, very rich in meaning. It is difficult to translate, and it expresses many of God’s attributes. This word can mean love, mercy, kindness, grace, devotion, faithfulness, and loyalty. All these qualities motivate a person to act for the benefit

of another without expecting anything in return. Naomi uses this word in its active form, under the variant of the verb in addressing the two daughters-in-law: “The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with those who have died and with me” (Ruth 1:8), or regarding Boaz, “Blessed be he of the Lord” (Ruth 2:20).

Ruth, unlike Naomi, speaks less; but in deeds, she demonstrates what kindness (hesed) means, as the narrator comments, “But Ruth clung to her” (Ruth 1:14). She does not preach about kindness; she shows what kindness is.

Kindness to Strangers, Widows, and the Poor

Naomi’s arrival with Ruth in Bethlehem could not pass unnoticed because “all the city was excited” (Ruth 1:19). All the inhabitants of the town had the opportunity to know the painful experience that this family went through. Naomi was not only without a husband, but she also had lost her two sons. A widowed woman without a family to support her at that time was in a miserable situation. Loneliness, hopelessness, and emotional suffering were and still are some of the most common problems. Our image of God can be affected when we are overwhelmed with pain. We see this in Naomi’s words, “The Almighty has afflicted me” (Ruth 1:21). Naomi is realistic; she proposes a change of name: “Call me Mara (Bitterness).” But remember, she does not show bitterness; she calls bitter only the circumstances she has gone through. Naomi continues to remain Naomi (Pleasant); that is why Ruth chooses to stay in her company.

Naomi did not lose faith in the one whom David would later call “the Father of the father-less, a defender of widows” (Ps. 68:5).

Ruth, perhaps a little more optimistic, is not just a poor widow like Naomi. She is also a foreigner. Twelve times her name appears in this narrative, and five times she is called Ruth the Moabite. Maybe this repetition is always to remind us that she is not part of the chosen people. She is a foreigner. But God also loves strangers, which is why He commanded His people not to gather everything from the field, but “to leave for the poor and the stranger” (Lev. 19:10).

Ruth asks Naomi’s permission to go to glean heads of grain from the field of the one who will be willing to show kindness (hesed) (see Ruth 2:2). This time, we meet the third character in the book of Ruth, namely Boaz. From the narrator’s account, we can learn that Boaz is not just a rich man with a certain social status. He is the one who treats his workers with a lot of respect, and by greeting, he blesses them. The greeting was and is still present in every culture, even if expressed through different words or gestures. The purpose of greeting is to establish relationships; it is the first thing we do when we meet someone. By greeting, we say: “You are important to me.” It is the simplest way we can express kindness. Ruth is over-whelmed by Boaz’s appreciation for the way she treated Naomi, her mother-in-law. “Then she said: ‘Let me find favour in your sight, my lord; for you have comforted me, and have spoken kindly to your maidservant’” (Ruth 2:13).

What an extraordinary power the right words can have at the right time. Many

people around us do not expect much from us, maybe just a greeting, appreciation, or encouragement. With simple words, we can welcome them into our world. But if they remain for us the stranger, the minority, the poor, or anything else that may create barriers or distancing, the message of Jesus from His last sermon is for others, not for us (Matt. 25:31-46).

“Under His Wings”

The Bible uses many metaphors that help us to know the deep truths that are revealed. We need familiar images to see what cannot be seen with the physical eye. We better understand God’s goodness when we read in the Holy Scriptures that He is like a mother who cannot forget her child (Isa. 49:15), or like a fortress, a place of “refuge” (Ps. 91:2).

Boaz uses another image in his welcoming words toward Ruth, “May the Lord repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge” (Ruth 2:12). The metaphor of a bird’s wings protecting its little ones is used by God Himself (Ex. 19: 4) regarding His people. Boaz tells Ruth that the wings of God’s providence, mercy, and kindness have spread over her, a stranger.

God also explains why He did this to the people of Israel: not because they deserved it, but because in His plan, He wanted them to show the same kindness to all nations. “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19: 6). They themselves should become protective wings for others, as was Boaz. Ellen White states: “All who, like Rahab the Canaanite, and Ruth the Moabitess, turned

from idolatry to the worship of the true God, were to unite themselves with His chosen people. As the numbers of Israel increased they were to enlarge their borders, until their kingdom should embrace the world.”¹

The wings are not like the fortress, the image of safety, built of stone. The wings express loyalty and love, but also vulnerability. That is why God’s goodness is best seen not in the providence of sometimes painful life circumstances, but in Golgotha. This is where we can all be protected from the greatest evil in this world, sin.

Throughout the book, the narrator refers directly to God only twice: at the beginning of the book of Ruth, when it says that God “had visited His people by giving them bread” (Ruth 1:6), and in the end, “the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son” (Ruth 4:13). Theologians call this technique inclusion. If something is said at the beginning of a report and the same idea appears again in the end, it means that the whole narrative is dominated by the same truth. In our case, the theme that dominates the book of Ruth is that God provides bread and life. He is the source of everything we have, even our existence.

Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz always express this truth in their addresses. On the other hand, they do not remain at the level of pious expressions, clothed in a religious language. Through their behaviour attitude, and sacrifice, each one showed those in Bethlehem, their future generations, and even today, what true religion is. They gave us true Christianity, and showed us what a

steward is: an administrator, one to whom in that great day Jesus will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

The only way people can see God’s kindness is by the example of His children. The women of the city of Bethlehem are convinced of one thing, that Ruth truly loves Naomi. And after Ruth married Boaz and bore him a son, they said to Naomi: “And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons has borne him” (Ruth 4:15). How happy Naomi must be, holding the baby in her arms. “Now she can no longer say, ‘I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty’” (Ruth 1:21).

What do we admire about Ruth, the Moabite? There are many things to admire, but maybe most of all, her choice, courage, and determination. Ruth remains an example of how big life decisions are made. Humanly speaking, without Ruth, there wouldn’t have been an Obed, a David, ... and the rest is history. And what can be greater than to be full of kindness, to be like Jesus?

Questions:

1. God is a God of relationship. To what extent are relationships a priority in your life?
2. How can the book of Ruth inspire you to make changes in your attitude and behaviour toward your family, relatives, or even strangers?
3. What can we learn from Ruth about how to make decisions in life?

“Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.”

Ruth 1:16, 17

I Promise

To IMPROVE my RELATIONSHIPS:
growing in faithfulness, forgiveness and
loving by principle.

¹ Ellen G. White, Christ’s Object Lessons, p. 290.



Children's Story: To Win Is to Forgive

“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Matt. 6:14).

Andrew and Tony were best friends. They used to play together, talk over the phone every afternoon, and even visit each other or ride their bikes in the park when their parents had time to take them.

They were both in the fourth grade at the same school, but they were attending different classes: Andrew was in class A, while Tony was in class B. Sometimes, they would even learn together, and the whole school knew that they were best friends.

But one day, at the end of the school year, when they had the annual sports championships, the two friends found their classes competing against each other in the finals for the Football Cup.

Both Andrew and Tony were very good at football, and their colleagues knew that they often won when they were on the same team. But this time everyone was curious about the match, and how the two best friends would cope with the new experience of competing against each other. “Now, I hope you remember that sports competitions and even the prize is just a passing achievement, but friends are for life,” Andrew’s mum reminded him on the morning she drove him to school for the big competition day. “Yes, Mum friends come first!” Andrew repeated, quoting the motto he and Tony frequently used. Right before the competition began, Andrew went to Tony, and shaking hands in their unique way, he said: “Best friends, no matter what,

right?” “Right,” answered Tony, as a promise.

But as they got on the sports field, the teacher started telling each of them how much he trusted them. When they saw the expectation in their colleagues’ eyes and the very tight score, both Andrew and Tony understood it would not be an easy match, nor would they be able to avoid the confrontation. The numbers were constantly changing from one team’s advantage to the other. In the last five minutes of the game, the score was even: 6–6. The stakes were high, and both Andrew and Tony were the “hope” of their team. “You’re our last chance!” whispered Max in Andrew’s ear, when the opposing team came to the final attack.

Forgetting for one moment his mother’s advice and his true friendship, and seeing Tony coming forward and directing the ball toward the goal, Andrew faulted Tony, tripping him, and making him fall and lose the ball. The referee saw it, of course, and gave Andrew a red card. Tony’s team won when they marked the goal from the 11 meters’ shot. Yet, Tony could not enjoy the victory. His heart was bitter because of his friend’s attitude and behaviour. After the match, he changed and went directly home, refusing to talk to anyone.

That night, Andrew couldn’t sleep. He missed his friend’s call. He understood that even if he had won the game, if he lost a friend, it would not be worth it. He felt terrible for

being unfair to Tony. On the other hand, Tony was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, feeling the bitterness of being betrayed. “I will never forgive him,” he told his mum when she came to say good night. “I think you’re losing a greater victory than the one you’ve gained today,” his mum told him.

“Which one?” asked Tony. “The victory with yourself. I know you can forgive Andrew; you just don’t want to, because he betrayed you in front of the other kids. But forgiving Andrew is the real match you have to win or lose!”

The next day, limping, Tony went to Andrew’s classroom during the first break and told him he was not upset. He did not want to let a match destroy their friendship. And even though it was not his fault, he still wanted to be friends with Andrew. Tears streaming from his eyes, Andrew hugged his friend, too ashamed to say anything but “Thank you!” Both Andrew and Tony are 41 years old now, but they continue to be best friends!

Questions:

1. Why do you think relationships and friends are more important than other achievements?
2. How would you describe a true friend?
3. You know Jesus is your friend, but how can you be Jesus’ friend, as well?

Day 3

No Com- promise in Babylon

“But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself” (Dan.1:8).

We often get the impression that putting God first refers only to the religious life and not to our lives in the workday world. The religion of the Bible, on the other hand, is a practical one; it penetrates all spheres of existence and has to do with the whole human being. Sometimes even the people of the Bible did not put God first and made compromises. Their list is quite long and includes names such as Eve, Adam, Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Elijah, and Peter, to mention only a few. The list of the uncompromising ones is not so long, and includes first of all Jesus, the perfect model, followed by Joseph; Daniel; Daniel’s friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; as well as a few others.

Identity and Integrity

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and his soldiers surrounded Jerusalem, conquered it, and took the vessels from the temple. Nebuchadnezzar also took hostages, including Daniel and his friends (Dan. 1:3-5). The primary purpose for which they were taken to Babylon was to serve Babylon from within. They were to be trained at the “University of Babylon,” get to know the culture of Babylon, be impressed by its beauty and greatness, and serve its interests. Slavery always has two risks: the first one is isolation. It’s much easier to keep your faith, values, and culture when you lock your-self down in an enclave. God’s message through the prophet Jeremiah was

to not isolate yourself, be present in the life of Babylon, and show that you have a God and hope (Jer. 29). The other risk is that of assimilation. It’s what was tried with these young Jews. Arriving in Babylon, their names were changed because their original names pointed to the identity of their religion and their God. The philosophy of Babylon continues the desire of the builders at Babel tower to make themselves a name.

Even for many today, their educational or financial condition is a way to make themselves a name. Abraham, called by God, left Babylon with the confidence that God would keep His word and make His name great (Gen. 12:2), a blessing to all nations. Babylon collapses, a new kingdom follows, and the new king, Darius, cries out to Daniel when approaching the pit, calling him by his Jewish name, which will remain forever. “Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?” (Dan. 6:20). The pit with lions which Daniel was put into, as well as the hot oven heated seven times more where the three friends were thrown, show that they had not lost their identity. The names could be changed, but the heart could not.

