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Lawrence L. LaPierre
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Prayer and the cosmic conflict

As a young lad, I thought the expression “golden oldies” referred to great songs from yesteryear. That may well be true, but perhaps “golden oldies” can also refer to great books of past generations that still have tremendous value for our lives today. One such volume is Power Through Prayer by E. M. Bounds.

Edward McKendree Bounds was born on August 15, 1835, in Shelby County, Missouri. Even as a young man, Bounds discovered a great passion for God and was strongly influenced by the writings of John Wesley. Though trained as an attorney, Bounds decided to become a pastor in the Methodist church. During the last 20 years of his pastoral ministry, he published extensively on the topic of prayer. He also left an indelible mark on the Christian church as a powerful prayer warrior.

I recently decided to read Power Through Prayer once again. His keen insights cut like a knife: “The little estimate we put on prayer is evident from the little time we give to it.” In stark contrast to the Twitter prayers of many Christians, Bounds spent from 4:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. every morning in private prayer. While true that the length of time in prayer does not guarantee power through prayer, it is unlikely that one who rushes hastily through prayer will ever make a lasting impact for the kingdom of God. Bounds reminds us that “the preacher is commissioned to pray as well as to preach. His mission is incomplete if he does not do both well.” Those of us who have a passion for powerful biblical preaching would do well to heed this wise counsel: “The character of our praying will determine the character of our preaching. Light praying will make light preaching. Prayer makes preaching strong, gives it unction, and makes it stick. In every ministry weighty for good, prayer has always been a serious business.”

Not only do preachers need to devote themselves to prayer as did the early Christian leaders (see Acts 6:4), but they also desperately need prayer cover. Having encouraged believers to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests,” Paul also makes this appeal: “Pray also for me” (Eph. 6:18, 19). Some might wonder why Paul would request intercession on his behalf. After all, he was such a powerful ambassador for Christ. Did he really need to send out appeals for Christians to pray for him? The answer is a resounding “Yes.” In fact, continued prayer on his behalf combined with his own devotion to prayer were reasons for his high-impact ministry. No wonder he appealed to the Christians in Colossae, “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” And then he adds, “And pray for us too” (Col. 4:2, 3).

At no time is personal and corporate prayer more important than when we find ourselves in the midst of the cosmic conflict between good and evil. It is not coincidental that Paul’s appeal to pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers comes immediately after his exhortation to “put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand” (Eph. 6:13).

In this month’s lead article, Richard Rice reminds us of the reality of this great cosmic conflict. He answers a question that many are asking: “If there is a good God who rules over history, why is there so much suffering in the world?” The answer is found in the scriptural teaching about the great conflict that began in the courts of heaven (see Rev. 12:7–11). That conflict continues on planet Earth and intensifies as we draw near to the day of the Lord (see Rev. 12:12). Consider adding Power Through Prayer to your 2015 reading list. Its timeless message may be more relevant than ever before.

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An enemy hath done this: Cosmic conflict theodicy

The assurance that we are connected to a power mightier than any of its foes, and any of our foes, can be an immense source of comfort and strength.

One of my favorite college teachers was a professor of biblical studies. As a ministerial student I took a number of classes from him, more than from any anyone else on the faculty. He taught Greek, Hebrew, and a number of other courses that required a knowledge of these languages. My professor loved the topics he was teaching. He was a good communicator and enjoyed being with students. He had a great sense of humor. Perhaps most important, he was an excellent scholar. During the years I was his student, he pursued his doctorate and completed all the requirements except the dissertation.

A couple of years after I graduated, I heard that this professor was having some health problems. Although he was a private person, the diagnosis soon became known. He had multiple sclerosis. I lived not far away, and the school asked me to cover one of his classes for a few weeks while he decided what to do. He managed to return to the classroom and teach from a wheelchair for a couple of years, but the progress of the disease eventually made that impossible. He took a medical retirement and lived in the community, where his family looked after him for a long time afterward. One day during a visit from the church pastor, he reflected on his predicament. "Every war has casualties," the professor observed. "There's a great war going on in the universe between good and evil, and I am one of the casualties of this conflict."

The presence and pervasiveness of suffering in the world poses a persistent challenge to religious belief and religious believers. If God is perfect in goodness and power, philosophers ask, how could God allow suffering to exist? And if God truly cares for me, almost everyone asks, sooner or later, why would God allow me to suffer? Over the years, people have responded to these questions in a number of ways. Some believe that God’s plans are perfect, and even though we may not understand it, suffering has its place in God’s design. Others believe that suffering is not something God wants, but resulted from the mistakes that some of God’s creatures made. And some hold the view that suffering has its benefits, and we can learn and grow in response to it. These and other ways of responding to suffering, theodicies as they are often called, have all received extensive scholarly attention. Each has its strong points, each raises certain questions, and, most important, suffering people somewhere have found in each of them a source of personal encouragement.

Cosmic conflict theodicy

My professor drew strength in the face of his great loss from what some call “cosmic conflict theodicy,” the concept that human beings are involved in a raging controversy between superhuman forces of good and evil. At the center of this conflict stands the towering figure of God’s archenemy, the one being, more than any other, responsible for all that is wrong and painful in the world God created. This figure appears here and there in a number of biblical passages. One well-known example is the prologue to the book of Job (Job 1:2). The Lord gave Satan permission to test His faithful servant. Also, the devil appears as Jesus’ great adversary in the Gospels, tempting Him in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). And the book of Revelation contains vivid portrayals of superhuman conflict: “And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven” (Rev. 12:7–9, NRSV).
For many who suffer, like my esteemed professor, the idea of a cosmic conflict is personally helpful. They believe their suffering does not come to them from God, but from something utterly opposed to God and is caused by a diabolical power that is doing everything it can to thwart God’s will for us and make our lives miserable. So, instead of wondering why God sends, allows, or intends to use their suffering, their response is to say, “‘An enemy has done this’” (Matt. 13:28) and put the blame on him.

In recent years, the figure of the devil appears infrequently in philosophical discussions of evil. But for some thinkers, the idea of God’s archenemy is indispensable to an adequate approach to suffering. One is Gregory A. Boyd, whose “trinitarian warfare worldview” places responsibility for the sufferings of the world squarely on the devil.2

To the question Is God to blame for suffering? Boyd responds with an emphatic No.3 God has enemies, Boyd argues, and these enemies have great power. So, they bear responsibility for the world’s sorrows and woes. Satan and his cohort of once angelic, now demonic, followers are the forces behind the strife and bloodshed that riddle human history. And their interference with the processes of nature has transformed the world from the perfect home God intends the world to be into an ominous and threatening environment, marked by pain, disease, and death.4

According to Boyd, the concept of cosmic warfare dissolves the familiar questions that suffering raises—How can a perfect Being allow it? and Why in particular do I have to suffer? The pervasiveness of suffering was not bewildering to those who lived during the eras of biblical history, he observes, nor to those in the centuries that directly followed. To the contrary, they were keenly aware of the presence of evil powers, and they attributed the ills of life to them, not to God. If the universe is populated by a host of beings opposed to God and bent on wreaking death and destruction, it is hardly surprising that we suffer; it would be surprising if we did not.

From the perspective of cosmic conflict theodicy, then, we do not suffer because God wants us to, we suffer because we live in a war zone. We suffer because God’s enemies are active in the world, and we have made ourselves vulnerable to violence.5 So, it is futile to look for a specific reason or purpose for suffering.

The warfare worldview has another ramification. “When we accept the warfare worldview of Scripture,” Boyd says, “the intellectual problem of evil is transformed into the practical problem of evil.”6 Freed from the burden of explaining or comprehending suffering and empowered by the victory achieved by Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are called to join God resisting the forces of evil and relieving suffering.

**The cosmic conflict of the ages**

Boyd is not alone among Christian thinkers to give the devil a prominent role in his account of suffering. Another is Ellen G. White,7 who, in Boyd’s estimation, “integrated a warfare perspective into the problem of evil and the doctrine of God perhaps more thoroughly than anyone else in church history.”8 The central theme of Ellen White’s theodicy appears in the title of her
most influential series, The Conflict of the Ages, as well as the title of its most influential book, The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan. According to the preface, the book’s purpose was “to present a satisfactory solution of the great problem of evil.”

Like Boyd, Ellen White places human suffering within the framework of a cosmic conflict. The conflict began with a revolt against God on the highest level of created beings, and it will end when God’s enemies perish and God’s loving purposes for creation are finally fulfilled. From this perspective, the devil is the source of all the world’s ills, and everything that makes human life miserable is ultimately attributable to our participation in his rebellion against God.

Like the great antagonist in Milton’s Paradise Lost, Lucifer before the rebellion was a majestic figure, a covering cherub, and head of the angelic host (see Ezek. 28:14, 15). In spite of his lofty position and great intelligence, Lucifer mysteriously, inexplicably, came to resent God’s authority. He aroused the suspicions of his fellow angels, and when their opposition ripened into open revolt, they were cast out of heaven.

When Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree, their disloyalty to God left them vulnerable to God’s enemies, and ever since Satan and his angels have been busy wreaking havoc on the earth. These sinister forces are ultimately responsible for everything that threatens human life and well-being, from natural disasters and organic diseases to personal sin in all its manifestations. Beneath the veneer of human activity, the course of history consists in the conflict between God and Satan as these great powers pursue their contrasting objectives for the earth, each attempting to counteract and undermine the work of the other.