These young men were also exposed to Babylonian education, which evidently contained more than learning new languages necessary for serving the kingdom at the highest level. They had a thorough knowledge of God’s Word. That’s

why they could filter and distinguish the truth from the lie.

The process of assimilation did not stop at the names and the intellectual development but also reached other aspects of more personal life, including food. Babylon wanted to change their lifestyle, which had great potential in destroying the identity.

Eating the food served at the king’s table contradicted the diet God had clearly established by law (Lev. 11). The purpose of the commandments regarding food, as well as the entire Jewish law, was sanctification, preservation of the identity as God’s people.

Consistent With the Lifestyle

Daniel and his friends had no choice in some things: their deportation to Babylon, the changing of their names, their intellectual preparation, and their choice of food.

Away from home, slaves in a foreign country, these young men were under huge pressure. In spite of all this, they decided not to defile themselves (Dan. 1:8) with the king’s delicacies and the wine from his table. The language is religious in connotation and has to do not only with the nutritional laws outlined in Leviticus 11 but also with the fact that it was served in a ritual setting, in which the king was considered a god. When asking for vegetables and water, Daniel was referring to the food established in the beginning by God for humans (Gen. 1:29),

and he implicitly affirms that God, not the king, is the Creator.

There are three things that the Bible calls an abomination before God: idolatry, unclean food, and promiscuity. The young men decided not to accept compromise regarding any of these.

The theology of food is already present in the first pages of the Bible because the first commandment we find in Genesis is regarding food and the forbidden tree (Gen. 2:16, 17). The first test that Adam and Eve had to pass included a food component, and this is repeated in Jesus' life, when the devil tempted Him in the desert to turn stones into bread.

Together with his friends, Daniel is aware that they need to witness to their colleagues and all the Babylonians. So they chose to take it further than the typical Hebrew diet. They chose a vegetarian food. Those who want to avoid any compromise are not content with the law's limit. They choose the highest and best standard.

Sometimes, people around us are not so interested in our beliefs, but they cannot overlook our lifestyle. Most discussions regarding the Bible and religion are motivated by seeing us living a different lifestyle.

We learn from Daniel that religion is not limited to the theoretical and abstract; it goes deeper, to the practical level of daily life. Religion has to do with the way we take care of our bodies, as well.

Daniel asks Aspenaz, the chief of the eunuchs, to allow him and his friend to subsist on a vegetarian diet for ten days, thus assuming a risk of faith that these young people are brilliantly passing.

The final test takes place three years after graduation when the king "examined them" and "found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers, who were in all his realm" (Dan. 1:20).

Three times in the first chapter of the book of Daniel, God's intervention takes place. First, God delivers Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 1:2). Next, he brought Daniel "into the favour and goodwill" of Ashpenaz. The third time, He "gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams" (Dan. 1:17).

The major theme that frequently comes up in the book of Daniel is victory and liberation. The book begins with a period of local distress and ends with the great tribulation, but also the great liberation. The victory in the first chapter, when God gives wisdom to these young people, is nothing but a prelude to what follows later. This victory was possible because they "decided" to remain consistent in their faithfulness to God, even in things that might seem small to some. And God honoured their faithfulness by giving them wisdom. The wise, according to the book of Daniel, have shone in the darkness of Babylon, and the promise is that they will shine forever and ever (Dan. 12:3).

A Lifestyle for the End Time

In His last sermon on the end time, Jesus recommended the study of the book of Daniel (Matt. 24:15). Its study led to the birth of the Adventist movement and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We must not forget, however, that if God had not intervened to change the lifestyle of our pioneers, this movement might have died, so weak was their health. Without the health message, it would not be what it is today, a worldwide church with a prophetic message. In 1848, Ellen White received her first vision of the harmful effects of tobacco, coffee, and tea. It took almost ten years for the church to be cleansed from the vice of tobacco and smoking. The next vision, in 1854, is about body hygiene, order, and cleanliness in homes. Next comes one of the most influential visions, on June 6, 1863, at Otsego, Michigan, when Ellen is presented with the principles of a healthful lifestyle and the fact that health care is part of the gospel.

In order to live, a human being first needs these vital functions: heartbeat, breathing, digestion, and assimilation of food. We can call these vital functions the life-support system. We can care for this system in order to maintain and even improve its performance. But we function at an even higher level, the intellectual or mental, and through proper care, we can have clear and correct thinking. God created us wonderfully. Not only do we have the physical dimension, but we have

the emotional and intellectual one. He also added an even higher level, that of moral and spiritual judgment. If we ask ourselves which of the above levels is the most resistant to violation, the answer, of course, is the physical one. Its performance is remarkable. There are many who not only neglect to take care of their physique but abuse it through the use of very harmful substances. The intellectual level is less resistant to violation, but the most sensitive is the moral and spiritual one. There is a close connection among all these levels. They influence each other. Ellen White said: "Between the mind and the body there is a mysterious and wonderful relation."¹

To further emphasize the need of caring for the physical body, Ellen White adds, "The health of the body is to be regarded as essential for growth in grace and the acquirement of an even temper."²

The biblical prophecy, expressed in poetic language, describes the menu of the one who was to become Emmanuel, "Curds and honey He Shall eat, that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good" (Isa. 7:15). We remember the metaphor that described Canaan, the land where "milk and honey" flowed, but this metaphor expresses the language of that time, that in this country is found everything that is needed. And in Jesus' case, a healthy and complete diet would influence correct thinking and moral discernment. We have the senses with which we can know the external reality. In order to know the spiritual reality, we need the Word of God,

1 Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 3, p. 485

2 Ibid., vol. 9, p. 159

but also the presence of the Holy Spirit, its Author. This communication takes place at the intellectual level. Unhealthy eating and drinking habits make God's voice more and more difficult to hear (Isa. 30:21).

Another quotation from Ellen White's writings emphasizes this truth: "All who profess to be followers of Jesus should feel that a duty rests upon them to preserve their bodies in the best condition of health, that their minds may be clear to comprehend heavenly things."³

God has given us an instruction manual about the functioning of the body, and we must not only know it, but also put it into practice. We need the healthiest food eaten at appropriate times and in the right amounts, physical exercise, enough water, clean air, sunlight, adequate sleep, and especially trust in God. The goal of a healthy life is not primarily a longer life, but to live for God's glory and to do the work entrusted to him or her as well as possible, like Daniel did.

Let's not forget, a lifestyle in harmony with the principles of the Bible is the best testimony, and for such a life we need the grace of God. That means putting God first in our lives. Today's world needs people who can say no to compromise, just like Daniel and his friends did.

Questions:

1. What are those compromises in your life that take your lifestyle out of harmony with God's requirements?
2. What lessons of steadiness can we learn from Daniel's life?
3. What are the decisions you want to make regarding a lifestyle for the glory of God and the fulfilment of your entrusted mission?

I Promise

To ESTABLISH one new HEALTHY HABIT, to better serve the Lord with my mind.

“But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.”

Dan. 1:8

3 Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 2, p. 522

Children's Story: When You Eat, But You Don't (Ch)eat

“Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

It was a hot summer. The days were so hot by noon that people tried to stay inside as much as possible until the temperature went down a little. Emily was spending her summer vacation at her grandparents' home in the countryside. “I'm so bored!” she complained, discontented. “I wish I could go play outside with Hannah.” Hannah was her best friend, who lived just two streets away.

“I'm sure you two can play a bit later, when the heat cools down a little,” Grandma suggested. “In the meantime, you can read a book, play with the dolls, draw something, or help me to make some cookies.”

“But I want to play outside,” Emily insisted. “Please, please, Grandma, let me go to Hannah's and spend some time with her!” “Promise me you will take good care!” insisted Grandma. “Health is a gift from God that we should take care of!”

“I promise!” Emily shouted as she rushed toward the door, sending her grandmother a flying kiss.

Emily forgot her promise. At Hannah's house they played hide-and-seek inside for a little while, then they wanted more space and went out in the backyard, where they started running and playing with the ball. The sun was burning as the noon temperature reached its peak, but the girls didn't pay attention or feel its scorching rays until Hannah stopped and said: “I'm so thirsty! How about something to drink from the

market at the corner of the street?”

“I don't know,” responded Emily, undecided. “Grandma might not like me drinking unhealthy sodas. Plus, I have no money with me.”

“Oh, come on!” Hannah said, waving her hand in the air. “I have enough in my money box for both of us, and I'm sure you can find something healthy and natural to drink. It's so hot, and I'm as thirsty as a camel in the desert,” she joked.

The two girls went down the street, sweat still running down their backs, and bought two orange juices directly from the fridge.

“I bet the sugar in this juice will give you enough energy to catch me faster,” laughed Hannah.

“That's the point,” Emily said, looking at the last drop left in her bottle. “I'm sure these ice-cold sweet drinks might be harmful, and it might not be a wise decision buying them!”

It took just a couple of hours to discover that she was right. The same evening, both girls started feeling the side effects of their decision: Hannah's sour throat tortured her during dinner time and all the rest of the night, while Emily's high fever ruined her plans to see her friend the next day. In fact, she stayed in bed with laryngitis, chills, and a high fever, under strict medication, for almost a week.

“I should have listened to you!” Emily told

her grandmother. “I can't play with Hannah, plus I have to endure all this torture!”

“And the pain you've caused to your own body,” her grandmother said. “You see, our body and our health are gifts that God entrusted us with, and we have to take care of them in order to live happily and for His glory. We can't represent God or honour Him while we destroy what He has given to us. Every time we hurt our bodies by eating unwisely, drinking unhealthfully, consuming things that damage the temple of the Holy Spirit—which is our body—or have habits that negatively affect our physical, mental, or spiritual health, we sin against God.

Sometimes when we eat, we cheat on our bodies, which were created for His glory. So, the wise way to eat, drink, sleep, and live is to do all these correctly, so we can enjoy this life and be prepared for heaven. Heaven is a healthy place and only those who have a healthy lifestyle will be able to get there and enjoy the menus that God prepared for us.

“I promise to never cheat when I eat or drink,” said Emily, hugging her grand-mother and already imagining what heaven will be like.

Questions:

1. What do you think a healthy life-style means?
2. Can you give examples of bad habits that can harm your body?
3. Why is it important to take care of our health and bodies?

Day 4

Missionary in Samaria

“Come, see a Man who told me all things that ever I did. Could this be the Christ?” (John 4:29).

If there was a local press, a news-paper announcing the most important events in the Samaria region, I think an article would have appeared with the title, “Revival in Samaria.” Such an article would have elaborated on the two days Jesus spent in Nazareth, in the city of Sihar, with His disciples. It would have been an extraordinary event because of the tensions and hatred that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans.

No respectable Jew would have done such a thing. The article would describe how Jesus became known among the Samaritans, as well as the important role that a woman, whose name we do not know, played in this case. At that time, there weren’t the means of communication we have today. But the event that took place in the suburbs of Judea was a real one. The people involved were real people, and this woman has been talked about for centuries and counting. She can be considered one of the most successful missionaries in the Bible because she met the greatest missionary of humanity, Jesus Christ. Let’s not forget, it all started with the smallest thing, a glass of water.

Jesus Christ, the Great Missionary

There is a fear that we do not talk about, although it is present and dominates the lives of many who call them-selves believers—the fear of witnessing. Fear can have many causes: we may not know what to say, we are not convinced that it is our duty, or we realize it can change someone’s

life forever.

In the Gospel of John, an entire chapter is dedicated to Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well (John 4). John, the evangelist, after presenting the meeting of Nicodemus with Jesus during the night in the third chapter, continues the description of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman as a demonstration of the most important verse in the Bible, which says that “whoever” believes can have eternal life (John 3:16). These two people, Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, are the two extremes of the whole religiosity spectrum. No one can be so good that he does not need a birth from above; but at the same time, no one is so far away that God’s grace cannot recover him. The gospel is both for the wicked as well as for those who consider themselves good.

Jesus Christ is also our model for mission and evangelism. The entire chapter is dominated by surprises. The woman is surprised at Jesus’ request. She has never seen such a thing (John 3:9)—a Jew addressing a Samaritan woman. The disciples are surprised because the Teacher is talking to a woman (verse 27). In their turn, the inhabitants of the city are surprised by the woman’s words, and they come to see Jesus for themselves. The biggest surprise is the change that takes place in this woman’s life. We do not know the exact amount of time Jesus spent at the well with this woman. John presents us with just a summary of the dialogue, but there are so many things we can learn from it.

First of all, the intention of Jesus is to save souls. We have exact geographical data and historical context, but John always gives us details that highlight aspects less noticed by the inattentive. Jesus, says John, “needed to” go through Samaria (John 4:4) on His way from Jerusalem to Galilee. This road, although shorter, was usually bypassed by the Jews precisely to avoid any encounter with Samaritans. Jesus had each day’s agenda, as we have it. Every day he asked for His heavenly Father’s approval as well as for guidance for the prepared occasions. Heaven still prepares opportunities for those who want to be used by God today.

Second, Jesus overcomes all barriers—ethnic, religious, racial, and cultural, as well as the prejudices raised by both sides—by initiating dialogue and asking for a favour water, because He was thirsty. Although the Samaritans believed in the first five books of the Bible, they were considered by the Jews as being worse than the pagans because they polluted the pure race of patriarchs by mingling with the Gentiles. The vessel for water that the woman had was considered unclean, and her own community regarded her as immoral. That’s why she was alone: no one wanted her company. Through the request, “Give Me a drink,” Jesus honours this woman and gives her dignity. He treats her as a responsible, respectable person, capable of a theological discussion. He tells her about the living water, the true worship, the true temple. Even more, she is ready for the noblest discovery: His identity. “I, who speaks to you, am He” (John 4:26), that is, the Messiah.

Jesus helps her discover the greatest need in her life: the need for cleanliness and forgiveness. He convinces her that He can read the most hidden secrets of her life, that nothing could be hidden. There, in the depths of her soul, was a painful, dirty chapter, the sixth man, who was not her husband. Jesus knew that this woman longed for love, fulfilment understanding, and acceptance, and the well from which she was trying to satisfy her thirst for the soul was poisoned.

The woman saw Jesus' face and understood from His words that He was not condemning her, but rather expressing mercy and love. God's grace, the living water, is poured into the heart of this woman, who leaves the vessel and runs to the city. She has a message for all Samaritans, and her message is "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did" (John 4:29), knows everything about me, and yet treated me with respect and love like no one else in my life.

Again, John adds a detail—the woman left her vessel at the well—but he does not explain why. Maybe she left it for Jesus to have something to drink with, or she intended to return anyway. The empty vessel can also be a symbol of her inner emptiness. Morris, on the other hand, prefers another meaning that I like very much: "She abandoned bringing water to bring people."

Can this woman be considered a missionary? Was she ready for such an important work? Here John emphasizes the

mission of a person engaged in evangelism. It is not to convert people; this is the work of the Holy Spirit. She had her own experience in meeting Jesus, her own testimony, and she did one thing: she invited people to Jesus. "Come and see," an expression that is repeated in this Gospel (John 1:39, 46).

Jesus' "Food"

In the absence of the woman, the disciples ask Jesus to eat, but Jesus refuses, saying that He has food to eat that they do not know (John 4:32). In this case, they wonder if anyone has brought him food. In the Gospel of John, we find two levels of reality. First is the physical one, which can be seen and known; but Jesus always turns the eyes of the listeners to another reality, the spiritual one, which can be identified and seen only by faith. In chapter 2, he talks about the spiritual temple, His own person, in which all people have the opportunity to meet God; but the Pharisees and even the disciples, do not understand His words. Nicodemus reacts to Jesus' imperative, "You must be born again," by asking how this is possible, and Jesus corrects him by pointing to the spiritual birth (John 3:25). The disciples, too, do not understand Jesus' words about the special food He received through His dialogue with the Samaritan woman. Jesus continues: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (John 4:34). Nobody spoke like this.

This chapter helps us to look again into God's heart, which is the priority of heaven. The entire Bible tells us about a missionary, God, who passionately seeks the lost. The

mission is not ours; it is not the church's but God's. It is part of the very nature of God. He is the protagonist of the mission. We do not have a God who sends us first, as He allows Himself to be sent and speaks about this again and again in the Gospel of John. Jesus' work is to offer eternal life; it is the work that the Father has entrusted to Him (John 17:2-4), and involvement in this mission gives Him the greatest satisfaction. He was strengthened by witnessing, and His joy was full when He met thirsty souls. Even on the wooden cross, when the agony of death took possession of His being, He was comforted by the last witness He gives to the robber beside Him. The cry "I'm thirsty" is an echo of God's search, of the desire to save as many souls as possible.

All people are loved by God and included in the work of salvation. God loves the world as a whole and each person individually (John 3:16). There is a spiritual hunger and thirst for God in our hearts, an empty spot in every soul, but many, like the woman in Samaria, still don't know where this need can be met. Because of sin, however, all people show resistance to God's call, which is why the Spirit of God fights with every soul. Resistance can be seen in the woman's dialogue with Jesus. She was not willing to open her heart, but Jesus gently leads her to the spring of living water. Even we ourselves often resist the divine message, and the Holy Spirit continues to work in our hearts. It's painful that some will continue to show resistance all the time. Jesus warned us that the seed could fall on unprepared soil. But even in such situations, those who don't

accept the message do not reject us, but rather the One who loves them and wants to save them.

Ready for the Harvest

The effect of this woman's testimony is seen in the multitude of people coming to the place where Jesus is. All these people come not to hear a sermon but to see a living sermon in the person of the Saviour. Ellen White captures the greatest need of humankind in the following words: "The world needs today what it needed nineteen hundred years ago—a revelation of Christ. A great work of reform is demanded, and it is only through the grace of Christ that the work of restoration, physical, mental, and spiritual, can be accomplished."¹

Jesus uses agricultural images to describe the interest shown by the people of Sihar. "Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!" (John 4:35).

According to the parable, the sower who went out to sow is Jesus Christ Himself; but in the Gospel of John, He is not only the sower. He is also the grain that must die in order to bear much fruit (John 12:24). He is the Seed of the woman in the first promise of the Bible (Gen. 3:15), and the wood of the cross is the place where the Seed dies not only to rise in glory but to see the fruit of His sufferings (Heb. 12:2).

The hardest work is not ours; it was and is His work, but all disciples are called to

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143.

participate in the great harvest. The harvest has always been an occasion for joy, and the whole community was involved in this activity (Ruth 1:22).

In nature, there is an order that God has set: it is a time for preparing the soil, a time for sowing, and a time for harvesting the fruit. We use these images to describe the long and difficult process by which the church is involved in winning souls. Sometimes even four months (verse 35), according to Jesus' application, are not enough to prepare the souls to enter into a covenant with God through baptism.

But in John's account, time is compressed. In the same day the sowing took place, the harvest takes place as well. It is what the prophet Amos prophesied: that the day would come "when plowman shall overtake the reaper" (Amos 9:13). The whole city is set into motion. The people come not only to see Jesus; they ask Him to stay with them, and Jesus Christ spends two days with them. We are not surprised that after the Resurrection, after the preaching of the gospel in Jerusalem and Judea, Samaria is ready for Philip's message (Acts 8). The Samaritans recognize in the person of Jesus the Saviour of the world (John 4:42), an expression we find only once in the Bible (1 John 4:14).

We wonder what Samaria represents today. Where does Jesus want to be known, and what are the barriers that need to be overcome? Even today, everyone defends their religion, their forms, rituals, and mountains (John 4:20). We can have our own

mountains, enclaves in which we recede, and forget about the world around us. To the question, "Is Samaria ready for the gospel message?" what would have been the disciples' answer? How about today's disciples? People do not need just to change a religion; they need to see Jesus. God can use the simplest tools, such as a woman with a doubtful past who has known the grace of forgiveness.

Ellen White in the chapter "At Jacob's Well" in *The Desire of Ages* says, "Every true disciple is born into the kingdom of God as a missionary."² The gospel is for "everyone who believes," and whoever receives the gospel, the good news—Jesus Christ—naturally becomes a missionary. This is the honour that God wants to give each one of us.

Questions:

1. What are the similarities between the woman of Samaria and today's society?
2. What can we learn from Jesus' method of evangelism?
3. What are the challenges of today's disciples? To what extent am I willing to be led by God each day for the opportunities of witnessing that He prepares?

**"...and ye shall be witnesses
unto me both in Jerusalem,
and in all Judea, and in
Samaria, and unto the
uttermost part of the earth."**

Acts 1:8

I Promise

To OFFER one day (or evening) each week to WORK for God, spreading the good news to others through Bible-Studies, small groups, etc.(TMI).

² Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 195



Children's Story: The 5-Year-Old Missionary

“Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32).

Not long time ago, in 2013, the Seventh-day Adventist church in Ploiesti, Romania, held an evangelistic campaign and decided to distribute the book *The Great Controversy* in the entire neighbourhood. There were many apartments in the neighbourhood that they wanted to reach, so the pastor invited the students from the Adventist high school to help distribute the book. About 50 students came in a bus from 60 kilometres (37 miles) away, and they were divided into groups of three to go down all the streets, distributing books to all the apartments and houses. With big smiles and polite words, they knocked on doors, giving away the book and inviting people to read it. Some of the people accepted the book happily, while others were reluctant or even rejected the students.

Along with them came the chaplain with his wife and two sons: a 7-year-old and a 5-year-old. They observed that while refusing the adults, people never refused the children. So they decided to let Robert, the 5-year-old boy, approach people while the rest of the family silently prayed for them to accept the gift.

By the time the family had finished the street that had been allotted to them, only two people had refused the little boy's

offer. He was very happy, and for weeks he continued to pray “for the people who had received the books to read them and know God.”

Three years later, Robert and his family attended a big Mission Conference held in Bucharest, the capital of Romania. As they were listening to the inspirational experiences and mission stories shared by the participants, a woman suddenly stood up in the back of the room and told the story of her conversion. She said that three years ago she had been given the book *The Great Controversy* by a little boy who asked her to read it, which she did. After reading the book, she sought a church and started attending the local Seventh-day Adventist church. She was now preparing to get baptised.

When little Robert, who was now 8 years old, heard her story, he turned to see who was speaking and recognized the woman to whom he had given the book. During the break after the meeting, he went with his mother to talk to her, and she recognized him, as well. It was a wonderful, happy experience!!!