As Ellen White describes it, the central issue in the great controversy is the character of God or, more precisely, the creaturely perception of God. Lucifer’s persistent charge is that God is tyrannical and abusive, unworthy of creaturely devotion. To resolve the conflict, God provided a definitive revelation of the divine character. The gift of God’s own Son vividly displays God’s love and exposes the emptiness of Satan’s accusations. His dominion rests on cruelty and tyranny, not God’s. The Cross was the turning point in the great controversy. With Christ’s death, “the last link of sympathy between Satan and the heavenly world was broken.” So “all heaven triumphed in the Saviour’s victory. Satan was defeated, and knew that his kingdom was lost.” When evil is finally eradicated from the universe the “terrible experiment of rebellion” will serve as “a perpetual safeguard to all holy intelligences, to prevent them from being deceived as to the nature of transgression.”

**Questions about cosmic conflict theodicy**

No theodicy is more dramatic than that of cosmic conflict, spotlighting as it does the fascinating, enigmatic figure of Lucifer, the archangel who became God’s archenemy. But, like every attempt to account for evil in God’s world, this approach raises some important questions. One concerns its basic plausibility. Is there indeed a cosmic conflict raging all around us? Are we surrounded by invisible personalities? Do superhuman powers actually influence the course of nature and history?

Such a view of things seems to fly in the face of our modern perspective. Today, people instinctively look to science and technology for an understanding of the world we live in rather than to supernatural forces. People today seldom appeal to angels, demons, or other invisible personalities to account for things that happen. Perhaps this is why most philosophical treatments of evil today do without the devil.

Along with this general reservation, some people wonder about the very concept of cosmic conflict. The idea of a superhuman agent whose revolt engulfs the entire universe and poses a genuine threat to God’s government seems incoherent in light of traditional concepts of divine power and sovereignty. How could any created being pose a serious challenge to God? After all, as Creator, God not only brought the universe into being; it is God’s power that sustains all that exists, moment by moment. But, if everything owes its existence to God, how could any created being, even the most highly exalted, pose a plausible threat to God? What would intelligent beings hope to gain from contesting God’s supremacy if they knew that God could instantly annihilate them?

**The enduring appeal of cosmic conflict theodicy**

Whatever the questions it raises, many people find the idea of cosmic conflict not only plausible but personally helpful. Boyd insists that secularism, with its dismissal of the supernatural, is no longer as influential as it once was. With the “postmodern awakening” of the past few decades, the “narrow structures of modern Western naturalistic categories” are becoming increasingly irrelevant, and people are less willing to dismiss the perspectives of other historical eras and other cultures today as implausible, “primitive,” or “superstitious.”

On a popular level, of course, the supernatural has never lost its attraction. Angels have been featured in motion pictures and television programs. And millions of people are intrigued by the devil. He is a familiar character in movies and novels. He figures prominently in a wide range of religious phenomena, evoking responses that range from fear, revulsion, and defiance to admiration and even worship, and he has even made an appearance in popular psychology.

Another factor points to a superhuman source of evil. Certain forms of suffering are of such duration, intensity, or magnitude that they defy comprehension. Only a cause of superhuman, indeed, near-cosmic proportions, it seems, could possibly account for them. The Holocaust made the idea of the devil plausible for many in the
twentieth century. We can all recall instances of cruelty and violence so outrageous, so beyond what humans alone could conceive, that they cry out for some cosmic explanation. They become remotely comprehensible only when attributed to a superhuman, supernatural, demonic source.

To speak of suffering on a grand scale with language freighted with cosmic connotations seems natural. And the idea that superhuman forces lie behind great moral conflicts speaks to us at a deeply intuitive level, as popular movies such as The Lord of the Rings and Man of Steel indicate. Behind the spectacles that entertain us lies a specter that haunts us.

Cosmic conflict and divine deliverance

A far more important reason to ponder cosmic conflict carefully is the powerful notion of divine deliverance it conveys. For this theodicy, God has become no detached executive, serenely presiding over the cosmos, like a CEO in the corner suite of a high-rise office building, far removed from the rough and tumble of the streets below. To the contrary, God is a powerful force within the world, challenging and resisting the agents of evil at every turn. This picture of God can be greatly reassuring to people who feel helpless before the forces arrayed against them.

There are those whose losses have the potential to leave them feeling utterly defeated and deprive their lives of meaning. There are people, like my professor years ago, whose devastating disease took away their health and ended careers they loved. Then there are people in the throes of enslaving habits, serious addictions that have so exhausted their energies and depleted their resolve that nothing in the sphere of natural remedies or conventional treatment can help. When recovery programs, self-help regimens, and medications all fail, people may feel that they are in the grip of an enemy possessing supernatural strength. And, for them, the idea of divine victory and divine deliverance may provide the only basis for hope.

The assurance that we are connected to a power mightier than any of its foes, and any of our foes, can be an immense source of comfort and strength. So the notion of cosmic conflict, with its assurance that God can defeat all that harms and threatens us and will eventually eradicate suffering entirely, can play an important role in a “practical theodicy.” It gives strength to many as they face the enormous challenges that suffering brings.

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Abandonment and pastoral care

No one chooses to be abandoned. Abandonment occurs when those from whom we expect love, understanding, and acceptance turn away from us. Whatever the cause of the abandonment, the experience is painful. Church members, even whole groups within a church, abandon one another because of some disagreement over doctrine, polity, or otherwise not having their way. Christian church history is replete with instances where a disagreement or dispute regarding doctrine or polity, organization or choice of leadership, or even the use of a particular word in stating an ecclesiastic position has led not to just abandonment and expulsion of individuals and whole groups but to torture and elimination of those who were considered as heretics or enemies of the church.

Abandonment is more than an issue of history. It is a personal tragedy, leaving the victims in emotional turmoil, social isolation, homelessness, sickness, and disablement. Abandonment affects our parishioners, and we, as pastors, should expect to deal with it. Some need help working through their painful memories of being abandoned in the past, while others may seek support for a current crisis. Many such victims have confidence that God will bring about healing through the ministry of their pastors. Still others who have no connection to God or any church may also seek help from a pastor.

Some who have been abandoned will never connect with a pastor unless the pastor goes to them. I met one such person when I was a student pastor. Visiting a nursing home, I came across a 38-year-old man who was curled up in a fetal position and completely noncommunicative. He suffered from advanced multiple sclerosis. His only other visitor that day was his mother, and she could only afford to make the trip monthly. He was about two years younger than I was, and I just could not imagine what he was experiencing.

The pastor and abandonment

Scripture speaks much about those who were abandoned. Imagine the loneliness and fear Joseph experienced when he was abandoned in a dry well, later sold as a slave to a caravan on its way to Egypt, and still later abandoned in jail for being true to God (Gen. 37:22–28; 39). Think of David, abandoned by his son, Absalom, in the latter’s coup attempt (2 Sam. 15:1–14). Even Job cried out in anguish because his prayers seem to have been ignored (Job 30:20–31). Or imagine the national sense of abandonment during the captivity when God’s people cried out in Babylon, “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Ps. 137:3). And even Jesus was not spared from the agony of abandonment in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:56; Mark 14:50), the betrayal of Judas (Mark 14:10, 11), the denial by Peter (Matt. 26:69–75), and the separation experienced on the cross when He uttered those words of “ultimate” abandonment, “ ‘My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?’ ” (Mark 15:34, NKJV).

With such a brief portrayal of abandonment in Scripture, it should not come as a surprise to pastors that they and their families too can be easy targets of rejection. We can see the effects of abandonment when someone loses themselves in alcohol or drug addiction because we are watching from the outside. But we do not notice the crisis when we, who are pastors and chaplains, become “addicted” to serving the needs of the church or a chaplaincy setting because we are in the midst of the situation. We are doing good, but we may fail to recognize the anxiety, sadness, and even the tears in our spouses as we leave for yet another home visit, church meeting, or conference committee gathering. “Workaholism” can be an addiction that many pastors struggle with, and consequently their families may experience abandonment.

One way abandonment may manifest itself in pastors is their unexpected departure from ministry. In one conference where I served as a pastor, eight fellow pastors withdrew from ministry...
in one year. The shock waves were bigger than one might expect. Not only were the individual congregations left wondering why they were abandoned, but also many colleagues in this small conference.

Another way, not very common but real, that pastors abandon their congregation is by taking the extreme step of suicide. This is not something we like to admit, but it does happen. In my pastoral career I have had two clergy colleagues who committed suicide. The incidents shook those of us who worked with them and became confusing and unbearably painful for their parishioners.

Sometimes pastors feel abandoned when they fail to understand or adjust to denominational policies they cannot fully comprehend. I served in a denomination that made clear that our loyalty, after our commitment to Christ, lay with the church. I was present when a clergy couple asked whether they could be appointed to churches geographically close enough to share one parsonage. The bishop said “No.” He reminded us that when we were ordained, we promised to go where we were sent. Yes, we did, but we had no idea of the strain that would put on our families.

Pastors may also create feelings of abandonment in a congregation by leaving “too soon.” A church that I served many years ago endured the loss of several pastors within a few years. A well-liked pastor was reassigned after five years in the parish. The next pastor left on his own initiative after a year. The third pastor, well liked, left ten months after arriving at the church to open a small business. When I left after almost four years to be a chaplain, it must have seemed to the parishioners that they had been abandoned not just by the four pastors but by the conference that sent us to them.

How should pastors respond to abandonment?

So, as pastors, where do we begin to deal with abandonment? In the ideal world we begin with an honest look at our spiritual condition no later than when we are in seminary. A senior pastor, pastoral counselor, or seminary professor with training in counseling are all potential resource people to aid us in looking into ourselves. If we are willing, they may help us to identify memories, barely suppressed emotions, or dysfunctional behaviors that indicate that we have been abandoned or suffered some other ordeal.

Some of us will discover feelings of having been abandoned when our parents divorced, a sibling died, or our family was impoverished. We need to be aware of these experiences and learn how to keep them from interfering with our ministries. As we listen to individuals narrate their story of having been abandoned, we need to be sufficiently self-aware of our feelings and memories so that we attend to their pain instead of ours.

With appropriate supervision in our practice of ministry, we can begin our healing process even as we help others. Others of us will need to go further and engage in pastoral counseling where we are the counselee—not the counselor.

From my own experience, I recall dealing with parents of children with cancer. I joined a grief support group working with such parents and soon found that I had more than the average amount of counseling training at that point. Even then I was not ready to deal with my own fears and grief when our daughter struggled with cancer. I needed to be with others who understood what it felt like to be helpless. The leader of this group, a trained clinical pastoral education supervisor, was helpful. However, what helped the most was being with other parents who would never abandon their children even though it may have felt like they were as they stood helplessly by while the hospital staff took over the care of their children.

When abandonment experiences are faced without support from peers or professionals, we may feel overwhelmed. We may even be angry at the magnitude of the suffering we experience, either within ourselves or with those who seek help from us in coping with their pain. Since anger is not easily tolerated in congregations or pastors, we may suppress or repress our anger only to have it resurface as depression. Our sense of abandonment may result in deciding not to seek the help we need to cope with our emotional and spiritual needs. We may also feel as if there is no way to cope if we have limited access to competent pastoral counselors with clinical as well as pastoral training.

Pastors also face abandonment, as a pastoral issue, whenever they note that the great question “why” is asked. Why did God allow a good person to suffer? Where was God when my baby died? Where was God when my spouse was killed in a car accident? Why did God allow my spouse to leave me?

In situations such as these, we need to be aware of our limits as to how much we can do to alleviate the suffering that comes from being abandoned. We may be shocked to learn that people are not always healed by our recommendations to pray or enter into extended pastoral counseling. While our parishioners do need our supportive pastoral care, we must learn to refer people to clinically trained counselors or psychiatrists. Otherwise, we may inadvertently question the power of prayer or the need to get professional counseling and assistance.

People who suffer abuse—physical, emotional, or sexual—may question the need for spiritual strength. They may even rage at God and/or the church for what they have had to endure. We who are pastors need to be humble especially when we have not lived with such abuse. We may not begin to understand the rage or sense of rejection that some victims carry within their souls. We may interpret it as a lack of faith, instead of recognizing that the victim has been blocked internally from connecting with God.

Working together to bring relief

How else do we cope with the emotional and spiritual burdens of
even a small congregation? Where do we turn when there are no additional resources from our conferences, colleagues, or retired clergy? We can choose to organize with other pastors, either denominationally or ecumenically, to form support groups for each other. Pastors can gather as a visible demonstration that God does not leave us isolated to cope with our burdens and those of our congregation. We can pray together as a visible sign that God calls us to be together—not driven apart by our unconscious needs or conflicts.

At the church where I now worship, we have a pastoral visitation committee. A pastor leads the committee, but most of the visiting is done by laypeople. This group has gone through a training program along with periodic supplementary training. They maintain contact with people who would otherwise have no physical contact with the church because they are unable to come to the church. They show that the church cares about God’s people enough to come to them.

However, our parishioners need more than just an occasional visit. So, our church publishes a prayer list of groups of people with particular needs. While obvious, it is worth reminding each other that we can help people to avoid feeling abandoned by praying for them and sharing with them that we are praying for them. Unless they have stated that they do not want prayer, it would be spiritually strengthening to pray with them, in person, where possible, and over the phone when it is not. Even praying over the Internet is worth exploring.

Perhaps one of the most important ways to show people that they are not abandoned by God or the church would be to involve them with Communion service when they cannot come to church. Both when I was a church pastor and when I served as a chaplain, I found this to be a ministry many appreciated. It is, after all, a visible sign that the church as the body of Christ is deeply interested in the spiritual welfare of its members and showing that the community of faith cares.

There may be some church members who feel so abandoned and have gone so far away that they have sinned grievously and think that God does not love them. Local church pastors are not always aware of this problem. However, I witnessed such desperation repeatedly when the military veterans to whom I was a hospital chaplain shared their feeling that God did not care about them. Often their feelings were the outcomes of what they were expected to do in wartime. Unless we have been through combat, particularly as a member of a military or paramilitary force, we simply do not know the depths of violence that a human being is capable or the guilt that may result from it.

In such and similar cases, the church needs to find ways to make it clear that all of God’s people are invited into the congregation. The church and its pastors need to remind their congregation that Jesus will not abandon His followers under any circumstances. His promise is: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20b, NRSV). We need to consciously witness to Jesus’ love for everyone. Any genuine reminder of God’s presence and love can create a foundation for healing from the experience of abandonment.

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References on abandonment

I love Jesus’ parables. They are powerful illustrations of the kingdom, the King, and the principles by which He governs His realm. One such parable is in Matthew 25. In chapter 24, as He nears the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus explains to His disciples the signs of the end of time. He continues this end-time discussion in chapter 25 by showing how the righteous Judge will give His final review and verdict. Jesus does this by telling three stories: the parable of the ten virgins, the parable of the talents, and the parable of the sheep and the goats. These three parables are loaded with meaning and have received a thorough treatment by countless preachers and scholars. However, I compared what I call the “post-decision declaration” in each of the three parables. This led me to notice a significant difference between the first two parables and the third.

After Jesus pronounces each decision, the master in the story gives to the lost and left out a sort of final word. This post-decision declaration is a type of explanation as to why they were not being rewarded. To the foolish virgins, He says, “I do not know you” (Matt. 25:11). Then, to the “wicked and lazy slave,” He says, “you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest” (v. 27). But, the final parable stands out, not only for its verdict, but more so for the reason behind that verdict. First, it stands out because it is so extensive. Jesus takes time to identify each person or group and to say how they were cared for. Then He reverses the entire explanation and provides for the wicked what is practically the same description, just with a negative twist. He is intentionally explicit. Second, this extensive explanation stands out because the explanation reads so simply and practically. These are things they could have, should have, been doing all along. These are things that they often claimed they stood for, yet they failed over and over to follow through. The master’s final words are chilling: “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (v. 45).

Ellen White’s comment is noteworthy: “The world will be convinced not so much by what the pulpit teaches as by what the church lives. The preacher announces the theory of the gospel, but the practical piety of the church demonstrates its power.” We have preached sermons about the “least of these” countless times, and many people do not want to hear about this. They do not seem to remember “the least of these” either. We must be more intentional about how we communicate the gospel through acts of service.

Jesus talks very specifically about what matters to Him and what type of ministry makes Him take note. He makes it unequivocally clear that He identifies directly with the voiceless, forgotten groups in society that often receive our last-ministry considerations. Jesus identifies with “the least of these.” So, what are some ways we can be more intentional about reaching out to “the least”? A closer look at the parable illuminates some hidden opportunities for ministry to the forgotten groups. While space does not allow for a thorough explication of all the forgotten groups, a few specific examples will lift the spirit of the text and challenge our ministry.

Those who hunger

The first group of people that the Master highlights includes those who suffer from hunger. Clearly, there is so much more ministry to be realized for the hungry. Hunger outreach by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency may be vibrant across impoverished countries, yet even in wealthy nations many still struggle to find three square meals a day. According to
hungerreport.org, “Hunger rates in the United States remain tremendously high in part because of a weak recovery since the end of the Great Recession.”

The author argues further: “When the breadwinner in a household is out of work, everyone living under the same roof is at risk of hunger.”

It is actually innovative to think that the way to fight hunger is to create jobs, given that traditionally our churches in the United States have set up food pantries to serve the hungry. The irony of our food pantry ministries is that they usually partner with the local food bank to serve food. And, generally, the food that comes from the food banks is food that the donors (even the ones who work in the food pantry) normally would not eat. So, the approach to hunger would be more effective if we tried a different tactic.

Consider the epidemic proportions of children who are growing up without adequate parental support, which limits proper food availability. Studies show that approximately 70 percent of African-American children in the United States are being raised in a single-parent home. This means that the vast majority of African Americans are at immediate risk “because the social, emotional, and financial resources available to the family may be limited.”

In his book Father Hunger, Robert McGee contends, “This kind of emotional hunger acts in many ways just like physical hunger. If we aren’t provided with what is best for us, we will soon begin to seek other, less healthy, substitutes.” McGee adds that this hunger leads to the dangers of codependency, dysfunction, addiction, and the like. We need new ministries and strategies to feed the hungrying children who sit in our pews and live in the communities where we pastor. We need mentoring programs and community centers to feed them with love, affirmation, and support.

In my previous district, one of the churches started a volunteer mentoring ministry at a local community center. We did not start a community center; we simply adopted one. Various members picked a day of the week and volunteered an hour for that day. We played games with the children, helped them with homework, and even put on a few basketball tournaments. One day, as I was sitting at a table playing a board game with a little girl, she asked me, “Are you my dad?” I was speechless. Then I began to realize how important it is for us to invest our time and energy with the children in our community.

Those who are sick

When Jesus thanks the righteous for their compassion for the sick, He does not say that they visited. He says, “I was sick and you took care of me” (v. 36). We struggle to visit the sick regularly. We generally keep their names in the church bulletin and often mention their names at prayer meeting. They might get a quick visit if they have a committed pastor or exceptional elder. However, we do not do much to provide for their care and recovery.