Imagine the great joy and celebration in heaven when you meet boys and girls, men

and women, who will recognize you as being the one who told them about God! Maybe some will thank you for being kind to them, for giving them a book, for smiling or responding politely, or praying for them when they did not even know. But in time, they came to know God because of your missionary spirit to serve others.

Never forget: everything you do can witness for God or against Him, and you can be a missionary at any age!

Questions:

1. How can you serve other people and be a missionary for God? Give some examples.
2. Why do you think God wants little children to witness for Him?
3. Plan some things that you could do in the following days to help others know God better.

Day 5

Healing Time

“Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28).

There is an old rabbinic story, more of a parable really: God had gone from nation to nation, offering His law in an attempt to find those who would be willing to receive it. They asked: “What does the law contain?” When they heard about prohibitions such as not killing, not lying, not stealing, every people group rejected the offer, because they could not imagine life without such practices. Eventually, He found a group of people in the wilderness to whom he proposed the same thing. Their question was: “What is the advantage of keeping Your commandments?” God answered: “I will offer you My eternal kingdom, where there will be no more death, suffering, and pain; you will always be happy.” They smiled saying: “What You are telling us is beautiful, but it’s too far in time; we want something we can see and taste now.” God answered: “Along with the law, I will offer you a sample, a foretaste, so that you can see what the kingdom is like. I will give you the Sabbath.” The parable expresses a great truth: Sabbath is an anticipation, a foretaste, of eternal life.

Jesus and the Sabbath

Each one of us has a certain image regarding the Sabbath, depending on the life experience and the knowledge we have about this issue. Most of the time, we associate the word “Sabbath” with rest, peace, blessings, and joy. We do not want the Sabbath to be disturbed by tense relationships, accusations, or physical or emotional suffering. But we live in a world of sin, and we must recognize that sometimes this is the reality. Not all Sabbaths are the

same. It was the same with Jesus, which we can read about in Mark 3:1-6.

Perhaps the author, the disciple Mark, was present on that Sabbath. That’s why he could not forget the scene in which Jesus “looked around at them with anger” (Mark 3:5), because the grief was too great and He could not hide it, and because of the hardening of their hearts.

The synagogue event is preceded by another episode (Mark 2:23-28) that also took place on the Sabbath. The disciples with Jesus were crossing wheat fields, and they began to pluck heads of grain and eat them (Mark 2:23). The One who is accused again is, of course, Jesus, because He allows it. Each disciple talks about the miracles Jesus performed on the Sabbath, and if we count them, there are seven altogether. All the Gospels relate the tensions and confrontations between Jesus and the religious leaders on the occasions of these miracles, but the largest amount of space for relating the controversies that followed is provided by the disciple John.

An important thing that every believer should remember is that these discussions are never about how the day should be celebrated, but only about how the Sabbath should be kept. The Pharisees had 39 categories of prohibitions for the Sabbath, and the discussions around these prohibitions were endless and often sterile. Jesus was never drawn into such debates. Even in these two cases, He does nothing except express general principles that can be, of course, applied differently, depending

on place and time, such as: “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil?” (Mark 3:4). Evil is what they were planning on doing that very Sabbath—they were planning to kill Jesus (Mark 3:6).

The disciple Matthew adds a detail: “If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (Matt. 12:7). It is possible that on that Sabbath day no one invited the disciples for lunch. In Old Testament times and in Jesus’ time, the Sabbath was not a day of fasting; it was a day of joy. That is why Jesus tells them, “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). The principles Jesus stated are profound and comprehensive! If they were taken into account even today, many sad experiences would be avoided.

Sabbath—a Day of Joy

Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath day and is invited to preach. It’s what we want every Sabbath: to see and hear Jesus! Jesus not only sets out the principles of the Sabbath, He also shows how they can be experienced in practice. There was a man with a paralyzed hand (Mark 3:1-3), and at one point Jesus notices this man. He stops during the sermon and addresses the one with the withered hand: “Step forward” (“Stand up in front of everyone,” NIV).

It is impossible for this incident not to draw everyone’s attention, especially those who were following Jesus. There are three actions that Jesus takes on this occasion.

First, He touches the sick man. At some point their eyes meet. Jesus sees a need, a suffering, and cannot move on without stopping to help. He sees the helplessness but also the faith of this man, who had come to the synagogue for worship. Second, Jesus gets involved. He doesn't just express compassion, which is important, but it's not enough. He asks the man to become the centre of attention, to stand "in the middle."

Many times, on the Sabbath, we position ourselves as the centre of attention, waiting for others to come to us, waiting for others to observe our presence or our ministry. Often the Sabbath, after an entire week of labour becomes the day when we wait to be served, nourished by God's Word, and blessed, forgetting the true purpose of the Sabbath: to bless others through our ministry. Sabbath can become a day of joy only if we follow Jesus' example. No one had the courage to answer Jesus' question, whether "it is lawful to do good or to do evil on the Sabbath" (Mark 3:4). Third, Jesus protects this man, He doesn't just heal him. The angry Pharisees and the Herodians, the two extremes of Jewish religiosity, came out. This time, they have a common goal: to destroy Jesus. Those who rejoiced remained inside with Jesus and the healed man. For them and for this man's family, the Sabbath becomes the most beautiful Sabbath. We are the ones who can make the Sabbath a delight and a joy for our families and the church where we worship. But let us not stop here. The commandment spoken at Sinai (Ex. 20:10) requires the joy of the Sabbath to be tasted even by those considered "strangers" to the Sabbath-keeping people. God wants to touch more

hearts through us on the Sabbath day; He wants to pour out more blessings, and to heal more sinful souls. Jesus declared in His sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth that this was His mission (Luke 4:16-18).

The Role and Purpose of the Sabbath

It is important to have a correct understanding of the purpose of the Sabbath; it can help us to have the right attitude and action. The Sabbath is first mentioned in the Bible at the time of Creation (Gen. 2:1-3). It is the day when God finished the work of Creation. It is part of His work. They cannot be separated. If during the six days God offered us created things, on the Sabbath day He offers Himself by entering into the space and time created for humans. The Sabbath is the day when God is present with His rest, as well as blessing and sanctifying this temple created in time, to which all people have access.

Rest is not the opposite of work; God did not need rest, and likely the man and woman didn't need it at Creation either. Rest is the celebration of the harmony between heaven and earth. It is the joy of the whole universe for all that has been created. The first account of Creation (Gen. 1, 2) culminates in the joy of the Sabbath. In other words, everything God created was for this particular day, the Sabbath. Even after the Fall, the Sabbath continues to be a memorial of Creation, pointing back to the One who is the Creator. At the same time, it carries with it a certain nostalgia; it reminds us of what we lost. If you have lost someone dear, the Sabbath awakens memories that might hurt.

But at the same time, the Sabbath speaks of an end—not only the end of Creation but also of re-creation. That's why it carries hope within it. It's the end of our journey home. Every Sabbath is nothing but a rehearsal for the day when we will see face-to-face the One who is the Lord of the Sabbath. This way the Sabbath becomes a vault that connects the Creation with the re-creation through Jesus Christ, and in the centre of this arch is the cross of Golgotha.

We can also call the Sabbath the meeting day. When my parents were alive and I would tell them that I was coming home for a visit, it was the most beautiful day for them. Every occasion to meet was full of emotion and joy. Nothing is sadder than parents expecting their children to come, and the children not honouring them with their presence. Each Sabbath, God opens the door of blessings and expects His children to come for a new feast.

Every Sabbath, we experience rest by putting into practice the principle of accomplished work. We have many plans, to-do lists, and countless wishes. Life beyond the gates of Eden is marked by many failures. On the other hand, the Sabbath tells us to put our worries aside, to stop, and to learn the most important lesson: what God does for us is far more important than our accomplishments. In the work of Creation and re-creation, rest precedes work. The first full day for the first human family was a day of rest.

Sabbath in the Context of the Great Controversy

God did not want this planet to become a place of pain and suffering, but He foresaw the possibility of humans falling, so He gave us the Sabbath. He wanted to say that the danger of falling into sin is real, so it is not enough to meet just once a year or once a month. He wants to spend a day together with us every week. The need for God's presence is imperative after falling into sin. The miracles performed by Christ on the Sabbath must be seen in the context of the great struggle. "The object of God's work in this world is the redemption of man; therefore that which is necessary to be done on the Sabbath in the accomplishment of this work is in accord with the Sabbath law."¹ Before falling into sin, God rested with the man and woman (Gen. 2: 1-3), but in the conditions of sin and suffering, God works on the Sabbath. In this way He manifests His presence. The Gospels show how the tension between religious leaders and Jesus is growing, because of His Sabbath ministry. In this way, Jesus revealed His identity and the character of God (John 5:17-47). On the Sabbath, the salvation of humans, which was the work of the Father, was a priority for Jesus.

The last book of the Bible, Revelation, reveals in a broader way the reality of the great controversy. In the centre of this book is the Sabbath message. In this time of the end, the number of those who believe in the report of Creation and who honour the Creator grows smaller and smaller. That's why we must convey the truth: "Worship

Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water" (Rev. 14:7). The Jews had the Sabbath but rejected Jesus, and without the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), the observance of the day is of no value. They enclosed it with all sorts of restrictions, and Jesus wanted to restore its true meaning. Another extreme is when the Sabbath becomes a day of ordinary rest, without the respect and honour we give to the One who created it. The Sabbath is the means and occasion by which we show that God is first in our lives and Christ's mission is our mission.

In 2007, in the Romanian media, an article written by a non-Adventist, with the title "Forgive me, Beatrice!" was printed. The author of the article, Emilian Isailă, describes an incident when he attended secondary school in Bucharest and had a colleague named Beatrice. He says: "She was a small girl, beautiful, and smart. She was a good student and did not speak without being asked. ... For the whole class, Beatrice was a mystery. I sincerely envied her. At the time, it seemed incredible to me that a student missed a day of classes every week. Besides not coming on Saturday, Beatrice had been leaving from the last classes on Friday. We were studying in the afternoon, and as the evening was approaching, she packed her things and left. ... Beatrice was the daughter of a doctor's family, and they were members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Every Saturday the teachers noted her unmotivated absences. ... On a Friday afternoon, by the end of History class, five minutes before the bell rang, our teacher suggested that we not let Beatrice leave. ... Beatrice, impassive to threats, began to pack

her things. The teacher called us to stop her. A few boys, including myself, blocked the door; others surrounded her, trying to make her give up. Beatrice sat back down in her desk. She covered her ears with her hands so she could no longer hear us and began to cry. Tears streamed down her cheeks like two springs that had finally found their way to the light. We got blocked. Suddenly there was silence as if the whole class had a revelation. We were ashamed. ... From that day on, Beatrice had no problems leaving school. A kind of mysterious solidarity had been created between us and her. We were helping her."

Even today, Jesus addresses the young people, the parents, all of us: "Stand up in front of everyone" (Mark 3:3, NIV). The Sabbath is the means through which we honour God. We show that He deserves to come first in our life. Sabbath is day of healing, a time when our hearts are touched by His love. Sabbath is the day in which God wants to bring healing and blessings through His children for those around us. Sabbath is the sign of belonging and faithfulness to God.