Health-care costs continue to rise. In addition, unemployment persists. With the rising cost of health care, the exorbitant prices of medication, and the unemployment situation, we need solutions that provide quality care for the sick who are among us. And health is one of the areas with a special message we have to share with the world.

In the book Creation Health, Dr. Monica Reed and Dr. Des Cummings put a new twist on the eight laws of health. For years we taught NEW START; now there is CREATION. Same gospel, but a new acronym. It reminds us, “Embracing the CREATION Health prescription can restore health, happiness, balance, and joy. These eight principles are the Creator’s gift to help us experience life as He designed us to live it.”

In what ways can we apply the eight laws of health in a nonconventional ministry to provide for the unique needs of our sick and shut in, chronically and terminally ill members? What about a task force deputized with ensuring that all our sick members have adequate sunlight, fresh air, and whatever type of exercise they can handle? What if we started a ministry to pay for the medication of (non) members who are in need?

What do we do for those in our midst who suffer from mental and emotional sickness? The wide prevalence of depression has led to depression being called the common cold of mental illness. Is there any consideration for those who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after severe abuse or fighting in a war? What do we do for those who are not emotionally healthy? How do we show compassion and provide care to them?

I have long thought that, with all of the counselors in our churches, we can at least provide a regional guide for therapeutic and emotional support professionals. Or, why not start a grief support group for those who have experienced major loss? What about allowing Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous groups to utilize our ministry space?

My very first pastoral assignment was in a depressed rural town in Alabama. The largest employer was a small factory that made car parts. There seemed to be a disproportionate number of cancer cases in the area, which many people attributed to the water contamination crises that had plagued the area for years. I visited with community members who lamented that while cancer is one problem, the other one is their inability to afford treatment because the factory began laying off many of the workers due to outsourcing. It quickly became apparent that these women were deeply depressed concerning their situations. They needed real support. Although I offered no solutions, they were really glad that someone cared enough to listen and that they had an opportunity to share their frustrations.

Later on I would learn the values of this type of moral support. Years ago, while pastoring in the big city, I met Ruth. Everyone who knew her called her “Grandma.” She was 83 years old and very sick. She had a family, but she had no one to take her back and forth to her many doctor appointments. More than that, she needed someone to look after...
her affairs. During one of her many stints in the hospital, her son stole money needed to pay insurance costs and her mortgage. We helped her renegotiate the terms of her loan with the mortgage company and get caught up with all her bills. Clearly, Grandma Ruth was ready to die, but she was worried about her son and the other six children she had adopted. She, too, was depressed and very lonely. She had people all around her, but she was still lonely. Grandma Ruth taught me that sick and lonely people need our love and care.

**Those who are in prison**

Finally, Jesus says to the righteous ones, “I was in prison and you came to visit me” (v. 36, NIV). I wonder how long it would take during a prison visit for an inmate to start talking about his or her children. Or, how long would it take for an inmate to start talking about worries and stress, depression and anxiety resulting from being locked up? Can you see how this is directed to the first two forgotten groups? “Father hunger” happens when Dad is in prison. More than that, Dad experiences PTSD and depression because of all the things he has endured and because he must now face the bleak prospects for his future release. And once released, he is often tempted to return to a life of crime because it is very hard to get a job when you have a felony conviction on your record.

Michelle Alexander expounds on this issue in her book *The New Jim Crow:* “Once a person is labeled a felon, he or she is ushered into a parallel universe in which discrimination, stigma, and exclusion are perfectly legal, and privileges of citizenship such as voting and jury service are off-limits. It does not matter whether you have actually spent time in prison; your second-class citizenship begins the moment you are branded a felon.”

The irony of inmates not being able to find jobs after they have been released is evident in that all of them work while they are imprisoned. They are forced to work for pennies. So basically, the prison system denies them the right to provide for their families while the prison benefits from their labor. That is de facto slavery. Or, at the very least, it is a revamped form of convict leasing.

What are we doing to protect prisoners from these types of injustices? What are we doing to provide a safety net for them once they are released? Can the church create systems for professional development, economic protection, and emotional support for these brothers and sisters who are at the greatest risk of falling through the cracks? What can we do to curb the hunger of their children? Maybe we should build a graduated halfway house with a job-training center and day-labor agency. Lots of our churches participate in Angel Tree style programs. Maybe we should create a ministry to provide for these children for every major holiday.

The church where I currently serve has a vibrant prison ministry. Church members minister in the prison facility on a regular basis, but even after the inmates are released, the ministry does not end. Church members and ministry leaders work to integrate them into church life. Just this past Sabbath, one brother stopped me to say, “Thank you for everything you all have done to help me since I got out.” Another young brother came who was released just last week. He asked for work because he was trying to earn enough money for travel across the country to visit his newborn son. He had worked numerous
menial jobs but had not come up with enough money. He worked for two days cleaning the church and doing manual labor, and in return, we gave him the balance needed for travel fare. Although the money we gave him was not much, he was happy to tell me yesterday that he had purchased his ticket. He is excited to meet his son for the first time.

Conclusion

The refrain that keeps ringing in my mind is the moment when the king says, “‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me’” (v. 45). This is a very compelling concept that Jesus identifies directly with those who are forgotten. And He bases our final reward on how we treat those forgotten ones.

In that very next line—the last verse—the finality of the judgment is expressed. “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (v. 46). If we want to be counted on the side of the righteous, we must be careful to care for the least of these—those who usually get the last consideration by our churches. We must care for them and minister to them, because when we do, when we reach down to help them up, we are looking into the very face of our Lord.

1 Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.
4 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
10 The acronym NEW START stands for nutrition, exercise, water, sunlight, temperance, air, rest, and trust in divine power. CREATION stands for choice, rest, environment, activity, trust, interpersonal relationships, outlook, and nutrition. For more information, visit www.creationhealth.com.
15 Ibid.
16 Douglas A. Blackmon, Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II (New York: Archon, 2009). Blackmon takes a look at the period post Civil War to Civil Rights and explores in detail the complex practice of convict leasing. Recently freed slaves were arrested on baseless charges and forced to work in labor camps like coal mines and railroads, where many died due to dangerous and unsanitary conditions. Blackmon contends that this revamped form of enslavement persisted until well into the 1940s.

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The Epistle to the Hebrews as Pastoral Encouragement

It was a small group of believers, only 20 or 30, but they shared a common experience of hardship. They had left behind the assurance and secure identity that only an ancient and close-knit community can provide in the form of a first-century synagogue. Judaism was a widespread and recognized religion in the Greco-Roman world. Most first-century Jews would have thought it madness to risk the comparative safety of their worldwide community for the uncertainties of the fledgling Jesus movement.

Worse, they felt the cruel taunts by those who did not share their belief in Jesus. Former companions heaped verbal abuse on this little group of Jewish believers who had “compromised” their heritage by following Jesus, the crucified Jew. “Where is Jesus now?” they mocked. “Where’s your temple and altar?” “Do you have a covenant with God?” “Where’s your history and tradition?”

The pastor of this little gathering of Jewish believers was absent, but he hoped to be “restored to [them] very soon” (Heb. 13:19). In the meantime, he wrote a word of encouragement, along with a series of dire warnings. That letter is what we know today as the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Their struggles

These Jewish believers had “endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution” (Heb. 10:32, 33). Some had been thrown in prison. Many had their property plundered (v. 34), probably while in prison.

Their pastor’s emphasis on community and shared pain is uncompromising: “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” (Heb. 13:3). They had looked death in the face as they struggled against the hostility of their former community (Heb. 12:3, 4).

Some were about to abandon their confidence and to shrink back (Heb. 10:35, 38, 39). In fact, some were drifting away from the message they had heard (Heb. 2:1), and others had fallen into the habit of “neglecting to meet together” (Heb. 10:25). Their hands were drooping and their knees were buckling; they were shrinking back instead of pushing forward (Heb. 12:12). They were in danger of falling away (Heb. 6:6), of spurning the Son of God (Heb. 10:29), of growing weary and fainthearted (Heb. 12:3), of refusing the voice of God (v. 25), and of being led astray by their former faith (Heb. 13:9).

Indeed, the pastor feared that “they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt” (Heb. 6:6).

This was clearly a community in need of exhortation and encouragement. The pastor’s initial response

The first matter the pastor’s exhortation to the Hebrews clarified was the antiquity and superiority of the Jesus faith. Jesus was the eternal Son through whom God had now spoken (Heb. 1:1, 2). And, as a Son (Ps. 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14), He was superior to all the messengers (angels) through whom God had spoken to “our ancestors” in the past (Heb. 1:1, 5), including Moses (Heb. 3:1–6). Jesus’ superiority over the messengers was made clear by contrasting the Son with the messengers (vv. 6–13). The author affirmed this with a string of Old Testament (OT) passages that he applied to Jesus (Deut. 32:43 [Greek OT]; Pss. 45:6, 7; 102:26–28; 110:1). Notice that “Lord” in Hebrews 1:10 refers to Jesus. He is the Creative Agent of God (vv. 2, 3), who “founded the earth” and created the heavens (v. 10). And though they will all wear out like clothing (v. 11), the Son remains forever (vv. 8, 12b).

“We,” their pastor reminded them, “do have a high priest, a sacrifice, a sanctuary, a covenant, a promised land, and a chosen city.” “We have a great high priest . . . Jesus, the Son of God” (Heb. 4:14), who is “a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 6:20). “He holds his priesthood permanently, because He continues forever” (Heb. 7:24), whereas death prevented the Levitical
priests from continuing in office (v. 23). High priests, by definition, offered sacrifices, so “it is necessary for this priest [Jesus] also to have something to offer” (Heb. 8:3); and “this he did once for all when he offered himself” (Heb. 7:27), and “the sacrifice of himself” was for the removal of sin (Heb. 9:26).

The blood of bulls and goats dealt only with the external pollution but were entirely inadequate as a means of cleansing from the inner reality of sin (Heb. 9:9, 10; 10:4, 11). The death of Jesus, the new covenant as their divine guarantee, a heavenly country as their better land (Heb. 11:15, 16), and the heavenly Jerusalem as their city—“the city of the living God” (Heb. 12:22; 11:10, 16). Or, to use his favorite adjective, Christians have a better leader (Heb. 1:4), a better hope (Heb. 6:9; 7:19), a better covenant promise (Heb. 7:12, 22; 8:6), a better sacrifice (Heb. 9:23), better possessions (Heb. 10:34), a better country (Heb. 11:16), a better resurrection (v. 35), and a better future (v. 40). whose suffering consecrates (that is, the Son) and those who are consecrated (that is, the believers) are united to the one Father, and “for this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters” (Heb. 2:11). To confirm the family relationship between Jesus and the believers, the pastor placed three OT texts on the lips of Jesus: Psalm 22:22; Isaiah 8:17b, and Isaiah 8:18a. The first reference has Jesus testifying to His siblings in the context of the worshipping community (Heb. 2:11, 12). The second citation has Jesus confessing His confidence in God even in the context of His suffering, which is a clear encouragement to His addressees (v. 13a). In the last quotation, Jesus speaks of the believers as the children whom God had given Him (v. 13b).

Jesus’ identity with the suffering Jewish believers was no charade; it was real. He, too, shared in the same flesh and blood (v. 14). Indeed, He became, in every respect, like His brothers and sisters. Two purpose clauses clarify how His becoming a human helped the “descendants of Abraham” (v. 16): “so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (v. 14), and “so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people” (v. 17). The author’s pastoral intent in this chapter is clear: “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (v. 18); a sentiment that is repeated in 4:15, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize...
with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”

To a weary and faltering congregation (Heb. 6:11, 12), it was reassuring to learn that the promise of God’s rest was still open and lay ahead of His pilgrim people. God’s rest has its origin in the creation narrative (Heb. 4:4, quoting Gen. 2.2, 3), and it was still available to the Exodus generation. But that generation failed to enter it because of a lack of a persevering faith (Heb. 3:16–19; 4:2, 6), and Joshua’s leading the wilderness survivors into the Promised Land was not the ultimate fulfillment of entering God’s rest (v. 8). If it had been, David, many years later, could not have spoken of “today” (Ps. 95:7b): “again he sets a certain day—‘today’—saying through David much later [than the Exodus], in the words already quoted, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts’” (Heb. 4:7). The pastor urged his congregation not to emulate the unbelief of the wilderness generation, but rather to make every effort to enter God’s future rest (v. 11).

**The future**

The conjoining of suffering and a future hope in chapter 11 also reflects the writer’s conviction that abuse that is a real possibility for those who heed his call to affirm Christ publicly and boldly (Heb. 3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35). Equally, the writer invited his readers to look by faith beyond the present exigencies to a future made secure by the achievements of Jesus. Faith is the capacity to see and be certain about God’s invisible future (Heb. 11:1, 3). Such as Noah who, when warned about things not yet seen, prepared an ark (v. 7). Abraham went out not knowing where he was going, yet looking forward to the city of God (vv. 8, 9).

The patriarchs saw the promises of God from a distance, and longed for the future city of God (vv. 13–16). Isaac blessed his sons with his eye on the future (v. 20). Joseph saw the return to Canaan and gave instructions about his burial there (v. 22). Moses suffered hardship with the people of God, eschewing the comforts of Egypt, preferring the reproach of Christ because he saw Him who is unseeable (vv. 25–27). In Hebrews 11, the “emphasis is on faithful deeds” and a persevering faith, that is, on a faith that turns “hope into reality and the unseen into sight.” The eyes of faith could see that future rest not far ahead. The pastor’s flock was among “those who are about to inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14, author’s translation), for the world that is about to come is theirs (Heb. 2:5). Meanwhile, they were to seize the hope that lies ahead (Heb. 6:18) and press towards it, enduring the trials as divine discipline (Heb. 12:7–11).

The catalogue in 11:32–40 begins positively by listing the triumphs of some of the OT judges, and ending with David and the prophets, but then suddenly the tone shifts to a dire list of calamities in verses 35b–38. The list is fearsome: tortured, jeered, flogged, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, killed by the sword, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated. The exemplars of faith from of old, who have run their race, surround, so to speak, these tiring Jewish believers and urge them to keep on running with perseverance (Heb. 12:1, 2).

In their struggle against those who opposed them, this band of early Christian Jews had not yet suffered to the point of shedding their blood (v. 4), but Jesus had suffered so (Heb. 2:9, 10; 18; 5:8; 9:26; 13:12). Their Champion (archégos), Jesus, had finished His course, having endured “hostility against himself from sinners,” and even “endured the cross, despising its shame” (vv. 3, 2). The pastor wisely, therefore, admonished his flock to fix their eyes on (apóthoró) Jesus and to contemplate (analogizomai) Him who endured such pain (vv. 2, 3) and to go by faith where He has already gone (Heb. 6:19, 20; 10:19–22).

**Conclusion**

When the author, in his concluding remarks, quoted two encouraging texts from the OT (Deut. 31:6; Ps. 118:6), he was not simply offering the mandatory “have a nice day” that one receives at the supermarket’s checkout. His texts were appropriate to the actual situation of the readers:

I will never leave you or forsake you. So we can say with confidence, The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.

What can anyone do to me?

The call, then, was to go outside the camp of Israel “and bear the abuse He endured,” knowing that believers had no enduring city here, but were to look to the future for the secure city of God (Heb. 13:13, 14).
Planning a sermonic year

Planning out the sermonic year and being intentional about creating a unified schedule of Sabbath services and sermons gives direction and inspiration to members and focus to the pastor and leadership. It helps show the pastor and leadership whether they are balanced in presenting various themes. The sermonic year calendar also can make sure that your church programs are in line with the direction and mission of the church and help both the pastor and ministry teams stay organized.

Yet, planning a sermonic calendar year takes months. From August to October, I spent about three to five hours each week on it. Much of that time was praying for wisdom and the leading of the Holy Spirit. I needed to hear what direction God wanted me to lead the church in the upcoming year.

Because such plans are so important, what follows are steps that I have found crucial for developing a sermonic year calendar:

1. Survey the community and congregation

   The first step involves surveying the community to discover what various sermon topics would interest the unchurched. Be sure to include your leadership team and members in this process. You could actually go to a few neighborhood shops and ask patrons what they would like to hear about when they come to church. Or have members ask family and friends what they would like to hear from a church.

   I always had a series of sermons, suggested by nonmembers, that I advertised in a flyer. This created credibility and brought new people to the church. Some suggested subjects were how to raise kids, how to have a better marriage, defining the New Age, and explaining why there are so many religions. Getting feedback from seekers helps you focus on the needs of the unchurched and be intentional about reaching them.

   Take a survey of your congregation to find out what areas they feel you should be addressing. Include open-ended questions for them to suggest topics of interest.

2. Take a leadership retreat

   In August of every year I took my leadership team to a spiritual/planning weekend retreat. We spent Friday night and most of the day Sabbath praying, worshiping, reading the Bible, and reflecting. Saturday night and Sunday morning we spent visioning. I gathered many ideas from the leadership team. We also hammered out dates for special events such as Vacation Bible School (VBS); this was also a time to decide which programs from the previous year, if any, should be terminated.

   During that weekend I received valuable feedback about issues and challenges in the congregation and community that were not brought up in the surveys. The leaders shared about the church as a whole in addition to individual concerns. This gave me insights as to the spiritual pulse of the church, which also became the basis of my sermonic year.

3. Pray, study, and reflect

   After we came back from the retreat, I spent considerable time in prayer, Bible study, and reflection. Sometimes I felt God was calling us to a greater focus on mission, other times on building community, yet other times towards various topics, such as personal sanctification or spiritual growth. I took all of these ideas and started putting them on a spreadsheet in an attempt to make connections and a logical sequence out of them.

4. Put it together: first draft

   By October, I finished working on a first draft of the master calendar and upcoming sermonic year. (I used a one-page calendar for the sermon planning so I could see the whole year at a glance.) Here are some things I included in the master calendar:

   A. Pay attention to the major events of the year. As I finalized the sermonic year, I always paid close attention to what I call the “seasonal.” This includes New Year’s Day, Valentine’s Day, Easter, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas. During these days people are much more inclined to go to church, and so I wanted to use these opportunities to minister to them, hoping too that they would continue to come.

   Other dates that I added to this list were the church anniversary (to emphasize how God led in the past and
His vision for the future, personal vacation times, school breaks, VBS, and two short evangelistic meetings. One was to be conducted in February and one in September. Each of them spanned a week and two weekends. The addition of all these special Sabbaths will take approximately 12 to 15 weeks out of the year. Pay attention to the overall church rhythm and plan accordingly.

B. Schedule Communion services. I put Communion and footwashing on the calendar four times a year. I tried to conduct one or two of them on Friday night or Saturday night to incorporate an Agape Feast and give variety.

C. Plan acts of kindness. I always planned four Sabbath afternoons of service to the community in conjunction with a sermon series on action. During these Sabbaths, people may engage in any form of community service they want—personally, as a family, or as a church.