Questions:

1. What place does the Sabbath have in your family's schedule? Is the Sabbath a day of joy?
2. How can the Sabbath become a blessing to those around us?
3. What decisions do you want to make for a reconsideration of how you celebrate the Sabbath?

"And He entered the synagogue again, and a man was there who had a withered hand. So they watched Him closely, whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. And He said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Step forward.'"

Mark 3:1-3

I Promise

To KEEP the SABBATH, preparing for it accordingly on Friday, keeping its limits, right thoughts and activities.

Children's Story: Present, the Present

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8).

Betty always celebrated her birth-day in the same way. She would invite her friends over; they would play games and have fun together for a few hours. Then her mum would bring a special birthday cake, which was different every year, and she would serve various goodies that her mum prepared. After everyone left, she would help her mum clean up the house, open her presents, and spend some time enjoying her new toys.

This year it was different. Her birthday fell on a Saturday, and she knew she had to celebrate it differently. She knew it was not just her birthday, it was also Jesus' celebration. She wanted to put Him first, to make Him happy on His special day. When her friends asked her what she had planned for her birthday, she told them: “I have a special invitation for you this year.” “What is it? What is it?” asked Amy, curious. “Well, I want to invite you all to church in the morning, and then you are all invited over for a special celebration lunch at my house. Afterwards, we will go on a special trip in nature and enjoy some special Sabbath games,” Betty replied. “Church?!?” repeated Amy, not believing her ears. “What does church have to do with your birthday?” “It doesn't,” Betty explained, “but it has to do with my Best Friend's day. You see, Sabbath is Jesus' special day, and I would like to first celebrate it the way He likes, and I'm sure He will turn it into a happy feast for me, too.”

As her birthday approached, nothing seemed to be OK. The whole week before, the weather was cold and rainy and unsuitable for an outdoor walk. Her mum, who had planned to prepare a special berry cake, had to work so much over-time that she did not have time to go to the market and buy the fruit. Even Mark, Betty's little brother, didn't feel very well, and Betty was afraid her birthday plan would fail. But she prayed hard about it and was determined to make the day “a delight,” as she knew all Sabbaths were supposed to be, in spite of all the challenges.

Surprisingly, Saturday morning the weather turned out to be very nice, and the sun shone warm and bright. At church, the instructor from her Sabbath School group wanted to surprise her and prepared a big strawberry cake for everyone, and they ate it at the end of the class. To her surprise, all her friends attended church and came over after-wards, bringing her presents and making the lunch a real celebration. And most of all, in the afternoon, when they went for a walk in nature about two miles away from their village, they found a tiny, little puppy, probably lost or abandoned by someone far from home. “It's exactly what I've wanted!” Betty exclaimed, excited. I have prayed so much to get a puppy for my birthday, but I knew my mum and dad would not allow me to get one at home, so I didn't tell anyone about my wish.” “Seriously?” her mum asked. “Yes, Mum,” Betty replied.

“Please, please, can I take him home? I will call him Present, because he's my birthday present from God.” She jumped happily, holding the little puppy close in her hands.

“You're so lucky!” exclaimed Amy. “You've gotten exactly the birthday you've dreamed of. And I think it was, indeed, one of the best birthdays you've ever had.” “I told you,” replied Betty. “When we take care of God's day, He will make ours a real celebration!”

Questions:

1. Why do you think it is important to keep the Sabbath and celebrate it?
2. What things can you do to make the Sabbath day special and beautiful?
3. Name a friend who does not know about the Sabbath, and share the special news about God's day with that person.

Day 6

Back to Bethel

“And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You” (Gen. 28:22).

The Bible contains many promises. For many, they are the most beautiful part of the Holy Scriptures. We need these promises because through them, our faith is strengthened. What is the most important promise in the Bible, the promise that man needed even before he fell into sin?

We find it in an explicit form for the first time in Genesis 28:15, and it is, “I am with you.” It is not addressed to a person who, in our opinion, deserves this. God speaks to the one who tricked his brother, lied to his father, and constrained by his brother’s hatred became a fugitive. His name is Jacob, meaning “the deceiver.” The Bible calls this grace; it is what we all need.

Bethel, the Meeting Place With God

Jacob left Beersheba, the place of his brother Esau’s wrath and vengeance, for Haran (Gen. 28:10). There, he was to be deceived and exploited by Laban. Behind was the threat, and ahead was the unknown. The road was a long one, about 800 km (550 miles), and in that time’s conditions, it took about a month. The Bible does not talk about everything that happened during this time, but it presents the experience of a single night that changed Jacob’s life.

Jacob’s grandfather, Abraham, had travelled this road about 125 years before, but in the opposite direction, coming to the Promised Land. There are many other differences between Abraham and Jacob. Abraham

was with his family, servants, and much wealth, but Jacob was alone and without any material support. But starting with this night, they have something in common, God’s promises: the Promised Land, many descendants, and the blessing that would include all the families of the earth. Jacob did not expect that God would speak to him personally and under such circumstances. He was 15-years-old when Abraham died, and he certainly had the opportunity to learn much about the God of his grandfather and father.

It is Jacob’s first encounter with God; he hears God’s voice for the first time. The ladder that reaches the sky descended to the place he was. The word “place” dominates the whole narrative (verses 12, 16, 17, 19), it is not just a geographical location. It is the place that marked Jacob’s life forever; it is the “gate of heaven.” Although it was only a dream, this dream woke him up. The words spoken by Jacob, “The Lord is in this place, and I did not know it,” point to his greatest revelation. God may speak to us in many ways and we may not know it. Jacob needed protection, and God promised to be with him. He needed forgiveness and discovered the ladder on which the angels ascended and descended. The image of this ladder points to the One who descends, Jesus Christ, to “take away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). It doesn’t refer to his past at all, only the future (Gen. 28:13-15).

In this superb narrative, God’s revelation parallels Jacob’s response (Gen. 28:18-22).

The answer is called worship. No one can define precisely what worship is, nor does the Bible define it. Worship, humanity’s greatest need and deepest experience, cannot be defined but only experienced. It is attitude, action, obedience, amazement, fear, joy, celebration, mystery, life, dedication—that’s all. Every dimension of life is touched by worship. Worship transforms lives. The devil doesn’t need our goods; he only wants one thing from us: our worship. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, tells us that worship will be the final object of the great controversy between good and evil (Rev. 13:8). We are invited to walk along with Jacob in this space and to experience true worship.

Vows at the Worshipping Place

It is impossible to meet God, to experience worship, and to remain the same. So far, Jacob’s life has been marked by failures. The place where he arrived and stayed overnight was dominated by darkness. Ellen White describes Jacob’s inner state, which was also laden with darkness: “He felt that he was an outcast, and he knew that all this trouble had been brought upon him by his own wrong course. The darkness of despair pressed upon his soul, and he hardly dared to pray. But he was so utterly lonely that he felt the need of protection from God as he had never felt it before. With weeping and deep humiliation he confessed his sin, and entreated for some evidence that he was not

utterly forsaken.”¹

After God speaks to him, we see a different Jacob. Overwhelmed by God’s promises, by the greatness of His presence, he responds to God by a vow. It is the first vow we find in the Bible, and it is based on what God has already promised. Jacob does nothing new but repeats God’s promises on a much smaller scale, content with just the basic needs of life and the assurance of returning home in peace. He says, “If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I’m going, and give me bread to eat and clothes to put on, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, the Lord shall be my God” (Gen. 28:20, 21).

In this vow, Jacob promises God three things: first his total loyalty to Him. Jacob’s commitment, in which he promises to put God first in his life, includes the fact that in this world of sin, this cannot be accomplished without determination and struggle. It’s a choice that must be renewed every day, and the biography of Jacob’s life demonstrates this truth.

The second element of worship is the “stone,” a common thing, which first served as a pillow and was watered with tears. It now becomes a monument of remembrance and the “house of God.” On this stone, Jacob pours oil, a symbol of dedication. The place of public worship, the houses of prayer, must be respected and cherished today as well. Nearby was the city of Luz, but it lost its significance because of the glory of Bethel. The houses of prayer must be the most neat and beautiful buildings, and the worship

there must befit a place where angels ascend and descend.

The third element of worship is the tithe that Jacob promises will be “of all” that God will give him (verse 22). Jacob does not conceive of worship without giving. David thought the same thing when he said to Ornan, “Nor offer burnt offerings with that will costs me nothing” (1 Chron. 21:24). True worship always costs. If there are some who consider that it does not cost, they do not know what worship is. If we want to see how much worship costs, let’s look at Golgotha. Our worship cost God the most. He is the “ladder” that Jacob saw coming down from heaven. Ellen White, commenting on Jacob’s promise, cannot help but say with amazement: “Tithes for Christ! Oh, ... shameful for that which cost so much! From the cross of Calvary, Christ calls for an unreserved consecration. All that we have, all that we are, should be devoted to God.”²

Someone once said that everything important we need to know about God, about men and women, and about salvation is found in the book of Genesis. Here is another aspect that we cannot overlook. Many do not understand why God instituted the tithe system. They get the impression that the only reason is to support the church and its mission. When Jacob promised to be faithful in tithing, there was no organized church, no pastors, no evangelistic institutions. The principle of tithing existed even before the first man and woman fell into sin (Gen. 2:16, 17). The practice of the tithe system began with Adam, and therefore it was part of Abraham’s

experience (Gen. 14:20). The principle of tithing was not instituted to raise funds, but to protect humans from the most insidious temptation: forgetting who the true Owner is. Theoretically, we accept that everything belongs to God, but often, practically, we consider our-selves the owners. When this becomes a reality, everything changes in life. Some wonder, however, to whom Jacob returned the tithe, which we know about Abraham. The answer is simple and should be kept in mind by any worshipper: he returned it to God! We always return our tithes to God. The fact that God later established it to be used in the temple (Num. 18:24) and for spreading the gospel (1 Cor. 9:13) is another matter, but He is its true Owner. The tithe has the role of putting order in our material world, putting God in the first place in a practical and tangible way, just as the Sabbath has the role of putting order in the administration of time. Both institutions have the role of protecting us from idolatry. Both belong to God; both are holy; both express our dependence on God; and both remind us that God is the Source of all blessings.

Vow Renewal

Each of us, like Jacob, passes through moments in which we promise God consecration and faithfulness in all areas of life. But as we have already mentioned, in order to preserve our consecration, we need vigilance, determination, and daily struggle. God was with Jacob, but this does not mean he was free from trouble, distress, and even failure. That’s why Jacob had to pass through a new experience. It is the agony of another

night, when God, wearing a human body, descends to be with him. Here we see again how difficult it is for us to give up control of our lives and let God be its Master. There are so many paradoxes in this unique story.

First, that the Almighty God fights all night with Jacob, a fist of dust, and cannot defeat him (Gen. 32:24, 25). It took a supernatural touch for Jacob to give up, and his defeat becomes a victory (Gen. 32:28). After meeting God, meeting Esau becomes one of the most beautiful and emotional experiences of his life. The real problem is not outside of him, and it is not Esau. It is about letting God be the Leader of his life.

There are many lessons for us in Jacob’s biography, but let’s stop at just one other episode. Chapter 35 of the book of Genesis is once again sad. When we look at Jacob’s family, we find that all the worst things in this world are happening in this family. Seeing your only daughter mocked, being lied to by your children, and the cruelty manifested in Shechem show the brothers’ true character. Jacob is horrified when he sees herds of animals entering his yard, children crying, and wives screaming. There is a new crisis in Jacob’s life. At the same time, we see God struggling by His grace to bring transformation and change to this family that was to become His people.