D. Conduct rewind Sabbaths. We also took two Sabbaths a year around the beginning of December and called them “rewind.” The emphasis is to thank the Lord and show how He led us in the past. During that time, we brought all the people who were baptized and those who helped them in their walk with the Lord during the year to give testimonies up front. Through testimonies and videos, we highlighted the ministries God empowered the church to do. We gave a summary of all the series we preached during the year and especially emphasized their relevancy and application.

E. Schedule the series. Look for blocks on your calendar that will accommodate a sermon series four to eight weeks long. If the series is shorter than three or four weeks, you do not get the maximum impact. If the series is longer than eight to ten weeks, people lose interest. Schedule one to three weeks of space between each series. That way, the pastoral staff can address current events and issues, bring in a guest speaker, or take the series a bit longer if the Spirit moves. Be sure to take into consideration the series’ length necessitated by the theme you present. While not ideal, if you occasionally have to take a week off during a series to accommodate a special event, you may do so.

5. Solicit feedback and craft the final draft

I gave the calendar to the board members, church secretary, musicians, graphic designer, outreach coordinator—anyone who needed to know. I did this for two reasons: First is to get feedback. Second, everyone knows what is going on and can be a part of what is scheduled. After I incorporated the feedback from the leadership team and made sure that they were comfortable with the schedule, the final calendar for the upcoming year was given to the church body by November. We found it important to let the membership know what was scheduled so they could plan accordingly, such as invite friends and family to a series that might interest them.

How to plan a sermon series

1. Prayerfully choose major themes to address. All topics you preach on will basically fall into the following categories:
   - Felt needs covers all of the how-to topics, such as raising kids God’s way, overcoming depression, handling anger, breaking bad habits.
   - Spiritual growth includes topics such as prayer, Bible study, worship, sanctification, justification.
   - Doctrines are covered during evangelistic meetings.
   - Stewardship includes the four T’s: tithe and offering, temple (your body), talents, and time.
   - Vision casting includes the journey the church is going on, both spiritually and relationally, toward embodying the character of the first-century church of Acts 2.
   - Seasonal, as mentioned before.

Do not limit yourself to just one or two of these themes. Try finding a place on your calendar to touch on all of the above categories. Because it can usually take about four to eight weeks to cover each one, expect about two years to cover them all.

For example, every year in January, I dealt with my vision and the values and mission for the church. Stewardship was addressed in April, and the seasonal was covered throughout the year. Some ideas of how to approach the seasonal could be topics like the...
life/teachings of Christ around Easter, or marriage and parenting around Mother’s or Father’s Day.

Be sure to have a good mix of Old Testament, New Testament, and topical or thematic sermons. Books such as Genesis and John can be used to cover almost every category presented above. Help your people get deeper into the Word. Regardless of the theme, the gospel message should be reflected in every sermon.

Sometimes we gave the whole year a theme, such as “The Year of Mission.” Every sermon series was related to what it means to be missional. Many of the series were overtly about mission, such as “The Most Effective Evangelist in the World” and a series on the Holy Spirit’s role in mission. There was also a series on James, with the central theme “If we’re going to be a church on a mission, then our best testimony is how we live.”

Other times, we decided that each month or sermon series needed its own theme. For example, the whole month of November could deal with thankfulness.

Some themes to consider are the character of God, denominational distinctiveness, Christian basics, Bible characters, and the Ten Commandments.

2. Intentionally craft sermon series. A sermon series demands more from the preacher in the way of “packaging” than does a stand-alone sermon. You need to divide the topic into individual sermons and scriptures that cover a certain amount of terrain each week. Keep your sermons simple enough for seekers to understand (avoid jargon and explain theological terms) but without watering down your message. You need to choose the series titles; perhaps a series metaphor, subtitle, and text presenting them in a unified way. You may write a marketing paragraph for the church Web site to stir interest in the series for your church and community.

Once you know the blocks of time you have to work with, then schedule each sermon series on the calendar and plan the order of the individual sermons within each series. Try moving from week one being more theological to the final weeks leaning in a more practical direction—from the why to the what. This way you are leading people toward personal and corporate application of the spiritual truths they have learned. Factor in the sequence of evangelism, discipleship, and Christian maturity.

3. Plan with a creative team. Develop a creative team before delivering your series. This team should include worship leaders, media directors, elders, and a couple of other creative people. Look at the series in broad brush strokes, talking about the overarching metaphors and ideas you want to communicate.

The role of the team is to help flesh out the ideas. They need to be honest enough to say things such as, “I think if you preach it that way, you will deliver the theological goods; but I don’t think that will change anybody’s heart.” Take their comments seriously, and go back to the drawing board. Always ask, “How is this truly going to change lives?”

In addition to giving honest feedback, creative teams are beneficial because they keep you working ahead. When you work ahead, the series become more creative and good ideas eventually become great ones. Team members can help with illustrations, PowerPoint presentations, videos, titles, and so on.

4. Brand the series. Once you determine the flow of the series, you should begin work on “branding,” which means the words and images that will be used to communicate the series. For example, we titled a series on the Holy Spirit “3rd Person” and chose titles and graphics that reflected the mystery of the Spirit. We gave the title “TXT MSG” to a series on the Bible. Coordinate your titles and visual elements, not for the purpose of being slick but to help people stay focused in one direction.

Another element of branding would be to see whether there is a way to incorporate ministry initiatives during a series so that people can see how what they hear is connected with how they live.

At the end of the day it’s not about clever branding; it’s about relevant preaching. If we are not handling the Word of God with integrity and showing people how truth makes a difference in their lives, all our creativity would be nothing more than smoke and mirrors.

We hit the mark when we faithfully preach God’s Word in a way that opens up the possibility for genuine life transformation.

Conclusion

Some of the benefits of planning your sermonic year are being able to avoid the rush and panic that comes with not knowing what you will be preaching about next week. This also allows time for the worship and communication coordinators to plan services and branding that will contribute to the theme. Finally, it allows for a balance in the topics and spiritual lessons presented.

Keep in mind that there needs to be a balance between structure and flexibility. The calendar changes sometimes. If there are new issues that need to be addressed, such as a death in the church or crisis in the community or global events, then change your sermon schedule accordingly. The sermonic year should be used as a tool to bring edification to members and further the call of God’s mission.

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In Western culture, names are not generally chosen to convey information about the character or qualities of the people they identify. For instance, if I introduced myself to you as Daniel, my name would not convey to you any new information about me or my character. In contrast, names in biblical times communicated significant information about the individuals they identified. Consequently, by looking at God’s name in Scripture, we should be able to learn something about who God is and what His character is like. What we learn is that God is much more than the God of our fathers, even more than the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. His name is a promise, and that promise was given to Moses when God called him into ministry—a promise that is extended to all those in ministry even today.

An encounter

Exodus 3 is part of a larger chiastic structure that is framed by oppression at its beginning, in Exodus 1, and its conclusion, in Exodus 6. We first learn of this oppression in Exodus 1:8, when a pharaoh came to power “who did not know Joseph,” and by Exodus 6 that oppression had intensified greatly. There is much to explore in Exodus 1–6, but the exegesis here will focus specifically Exodus 3:14–17, the center of the chiasm—the height of Israel’s hopelessness and Moses’ encounter with God.

The backdrop to Exodus 3:14 is a dialogue between the Lord and Moses. In Exodus 3:10, the Lord commands Moses to go to Pharaoh and bring His people “out of Egypt”; that is, out of slavery. Moses responds with a question in Exodus 3:11, “‘Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’” The Lord, in an attempt to allay Moses’ concern, reassures Moses that He—the all-powerful One, the Creator of all things seen and unseen—would go with Moses (v. 12).

The careful reader will notice that the Lord may already be revealing His identity to Moses via a play on words, namely, His use of the personal pronoun “I.” Moses asks, “Who am I?” and the Lord responds, “‘I will be with you’” (v. 12; emphasis added). Moses, a mere shepherd, doubted his own ability to confront the power of Egypt. So, the Lord reassures Moses that Moses’ strength would not go before Egypt; rather, it was His strength, the Lord’s strength, that would go before Egypt. The Lord would not leave Moses alone. Thus, in this exchange we get a glimpse into God’s nature, one that is all-powerful and loving, a God who wants to be with His creation.

Questions and answers

Still unsure about his ability to complete the mission, Moses poses the second of five objections to the Lord, “‘What is [Your] name?’” (v. 13). Interestingly, after Moses voices his uncertainty about his own ability, to which the Lord responds that His presence would go with him, Moses then extends his uncertainty to the Lord’s ability. Moses compares God to his fears, and Moses’ fears prevail.

God’s request is indeed daunting: He asks Moses to confront both Pharaoh and the Israelites. At the time, Pharaoh was the leader of the strongest nation and army in the world. What can one 80-year-old shepherd do? And the Israelites themselves were no less a fearful obstacle. Moses must approach this skeptical nation and convince them that God has indeed sent him—an 80-year-old shepherd—to Pharaoh. Moses was inquiring about something more than simply the name of God, he was asking about God’s very nature.

On the heels of that question, we come to the passage that is at the heart of this exegesis in Exodus 3:14. God’s response to Moses’ question is “‘I AM WHO I AM,’” which can also be translated in the future tense, “I WILL BE WHATEVER I WILL BE.” After God reveals His name in response to Moses’ second objection, He proceeds, for the balance of the chapter, to describe His plans in detail, addressing Moses’ fears about Pharaoh and the Israelites.