That is why God intervenes and speaks to Jacob again: “Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau, your brother” (Gen. 35:1). Why at Bethel? Bethel dominates the whole

¹ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 283.

chapter again, it is the place where God was first revealed to him, it is the place where Jacob made the first vow of his life to God. There God promised, "I will be with you." Ten years have passed since Jacob returned to the land of Canaan (30 years after leaving home), but he stopped in Shechem, perhaps for-getting about Bethel. Returning to Bethel involves a less enjoyable work. Jacob knew that things were not in order in his family, but he tolerated them. Until now, he always went alone to meet God, but this time he refused to do so. He realizes that he is losing his family, which is why this time his courage is unprecedented, and he demands that everyone participate in this event. He knows that worship requires renunciation, cleansing, and consecration, so he commands, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments" (Gen. 35:2).

What keeps us from putting God first in a tangible way by tithing, sacrificing for God's house, the place of worship, and also for world mission is idolatry. It can be the idols of materialism, selfishness, self, or any other form. But let's not forget: idols destroy our lives and families. They are cruel. They demand everything from us, and they don't offer us anything in return. Jacob had the courage to say that he no longer wanted such things. The idols were buried under the oak near Shechem (Gen. 35:4). Arriving at Bethel, he builds the altar, prepares the sacrifice, and gathers his family around the altar. The sermon Jacob gave there could not be forgotten by anyone, because it was anchored in the experience of his life. This is the place—he says—where God spoke to me for the first time; He promised to be with

me, and He kept His word.

God always keeps His word. That was the case then, and it is the same today. The problem is not with God; it is with us. Jacob admits that there were delays in his commitment, but he wants a new consecration, this time of his whole family.

We are talking about revival and reformation and how much the church needs it. If there was a day in our lives when we promised faithfulness and consecration, now is the time to renew that vow. It is time to return to the Bethel of our beginnings. These are the three essential aspects of the commitment: God in the first place, God's house or His local or worldwide church, and faithfulness in tithing. If we want a change in our lives for the first time, let us not forget the experience of Jacob. God is ready to forgive the past and give us a new beginning. Bethel is the place of new beginnings as well as the place of renewal of our consecration. The day of this experience is today.

Questions:

1. How does worship change my life and that of my family?
2. John abruptly concludes his first epistle with the warning, "Little children, keep yourselves free of idols" (1 John 5:21). Why?
3. Are there any delays in my life regarding faithfulness in returning the tithe? What keeps me from committing to God as Jacob did?

"Behold, I am with you, and will keep you in all places wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you, until I have done what I have spoken to you."

Genesis 28:15

I Promise

To DEDICATE a percentage (__)% of my income as a regular OFFERING to the Lord.



Children's Story: Five Times Rewarded

“For God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7).

Timothy was a 7-year-old boy who loved playing with Lego® very much. He could spend hours patiently building up different Lego® models and inventing all kinds of things from his Lego® pieces. He had only two sets of Lego®: one was a birthday present from his parents, and the other was from his classmates as an end-of-the-school-year gift. But he loved to mix the pieces and build all sorts of cars, ships, planes, and buildings.

He had just seen a new Lego® model that had come out, which he liked very, very much and wished he could have. “If I had this model too, which has a lot of special pieces included, I am sure I could invent and build almost everything,” he used to tell his mum. “You can try to save money,” his mum advised him. Timothy started saving money, little by little, but he knew the game was pretty expensive, and he felt bad for having to pay so much for a simple game.

Then one day, an old family friend came to visit and gave Timothy a banknote worth \$50! Along with the money he had raised, it was just enough to buy the Lego® set. Just imagine Timothy's joy! His first thought was to go to buy it. Then a second thought came to his mind: he remembered that the previous Sabbath the pastor had announced in church that they would have a special collection for a mission project in Africa. He felt the urge to give his money to church, even though he wanted the Lego® game

really badly!

The following Sabbath, he took the money he had received to church and put the entire sum into the offering basket. His mum was very surprised, as she knew how much he had wanted the game. She also knew that he could not easily earn the amount needed by himself.

Two days later, a woman from his mum's workplace asked his mum if she wanted some toys for Timothy. Her grandson, who was now grown, had decided to give them away. And guess what one of the toys was? It was a very, very big sack full of Lego® pieces!!! When she gave the bag to Timothy's mum, the woman said: “My grandson kept these toys the longest, but now he is big enough to not play anymore and is ready to give them away. I think there are more than 10 Lego® games mixed inside.”

You can imagine Timothy's joy when his mum brought the sack home. Also try to imagine his amazement when he realized he had given up his money for God, but that God had given him way more than he could have bought with his money! Putting God first in all aspects of our lives, including money, is like opening the door for God to bless us and fill our own life with joy! God is always happy to bless the cheerful giver!

Questions:

1. Do you think God needs our money? Why do you think He wants us to return the tithe?
2. How can you share what you have with God and other people?
3. Do you think you can find ways to return the tithe, even though you might not have an income?

Day 7

The Gift of Love

“But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial’” (John 12:7).

I haven't met anyone who doesn't like presents. Gifts are part of our lives and are a thermometer of love and generosity. It is difficult to say what we like best: giving or receiving gifts; but Jesus said that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). I would like to invite you to meditate on a special, extraordinary gift, which was offered in an unconventional and inappropriate way for that time. Everyone there was troubled and therefore did not forget that occasion. It happens that the beneficiary of this extraordinary gift was Jesus. Few accounts, except the crucifixion and the Resurrection, are told by all four evangelists. This event is one of them. Matthew says that a woman “poured the fragrant oil on His head” (Matt. 26:7). Mark, on the other hand, adds a detail: that this woman “broke the flask” of alabaster, and Jesus describes it as “a good work for Me” (Mark 14:6). The evangelist Luke calls her “a sinner” in the city (Luke 7:37); and in the Gospel of John, a gospel that was written much later, we also find the name of this woman, Mary (John 12:3).

The Context in the Gospel of John

Some commentators divide the Gospel of John into two parts. The first part, from chapter 1 to chapter 12, is called the “book of signs.” In this first part, John presents seven signs. The first we find in Cana, and the last is the resurrection of Lazarus in Bethany.

The second part, from chapter 13 to the end of the gospel, is called the “book of

glory.” The events of this section culminate in Golgotha, where Jesus manifests the glory of God.

We see how in the Gospel of John, the popularity of Jesus increases from one sign to another. The resurrection of Lazarus motivated the Sanhedrin to meet in order to decide what to do with Jesus (John 11:47-57).

The Sanhedrin decided that Jesus must die; and the disciple John, after presenting the supper in Simon's house, talks about a new decision of the Sanhedrin. It is not enough for Jesus to die; Lazarus also must die (John 12:9-11). John intersperses the report of the anointing of Jesus under this cloud of threats, showing how great the tension was when it occurred.

If in the first part of the Gospel of John we have a chronology of what happened during the first week of messianic activity, now the countdown begins during the last week before the crucifixion. “Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany” (John 12:1), because He wanted to spend the last Sabbath with His friends, in the family where He felt at home.

Dinner at Simon's House

Simon, although a Pharisee, considered himself a disciple of Jesus. He wanted to honour Jesus by preparing a special meal. Simon bore the epithet “the leper,” because he had suffered from this terrible disease, and Jesus had healed him. At this meal were the disciples along with Jesus, other Jews, and Lazarus, who was recently resurrected from the dead. Martha is also present and

responsible for preparing the meal. It is the last occasion when we meet all three siblings: Lazarus, Martha, and Mary.

If we had the opportunity to go back in time and be present at this dinner, what would we be interested in? Maybe some of us would be surprised by the menu prepared, or by the way the meal was served. Another surprise for our culture is that only men were present, and women were only concerned with preparing food and serving it. Discussions between those present could be another point of interest. Let's not forget, at the table there was someone who had spent several days in the grave, and such a thing had never happened before.

Dinner was in full swing when something uncommon, even outrageous to some, suddenly happened. A woman, Mary, enters the space where the event was taking place. She carried with her a vessel, which she first “broke” (Mark 14:3), and then she spilled the contents on Jesus. The vessel was precious, made of alabaster, and the contents were extremely expensive, “oil of spikenard” (John 12:3). A few drops would have been enough to fill the house with the fragrance of the anointing, but Mary pours all the contents on Jesus' body. All eyes are turned to Jesus. There is silence; indignation and tension increase in the room. One of the disciples finally breaks the silence with the words: “Why this waste?” (Matt. 26:8), and John tells us who that disciple was, whose spirit of criticism was immediately taken on by the other disciples.

The spirit of criticism is still very contagious

today. With mercantile thinking, Judas immediately calculated the cost of this “waste,” three hundred dinars. To have a picture of Mary’s gift, the sum of three hundred dinars was enough to provide all the basic needs for a family for a whole year. We can evaluate Mary’s gift in the context of today’s family income for an entire year. Even today, this gift would be considered extraordinary. Mary was horrified when she heard these words of criticism, and now she was afraid of how Jesus would react. Suddenly, the voice of Jesus is heard through the words: “Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial” (John 12:7). Jesus not only defends Mary, He appreciates the profound significance of her gesture. Mary’s gift points to an even greater gift, the gift of Golgotha.

Two Characters With Totally Different Attitudes

The main character of this narrative, as well as of the whole gospel, is Jesus. Let’s look at two other characters who had the opportunity to meet Jesus: Judas and Mary.

Judas, a derivative of the name Judah, is a beautiful name; the meaning of this name is “I will praise the Lord” (Gen. 29:35). Today, however, this name can rarely be found. Why was Judas bothered, and why did he create this atmosphere of indignation toward Mary and even toward Jesus? Ellen White in the book *The Desire of Ages* says that Judas was so upset that from this

supper he went to the religious leaders to betray Jesus.¹ But the fact is, it wasn’t his money. It wasn’t his product. Every time an act of generosity is manifested, selfishness is already present and wants to take control. This was the case then, and it is the same today. This tension and struggle are present in every heart, including our own. We were not born with a spirit of generosity; selfishness is part of our fallen nature. It is present in our DNA. Even young children, up to the age of 2, already have a clear sense of possession. They know how to say the word “mine.” Just as parents strive to help their children give up selfish manifestations, so is God fighting with us to become like Him, full of generosity.

John the disciple adds a detail that we do not find in the other gospels when Judas asked the question, “Why was this fragrant oil not sold ... and given to the poor?” (John 12:5). John said this of Judas: “Not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it” (verse 6). Even decades after the Gospel was written, John’s indignation is still great. He knew that the money in the bag did not belong to Judas or the disciples, but was God’s.

Every Sabbath in church today, money is put into the offering basket or sent to the account of the church during worship. This money, tithes and offerings, belongs to God, and His money also passes through our hands. Selfishness or greed might tempt us, as well, to hold on to what belongs to God. Some may wonder that if Jesus knew

the character of Judas, why did He agree to let him become a cashier? God gives us responsibilities not to be overcome by temptation but to overcome temptation. He does not need our offerings or tithes. We need to overcome selfishness and criticism. “Judas had indulged avarice until it overpowered every good trait of his character. He grudged the offering made to Jesus. His heart burned with envy that the Saviour should be the recipient of a gift suitable for the monarchs of the earth.”²

In contrast to Judas’ attitude, we have the example of Mary. Her gift exceeds all expectations. She is a model of generosity. John says, “The house was filled with the fragrance of the oil” (John 12:3), but not only the house was filled but also the courtyard. Besides the Saviour no one is more honoured in the New Testament than Mary, because Jesus said: “Wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her” (Matt. 26:13).