A message of hope

Several critical themes emerge from what God is communicating about His nature in what He revealed to Moses. To begin with, in the four verses this article considers, the verb “say” is used by God eight times; three in connection with Moses and five in connection to Himself. This pattern begins in Exodus...
3:14 when “God said . . . , ‘This is what you are to say ’ and later in that same verse, “thus you shall say.” Next, in Exodus 3:15, “God also said . . . , ‘Say to the Israelites,’ ” followed in Exodus 3:16, when God commands Moses yet again to “assemble the elders of Israel and say to them . . . saying” (author’s translation). Finally, in Exodus 3:17, God concluded with the words, “So I said, I will bring you up out of the affliction” (author’s translation).

Eight times in four verses, the Lord is both speaking and directing Moses to speak on His behalf, first to the Israelite body as a whole, and then separately to Israel’s elders. Tell the people and then tell their leaders; it seems that God wants to ensure His message of hope is conveyed. Say this, say that, and say this too—as if there is so much that the Lord wants to communicate with His people, who have been in bondage for hundreds of years. The Lord has a message of hope and wants His children to know that He has always been with them, and is with them presently—a message that is inherent to His name.

The second major theme concerns what God Himself has been doing. If we look back to the beginning of the narrative, we find the Lord, in Exodus 3:7, 8, stating what He has been doing: “I have indeed seen the misery of my people”; “I have heard””; “I am concerned”; and concluding with His rescue, “I have come down to rescue.”

Transitioning to Exodus 3:16, 17, we see a parallel structure of the Lord’s attentiveness and compassion: “I have watched over you”; “I have seen”; and concluding with His reminder of rescue, “I have promised to bring you up out of your misery.”

God is telling Moses that He is not an absent God; He is not One who is busy attending other matters. Rather, the Lord has His finger on the pulse of all that is afflicting His children, and He is about to move into action. This brings us to the third and final theme that this exegesis will consider: God’s promise to those He has called that He will be with us forever, all of which is revealed in His name.

The God of the fathers

In the Bible, names of people, places, and things carry with them great significance. For example, after Moses led the Israelites across the Red Sea and into the wilderness of Shur, they came to a place called Marah, where they could not drink the water because it was bitter. Scripture records that it was “therefore . . . named Marah” because the waters were bitter (Exod. 15:23, author’s translation). In another place, the Lord changed Abram’s name to Abraham, which means “father of many nations,” because He had “made [him] a father of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:6, author’s translation). The new name expressed the promise that the Lord would manifest Himself in a big way in Abraham’s future. Hence, we see that names in the Bible could contain a sense of past, present, and/or future.

Perhaps what the Lord was telling Moses, when He referred to Himself in Exodus 3:15 as “‘the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob’” was “I am the God whose history you know.” In other words, God could have been trying to encourage Moses by implying that I am that same mighty God who promised Abraham that his seed would be as numerous as the stars in heaven and as the sand of the seashore (Gen. 22:17); I am that same God who brought that promise to life when Isaac’s wife carried two nations of people in her womb (Gen. 25:23); I am that same God with whom Jacob struggled until the breaking of the dawn, and I changed his name to Israel for he had struggled with God and with man and prevailed (Gen. 32:28). All of this history would have come to mind when God declared to Moses that He was the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

Moses, when hearing God described as mentioned above, would have heard the voice of a loving Father, the gentle appeal of his great Lover, the mighty roar of his all-powerful Creator. Gerald Janzen notes that “history is the clue to the character of God, the history is the clue to the meaning of the name.”

While God’s history provided a clue into His character, His present and future existence was revealed to Moses. Said differently, God was known by Moses and the Israelites as the One who appeared to their forefathers, but somehow it had escaped them that He was the One who presently was with them.

God had promised to always be with His children. But now He was revealing to Moses that this promise—to never leave them—had not been forgotten. The declaration of His name—I AM—was to take on new significance. The Israelites would now experience God as much more than the God of their fathers; they would experience Him as their God today! They would experience Him as the promise fulfilled.

God’s name as promise

Finally, we come to God’s name. Exodus 3:14 opens with “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ ” The Lord elaborates on His name in the following verse, when He says, “‘Say to the Israelites, “The Lord [Yahweh], the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” ‘ The covenant names YHWH and I AM are derived from the same verb root “to be.” The form of this verb could signify any tense—past, present, and future. God is telling Moses that His name, and subsequently His character, is a state of being. God is proclaiming that He is all-powerful, He exists solely on the merit of His own strength, He needs no other, He is the essence of life. God always IS, God always WILL BE, and God always HAS BEEN. God’s character is in His name.

Moreover, the fascinating part about God’s declaration is that He is proclaiming to Moses that He was, is, and will ever be, not as an empty statement. God is proclaiming His state of being in the context of Exodus 3:7, 8, 17. He is stating that I have seen, I have heard, I am concerned, I have watched, and I have promised to come and rescue. In this context of His proximity to His children, He declares His very being. God states that He has
always been with His children, that He always is with His children, and that He will always be with His children. God’s very nature is revealed, and His nature is to be with His children. God proclaims His eternal and ever-pursuing love for His children.

Conclusion

God loves His creation. From the moment that He created the first couple until today, there has never been a moment that He has not been with us. In Exodus 3:14–17, we learn much more than the vocal sounds or the spelling of the name of a deity. We see the heart of the One who is intimately familiar with who we are and eager to lead us out of the bondage in which we find ourselves.

In Exodus 3:14–17, God revealed much more than just His name; He revealed the essence of who He is: He is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—the God who promised and has always been with us. He is the great I AM; the One who is with us today and will be with us forevermore. We can take comfort that when God calls us to action, He does not send us by ourselves. Rather, He Himself will go with us and give us the ability to carry out our ministry. We can rest in the knowledge that our success does not depend on who we are, nor will it be hindered by our past or the obstacles in our future. Instead, we can be assured that our success is directly linked to our connection with the all-powerful, all-consuming, self-existing One—the great I AM.

Tell us what you think about this article. Email MinistryMagazine@gc.adventist.org or visit www.facebook.com/MinistryMagazine.
This book comprises the second volume of a three-volume series, Studies in Adventist Ecclesiology, produced by the Biblical Research Institute (BRI) of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This ecclesiological study is the result of the work of many well-recognized and highly respected Adventist scholars in various countries. This present volume concentrates on the nature of the church, its message, mission, authority, and unity, while the prior volume in the series, entitled Toward a Theology of the Remnant: An Adventist Ecclesiological Perspective, deals with the very identity of the Adventist Church as the remnant, which occasionally needs to be examined and reaffirmed.


Chapters 4 through 7 excavate the mission concept in the Old Testament and the New Testament, the book of Daniel, and the book of Revelation. Chapters 8 through 10, as historical studies, try to provide historical background for the better understanding of the mission, message, and unity of the church in general as well as in particular. In this section, chapters 8 and 9 trace the understanding of the mission and the nature of the church in the post-apostolic church and the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation.

Chapter 10 explores the history of Adventist ecclesiology. Chapters 11 through 15 and 17 concentrate on the message, mission, authority, and unity of the church from the perspective of the Adventist Church: the elements that contribute to the global unity of the church, the message and the mission of the church, the nature and the role of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the close relationship between the church and the Holy Spirit, the role of the church in the interpretation of the Bible, and the mission of the Adventist Church among world religions. After providing the ecclesiological role of Ellen G. White in the Adventist Church (chapter 16), chapters 18 through 21 include discussion on the relationship between Israel and the church, a study of world religions and salvation, and a personal reflection on Adventist mission today. The appendix, titled “Roadmap for Mission,” is the document voted during the 2009 General Conference Annual Council and published in the General Conference Working Policy 2011–2012.

There is no doubt that this work will contribute to a new appreciation of the Adventist Church acting as the remnant in the contemporary world. This book will clearly show how Adventist ecclesiology intersects conclusively with modern concerns. This volume will also advance the reader’s understanding on the nature, message, mission, authority, and unity of the church, particularly the Adventist Church.

However, there are three points of inconvenience of the book. First, considering that this volume provides wider biblical, historical, theological, and missiological background of the church than the prior volume does, it would have been better if this volume had been published prior to the first volume that specifically deals with a serious theological reflection and a clearer expression of the identity of the Adventist Church as a community of spiritual remnant. Second, this volume contains the nature, message, mission, and unity of the Adventist Church in general at the same time as the Adventist Church in particular. Consequently, this volume is inclusive in nature, so the readers can become a little confused in understanding the nature, message, mission, and unity of the Adventist Church in particular. Third, this volume covers such a multitude of critical issues that it is hard to deal with them thoroughly, and it includes multiple questions that cannot be answered completely.

I strongly recommend this volume for not only theological scholars and present Adventist pastors, but also theology students and seminarians, as well as lay leaders of the church who want a better understanding of the nature of the church, its message, mission, authority, and unity. The studies in the volume will “contribute to build up the faith and commitment” (xii) of the readers. The volume would enhance the readers’ understanding of the church and the ground used for establishing its mission. The readers will experience the renewal of their passion for the mission of the church.

—Reviewed by Sang-Hoon Jee, PhD, assistant professor, faculty of Religious Studies at Asia-Pacific International University, Muak Lek, Saraburi, Thailand.
Adventist leaders mark growth of deaf ministries

Silver Spring, Maryland, United States—The Seventh-day Adventist Church’s ministry to deaf people is gaining traction worldwide with increased coordination to better reach and minister to members of this often-neglected subculture. The year 2014 marked the first time that each of the denomination’s 13 world divisions had a designated coordinator for deaf ministries in their territory.