In the vessel that Mary broke was all her wealth, all her dowry, all her dreams. If we had the opportunity to ask her: “Mary, was it worth doing such a thing?” what do you think her response would be? I think her answer would be: “What I did can in no way measure up to how much He has done for me!” In the Gospels, Mary can be found every time at the feet of Jesus. After the Resurrection, she is the one to whom Jesus reveals Himself for the first time. The essence of pure nard myrrh soaked into the Saviour’s body and continued to spread the

pleasant fragrance. When He was mocked and beaten and hung on the wood of the cross, the fragrance of the pure nard oil told Him that there were beings in this world who valued His sacrifice.

Gifts for God

What can we offer to a person who has absolutely everything? The only thing we can offer is our love. Along with tithes, God instituted the offering system. Often, when we discuss the practice of tithing and how God treats this subject, we open the Bible to the last book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi. In the first chapter of this book, God expresses His displeasure with the way His people treated the offerings that were to be brought to the temple (Mal. 1:8), and in chapter 3, along with tithes, the offerings are mentioned again (Mal. 3:8). The offerings in the Bible are often associated with confession of sins and worship.

The standard of giving gifts is different from that of tithing. Tithe is our duty, and duties in the Bible are expressed in specific terms, to be clear to everyone. That is why the tithe is 10 percent of all our income. But offerings are not limited to an exact mathematical number. Offerings are determined by our gratitude and love. Mary’s extraordinary gift is an expression of her love and appreciation for God. Our offerings, not our tithe, show how much we love God. That is why Jesus told Simon, who looked down on Mary and judged Jesus, “But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little” (Luke 7:47).

There are clear principles in the Bible that

1 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 645.

2 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 564.

can help us to personally determine not only the quantity but also the quality of offerings. In the Old Testament (Deut. 16:10, 17), as well as in the New Testament, it is said that the offerings must be according to as “he may prosper,” or the “gain,” of each (1 Cor. 16:2) or the blessings received. (Expand one additional line about the principle of proportionality.) The second principle is that of the sacrifice so evident in the churches of Macedonia that the apostle Paul appreciates and presents as a model for those in Corinth but also for us (2 Cor. 8:1-5). Jesus was so impressed with the widow’s gift, which she gave not of her abundance but with sacrifice; she gave everything (Mark 12:41-44). Every Sabbath, when we have the privilege of giving, we need to ask ourselves, “Is the gift I offer to God today a sacrifice to me?” It is not God who needs our gifts, but we need to be healed of selfishness.

The third principle is that of regularity. Whenever we participate in worship, we give because worship without giving is not only incomplete, it is also worthless (Ps. 50:5).

One Friday I was at the office when a brother came to me and asked me to lend him a certain amount of money because tomorrow, he said, “I don’t want to attend the worship service empty-handed.” Of course, he soon came and returned the amount, but I can’t forget that occasion. We need to turn daily to the supreme gift of our Saviour at Calvary.

Another offering principle is the one Jesus mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount. It is the principle of God’s priority and His kingdom. Mary, unlike others, had the opportunity to anoint Jesus’ body before

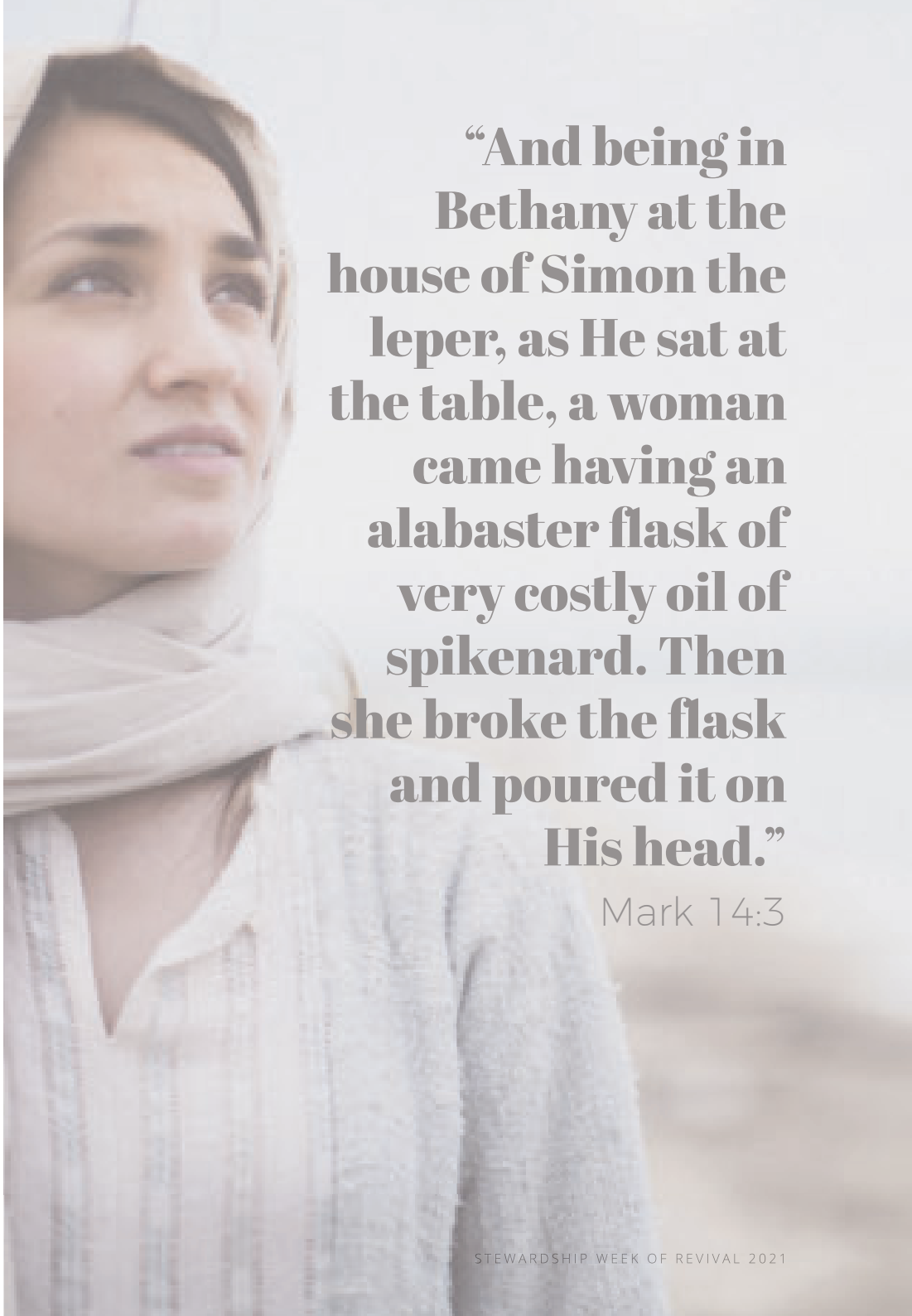
the funeral because she had made her gift to Jesus a priority. Ellen White says that “the Holy Spirit had planned for her, and she had obeyed His promptings.”

The Holy Spirit still wants to lead us in giving offerings today. We can listen to His exhortations or, like Judas, be led by selfishness. Every gift we give must become a symbol of the sacrifice at Calvary. Jesus saw in Mary’s gift a symbol of the fragrance of salvation that will spread from Golgotha throughout the universe. Mary gave Jesus an even more precious gift than the alabaster vessel with pure nard myrrh. Not only was the vessel broken, her heart was broken as well.

Standing in front of the cross as Mary once stood, we can say: “Lord, take into your hands our past, present, and future. Turn our broken vessel into a vessel of honour for Your glory. Watch over us so that we do not follow Judas’ example. We want to express our love for You through the offerings that we offer You every Sabbath, so that through them others will know the scent of Your eternal salvation, Your love, and Your grace.”

Questions:

1. Am I happy that God has instituted the offering system, or is it something that bothers me?
2. Are there gifts that God does not accept today, and if so, what are they?
3. I am willing to decide that my offering is not out of impulse or made of sums that do not represent me. To what extent is my offering a symbol of the sacrifice at Calvary?



“And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head.”

Mark 14:3

Children's Story: The Egg Seller

“Render ... to God the things that are God's” (Matt. 22:21).

Hellen lives in a small village and is in her retirement years, but she does not receive any monthly payment because she was a housewife all her life. She always worked very hard as a housewife, but she was never employed outside her home.

Now that she is old, her income is very small, and she has had to struggle many times with financial needs.

One of her dearest wishes was to be able to sustain mission through her money and help those who were able to spread God's Word to other people. One day she decided to put aside for God a single banknote every day, no matter what (the smallest banknote in her country's currency is equivalent to 25 cents in U.S. currency). Every day Hellen sought for ways to make just that little amount of money and prayed that she could keep her promise to God. Since she was living in the country, she tried to sell at least two eggs a day (which would have been the amount of that one smallest banknote), just to be able to put it aside for God every day.

When she saw that she could easily raise this amount, she “raised the stakes.” She decided to put aside one banknote for mission, one for charity, one for Hope Channel, and one for ADRA every single day. Even though the sum was not very much, it was not an easy task for a 60-year-old woman with little

income. Every day she would pray and ask God to help her find ways to complete the sum before the evening. Sometimes she would work for a little money or sell a few items, but God always helped her to keep her promise, and she had many wonderful experiences while raising money for God.

Little by little, she raised the stakes again, until she was giving a \$10-value banknote to each of her four offering projects: mission, charity, Hope Channel, and ADRA. She eventually reached the point of giving a \$50 value banknote for each project every week, and she has had many beautiful experiences with God as a result. It's been more than four years since she began to do this, and when she talks about it today, she always says these were the most prosperous years of her life. She has been greatly blessed all this time!

Questions:

1. Why do you think God wants us to give offerings to church?
2. How can our money help others to know Him?
3. Challenge: try to save as much as possible this week and give the sum at church, asking God to use it as a blessing to those in need.

Day 8

Stewards
for the End
Time

“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming” (Matt. 25:13).

The year 2020 is not yet over, but it will undoubtedly go down in history as the year of the deepest crisis in recent times. People ask many questions these days. Here are some of them: Is the crisis that we are going through a sign of the end? Is there much time left before Christ returns? What else does the future hold for us?

To answer these questions, let us open the Bible to the Saviour's last sermon, which we can find in all the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—but not John. The disciple John does not record this sermon, but he wrote the book of Revelation, which deals with this same subject.

Of the three Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of Matthew presents the last sermon of Jesus in a complete form. It dominates most of two chapters (Matt. 24, 25). Jesus parallels the scenario of the destruction of Jerusalem with the final events of His return, as the assurance of the fulfilment of the last act in human history, His return in glory.

If we look at the structure of the Sermon on the Mount of Olives, we see that Jesus first speaks of the signs of His return, then of the need to watch for them. But most of the sermon is devoted to the way we should wait and be ready for His return. This is obvious by the way He corrects the disciples' question, “Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming and the end of this age?” (Matt. 24:3). Jesus

answers, “Take heed that no one deceives you” (Matt. 24:4). He wants to tell the disciples that the most important question is not when, but how they should be prepared. To help the disciples and those waiting throughout the ages to understand what it means to be ready, Jesus tells four parables. We call them the “expectation parables,” but they also can be called the “stewardship parables,” because they illustrate the fundamental principles of stewardship. The short answer to the question of what it means to be ready for Jesus’ return, according to the sermon, is to be a true steward, one to whom the Lord can say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21).

In the first parable, Jesus shows that watching and being ready is reflected in how we treat those around us. One day we will give an account of this. In the second parable, Jesus speaks of a possible delay. Watching involves a relationship with God that sustains us, even if He does not come when we think He should come. In the next parable, watching means to use all the capacities and opportunities offered to expand the borders of His kingdom. In the last parable, that of the sheep and the goats, watching means to be willing to serve. Space does not allow us to talk about each parable. For this reason, I will discuss only the third, the parable of the talents.

We Have a Generous God.

The disciples gather around the Saviour and continue to listen to one of the most important sermons they have had the

opportunity to hear. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus said, “is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and entrusted His goods to them” (Matt. 25:14). This truth should be repeated again and again, that all that we are and have is only entrusted to us; it belongs to God. Only in this way will we be able to have a correct perspective of God, ourselves, and the meaning of life. Watching and waiting for the Saviour’s return is not an event. It is a lifestyle based on the truth that everything belongs to God and must be used in harmony with His will. The apostle Paul’s question should always dominate our thinking: “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4:7).

Three servants were given the responsibility of administering the entire wealth of their master: eight talents. What the disciples understood from Jesus’ words may be different from how we understand the meaning of the word “talent” today. The talent at that time was not a monetary unit, but a measure of weight. It could weigh between 25 and 35 kilograms (55-77 pounds). A silver talent was the equivalent of 6,000 dinars, or 15 years of work. So, one talent was worth a fabulous sum. From the talent in the parable came our word “talent,” which means the endowments or abilities that a person might have.

Jesus’ primary purpose through this parable is not to teach us a lesson in financial management. Jesus wants to say that the kingdom of heaven only resembles the administration of money. Each servant received according to his own “ability” (Matt. 25:15), or capacity. One thing is for sure:

everyone received much more than they could have earned or owned. The lord of the servants also expresses his generosity through the trust he shows them.

For our understanding, a talent can represent any gift received from God, everything we have, everything we are, every moment, every day, the financial resources, family, and social relationships—everything we have is because of His grace.

God also opens opportunities to serve, through which we can do something extraordinary for Him. No one has reason to complain that he did not receive any opportunities. God has invested so much in each of us. Everything that follows in this parable happens because of the different perspective the stewards have of their master. Perhaps we should make a daily list, as did David (Ps. 103), of God’s blessings and praise Him for who He is, a God full of generosity.

Different Attitudes Toward the Master

The first two stewards appreciate their master, and therefore they do not behave like servants, but as his true partners. They “immediately” (Matt. 25:15) invested everything they had received and thus increased its value. Every time we read this parable, our attention turns to the third servant, who “went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord’s money” (verse 18). At first sight, there seems to be nothing wrong with what he did. He did not waste his master’s resources. On the contrary, he sought a way to make sure he could fully repay all that he

had received. In this case, we wonder, Why is the punishment so harsh? Maybe firing him would have been enough.

Let’s not forget the purpose for which Jesus told this parable. He does not address the crowd; He speaks to the disciples, those who asked Him about the end of this world. Once again, Jesus emphasizes the need for vigilance and shows what it means to be vigilant. In the previous parables as well, the master and the bridegroom returned. Here the same theme appears again. Jesus mentions that there will be a delay when He used the expression “after a long time” the master returned. The certainty of return is accentuated again. We do not know when He will come, but we know that He will return. And when He returns, He will do one thing: He will “settle accounts” (verse 19) of what we have done with what has been entrusted to us. Such a generous God has every right to do so. However, why does He settle accounts? He gave the unused talent to the one who had ten talents. God has only one expectation from us: to grow in the likeness of Him, and become generous with what has been entrusted to us. We are either generous as God is or stingy, and see Him as stingy as well.

These are the words of the unfaithful servant: “Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid” (Matt. 25:24, 25). If we do not have a correct perspective of God, we will not wait for Him to return, and our life will be dominated by fear (verse 25). Fear has a paralyzing effect, negatively affecting the experiences of vigilance and waiting.

And yet, why such a harsh punishment? Jesus is not talking about money here, but about His kingdom. He did everything to make His kingdom a reality; to expand it and to embrace as many souls as possible. This is the role of the church, the responsibility of each of us. For this reason His precious blood was shed on the cross. To be careless with such a calling means to be a “wicked and lazy” servant (verse 26). The church is not just a place in which to feel good or to bury the talents you receive. Not putting to work what we have received through the enormous cost of the sacrifice at Calvary is wickedness and rebellion against God. Ellen White says, “Christ’s followers have been redeemed for service. Our Lord teaches that the true object of life is ministry.”¹

These parables remind us that no matter how rich or modest the received talents are, they are all important to God’s plans. The parable of the talents shows that the most important thing is not how much we have received (the reward is the same for everyone), but what we do with what we have.

Stewards in the End Time

Is the crisis that has gripped the world in the year 2020 a sign of the end? The answer is definitely “Yes.” We have been in the time of the end since the period of the early church, says the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:11. But how much time is left until Christ’s return is what we do not know. Not even the angels know (Matt. 24:36). Precisely for

this reason, we are advised to watch and be ready. What will happen to us then, depends on what we do today. This is the message of Jesus.

There is another aspect to consider. The state of being ready is not what saves us. Salvation, from beginning to end, is because of His grace. The state of being ready or watchful shows whether we have received God’s grace in our lives. The Saviour’s parable tells us that this immense capital, which is His grace, must be invested and used to expand His kingdom. The first two servants knew how to watch and be prepared for the master’s return and could look him in the eyes with joy. They invested what they had received.

Pastor Randy Roberts in the book *Waiting and Longing* says:

“Have you ever thought what vigilance means? First of all, take it for what it literally meant to the first hearers, when a talent symbolized money. So one of the first ways to watch is using your money in ways that further the goals of the Kingdom of God.

“Have you ever realized that when the offering plate comes down your row at church and you drop in your tithe and your offerings, that you are not just giving for the church? No, you are watching, watching for the coming of Christ. Have you ever realized that when the hat is passed for a needy family, and you help bear the burden, you are not just giving something to help the needy? No, you are watching for the coming.

“But we must also appropriately broaden

the meaning of talent to include not only the money, but to also include the responsibilities, gifts, talents, and abilities that God gives to each one of us. And when we do that, we realize that every day of our lives can be characterized by watching.

“When outstanding musicians lead worshippers in majestic praise; when the choir and orchestra use what they have been given to lift the hearts of God’s people heavenward, it is tempting just to say, ‘Thank you for using your talents.’ . . . But please understand that on a much deeper level, as they increase the Kingdom of God, they are watching. Watching for the coming.

When children learn of the truths of the kingdom in children’s programs, they are the beneficiaries of the people who are using their talents to increase the kingdom in their little lives. And so we will say, ‘Thank you for using your talents.’ But beyond that do not miss the fact that these leaders are not just serving the children. No, they are watching. Watching for the coming of the King.”²

The greatest blessing one can enjoy is to hear on the day of His return the words: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matt. 25:21). Remember, by God’s grace, strive not to be a successful servant, but rather a good and faithful servant, made ruler over a few things. We are not called to accomplish anything sensational, but to be faithful to what has been entrusted to us, and the Bible calls this “stewardship.”

Questions:

1. Who is the lord of the parable for you?
2. What are the talents received for which you will one day have to give an account?
3. How do the parables of Jesus help me to have a correct understanding of what He expects of me?

¹ Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 326.

² Randy Roberts, *Waiting and Longing for Jesus* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2011), p. 86.

Children's Story: The Buried Treasure

Amanda was a very talented girl. She loved drawing, taking photos, traveling, and doing crossword puzzles. But most of all, she loved collecting stamps. She had a great passion for it, and her collection included more than 250 stamps of different colours and values from all over the world. She would show her collection to her friends and even exchange stamps through the mail with other children who also were collecting stamps.

One thing Amanda didn't like to do, though, was to play her violin every day. She loved music, of course, and she was the one who begged her mum to take her to music school. But when it came to daily practice, she would always delay or skip it! Her mum would remind her every day to practice, but every time something would come up or be more urgent to do. So, Amanda would sometimes forget to play her violin. More than that, when it came to playing in church, she would always complain that she was too shy or that she would prefer doing something else.

One day, after her mum received a text message from the music teacher saying that Amanda needed to practice more, her mum took the box in which Amanda kept her stamp collection and buried it in a little hole she dug in the garden. The next day, when Amanda came home from school, she seemed very happy. She told her mum that she had just received two new stamps from her best friend, whose dad had travelled to a foreign country. But when she wanted to add the two new stamps to her collection,

the box was missing! Extremely worried, she looked everywhere in her room where she thought it might be, but could not find it. Almost crying, she went to her mum and asked her if she had seen the stamp box.

"Are you sure you have searched everywhere?" her mother asked.

"Yes, Mum, I'm sure I've looked very carefully. Oh, Mum, I can't even think about losing my stamp collection!" she sighed. "That box was like a treasure box for me!"

"Well, then, let's try to look for it together," her mum suggested. "Because many treasure boxes that are lost have no value, right?" she asked, looking into Amanda's eyes. "Yes," the 12-year-old girl responded. "Do you really think it is lost, Mum?" she asked, with fear in her eyes and a trembling voice.

"Let me tell you something," her mum said, talking her hand and guiding her through the back door and into the garden. "You see, our goods are valuable as long as we use them as needed. But when we lose them, or hide them, or when they are buried, they have no value, no matter how big the treasure is." Before Amanda could ask why her mum had taken her into the garden, her mum continued: "It is the same with our talents. They are treasures that God has given to us to use for His glory. Some of us have more, some have less, but each one has a treasure box in which God has put one or more special talents. When we stop using these talents, when we don't practice them for God's glory and to bless those around us,

we bury them, just like a treasure box that is lost or hidden." stamp box?" Amanda asked, confused.

"It has much to do with both with your stamp box and with your music talent that are both buried right now," her mum answered, leaning on the trunk of the tree beside which she had buried the box. She then removed the dirt and revealed Amanda's stamp box, carefully wrapped in a plastic bag.

"Oh, Mum!" Amanda jumped happily, picked up her box, and held it tight to her chest. "I almost thought I lost it!"

"Well, you almost did. And I'm afraid you will lose some of the treasures that God has entrusted you with—like your music talent—if you keep burying them under the dust of time, postponement, or forgetting."

"I think I've gotten the idea," Amanda said, blushing, yet happy to have re-covered her stamp box. "I guess I have another treasure to recover," she said, hurrying to her bedroom to get her violin and practice the song she was to play during the children's program the following Sabbath.

Questions:

1. Can you name one or more talents that God has given you?
2. How can you use your talent or talents for God's glory?
3. How can our talents multiply, as we use them more and more?

G. EDWARD REID

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IN SEARCH OF THE STOREHOUSE



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Notes



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