“We’re seeing exciting things happening, and we hope to keep offering resources for both the deaf and the hearing to understand the challenges of ministry for this unique group,” said Larry Evans, an associate Stewardship Ministries director, who has long promoted mission to deaf people and currently helps the denomination coordinate this outreach effort. “Only about 2 percent of deaf people are Christian,” he added. “We need to be talking more about reaching this unreached people group.”

The development of resources to deaf people includes a new Web site with sections for both people who are deaf and people who hear.

Deaf people are often isolated from the typical sources of spiritual teaching and encouragement. When they are members of a hearing church, they are often not included in most church activities, including church leadership. Some practices at deaf congregations are noticeably different—heads are not bowed during prayer, hymns aren’t sung but signed, and applause is replaced by a waving of hands.

Evans and others, including North American Division vice president Debra Brill, have continually pushed the denomination to understand how to better minister to deaf people. Summer time camp meetings for deaf people have been held in the United States for more than three decades. Earlier in 2014, a school for deaf students was opened in Kenya that serves 18 students. Also, in April 2014, 75 people from several countries throughout Europe held a conference for the deaf people in Germany. And in Brazil, more than 1,200 people attended a deaf camp meeting in November.

In areas lacking a coordinated approach to deaf ministry, church members can think of ways to include deaf people in church services and leadership, said Esther Doss of the Three Angels Deaf Ministries. “Make friends with deaf people and interact with them,” Doss said. “We don’t have to worry about making a mistake—they’re used to it.” She added that churches can train or hire a sign-language interpreter to help the deaf people feel more welcomed. “Use your imagination a little bit, think how to make the environment more accessible.”

Many proponents of the ministry say more resources are needed, including a ministry training center to train deaf pastors and Bible workers. In 1996, Jeff Jordan became the first deaf Adventist to earn a master of divinity degree from the Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. He now pastors the Southern Deaf Fellowship, an online church based in Tennessee. Jordan said church employees working in full-time deaf ministry are few. “We need more workers to help finish the great commission given to us by Jesus,” he said.

In the meantime, at least one more worker is becoming ready for service. Brazil’s first deaf Adventist pastor, Douglas Silva, will graduate from seminary shortly.

For more information about Adventist Deaf Ministries, visit adventistdeaf.org. [Ansel Oliver/ANN]

Adventists celebrate religious freedom in Papua New Guinea

Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea—Thousands of people from various Christian denominations marched in the capital of Papua New Guinea on Friday, December 5, 2014, in an Adventist-organized celebration of the religious freedom that they enjoy on the South Pacific island nation.

The march capped a major symposium on religious freedom hosted by the Adventist-affiliated International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) on the campus of Pacific Adventist University and attended by government officials and the leaders of a number of religious faiths.

Leigh Rice, president of the Adventist Church in Papua New Guinea, said Adventists participating in the march were saying “thank you” for a freedom that they do not take for granted. “We know many of our members around the world live under enormous pressure,” Rice told a rally following the march in Port Moresby. “How wonderful that this nation grants freedom to us, and not just to us, but to a broad range of religious practices.”

A senior Roman Catholic clergyman, Victor Roche, compared Papua
New Guinea (PNG) with other countries beset with religious violence and illustrated his point by mentioning the 28 Christians, including at least 8 Adventists, who were killed by Islamic extremists in Kenya. “We must be thankful,” Roche told the crowd. “In PNG, if we want to worship on Sunday, we can. If we want to worship on Saturday, we can. If we are Muslim and want to worship on Friday, we can.”

He implored the crowd to pray that the freedom continued unabated.

The International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) intends to play a role in securing that freedom by opening a local chapter. The government of Papua New Guinea is giving the new chapter a grant of 10,000 kina (US$3,900) to help it get started.

“We need to expand the religious liberty movement in PNG,” Delilah Gore, Papua New Guinea’s minister for religion, youth, and community development, said in announcing the grant during the religious symposium on Thursday. “Even though PNG is a predominantly Christian nation, we have non-Christian religions coming here. A new chapter of the IRLA will help us peacefully and sustainably manage our growing religious diversity.”

The chapter will be coordinated by Sir Gibbs Selika, deputy chief justice of the country’s Supreme Court and a Seventh-day Adventist. He said he looked forward to learning from other IRLA chapters around the world. “We can learn from each other, and together we will be strong,” Sir Selika said.

John Graz, secretary general of IRLA and religious liberty director at the world headquarters of the Adventist Church, said that the promotion of religious freedom through strong national chapters was vital in responding to a growth of violent religious extremism and other restrictions on faith. “We hope that this first chapter in the South Pacific will be the first of many in the region,” Graz said.

Bienvenido V. Tejano, Philippine ambassador to Papua New Guinea, spoke passionately to the rally on Friday about the advancement of religious freedom in his own country after Graz instigated a Philippine chapter of the IRLA. Students were barred from taking national exams on any day other than Saturday at the time, and the IRLA chapter aimed to change that. “Today students have the opportunity to take exams on a day that does not violate their conscience,” Tejano said. “This is the practical difference religious freedom makes.” [James D. Standish/Adventist Review staff]

Existing to bring Him praise

The Gospel of John (chapters 13–17) records the last meeting of Jesus and His disciples before His death. This would have been the perfect time for Jesus to give them an unforgettable blueprint for accomplishing God’s mission in this world.

He might have clarified some theological questions that have fueled controversy for centuries. He could have shared some ideas on fundraising and strategies for reaching every village, town, and city. The disciples could have learned about setting priorities. And certainly some ideas about sharing the good news among diverse cultures and languages would have been most timely.

But Jesus did not address these matters, at least not directly. He used His last few moments to focus on relationships rather than tasks. He washed the disciples’ feet, spoke about His betrayal, reaffirmed that He had chosen them, gave a new commandment, described the work of the Holy Spirit, and used the vine and branches metaphor as a symbol of the relation between Him and His disciples.

Could it be that Jesus was telling His followers (then and now) that the first task in mission is to create a people, a community, that reflects God’s own character and exists to bring Him praise and honor? This encompasses the real meaning of revival—giving God His rightful place in our lives. For the truth is that when we take care of our private lives with God, our public life will take care of itself.

—Lowell C. Cooper serves as a general vice-president for the World Church of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.
Human performance integrity

There are several standards by which human performance can be measured—physical, mental, social, and emotional. Many of these standards have been carefully researched and validated. Yet, there is no single standard that melds each of these sometimes disparate areas together.

One of the great experiments of the Bible attempted to meld these standards. Often we view and use the Bible as empirical evidence for how we and others should live. When done in the right spirit, this can be appropriate. Yet there are some significant mysteries that need exploring. One of these is found in a story familiar to many: the story of Daniel and his three friends in Babylon:

“But Daniel was determined not to defile himself by eating the food and wine given to them by the king. He asked the chief of staff for permission not to eat these unacceptable foods. Now God had given the chief of staff both respect and affection for Daniel. But he responded, ‘I am afraid of my lord the king, who has ordered that you eat this food and wine. If you become pale and thin compared to the other youths your age, I am afraid the king will have me beheaded.’

“Daniel spoke with the attendant who had been appointed by the chief of staff to look after Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. ‘Please test us for ten days on a diet of vegetables and water,’ Daniel said. ‘At the end of the ten days, see how we look compared to the other young men who are eating the king’s food. Then make your decision in light of what you see.’ The attendant agreed to Daniel’s suggestion and tested them for ten days.

“At the end of the ten days, Daniel and his three friends looked healthier and better nourished than the young men who had been eating the food assigned by the king. So after that, the attendant fed them only vegetables instead of the food and wine provided for the others.

“God gave these four young men an unusual aptitude for understanding every aspect of literature and wisdom. And God gave Daniel the special ability to interpret the meanings of visions and dreams” (Dan. 1:8–17, NLT).

In the Babylonian court were gathered the best and brightest from throughout the kingdom. The competition was very talented. Have you ever wondered how these young men could be found sharper and smarter than all the rest in only ten days? I like to call this amazing difference observed in Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah human performance integrity (HPI).

One of the great challenges of scientific research is how to account for and control the confounders—outside factors that may affect the outcome. Was it simply the diet and water that brought about these remarkable findings, or might it be something entirely different, or a combination of factors? Good health habits tend to cluster; that is, people who make careful dietary choices tend to exercise more regularly, use fewer harmful substances, sleep more regularly, and, in general, exhibit greater self-discipline. Most likely, these four young captives did not suddenly adopt new habits when in captivity. They probably had already been living healthfully to preserve every aspect of their being to honor and glorify God.

Too often we fail to recognize the subtle impact our lifestyle choices have on the most sensitive parts of our day-to-day performance and, easier to accept, that eventually, in old age, we might develop a debilitating disease. Yet science recognizes that insufficient sleep, dehydration, noisy environments, alcohol, and unhealthy diets, to name just a few, impact the highest levels of human performance—our cognitive performance. In lifestyle, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

When the final test for these young men came and they were evaluated by the king himself, they were found to have incredible wisdom and judgment and were ten times more capable than their peers (Dan. 1:19, 20).

Human performance integrity is what gave Daniel and his three friends this incredible evaluation. They chose to live each day in such a way as to maintain their optimal, God-given performance—physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and spiritually.

Here are simple ways you, too, can optimize your HPI:

- Place your trust implicitly in God.
- Choose a healthy diet.
- Get 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity every day.
- Drink sufficient water.
- Sleep at least eight hours per night.
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- Get adequate exposure to sunshine.
- Breathe pure air.
- Serve those in need.

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