

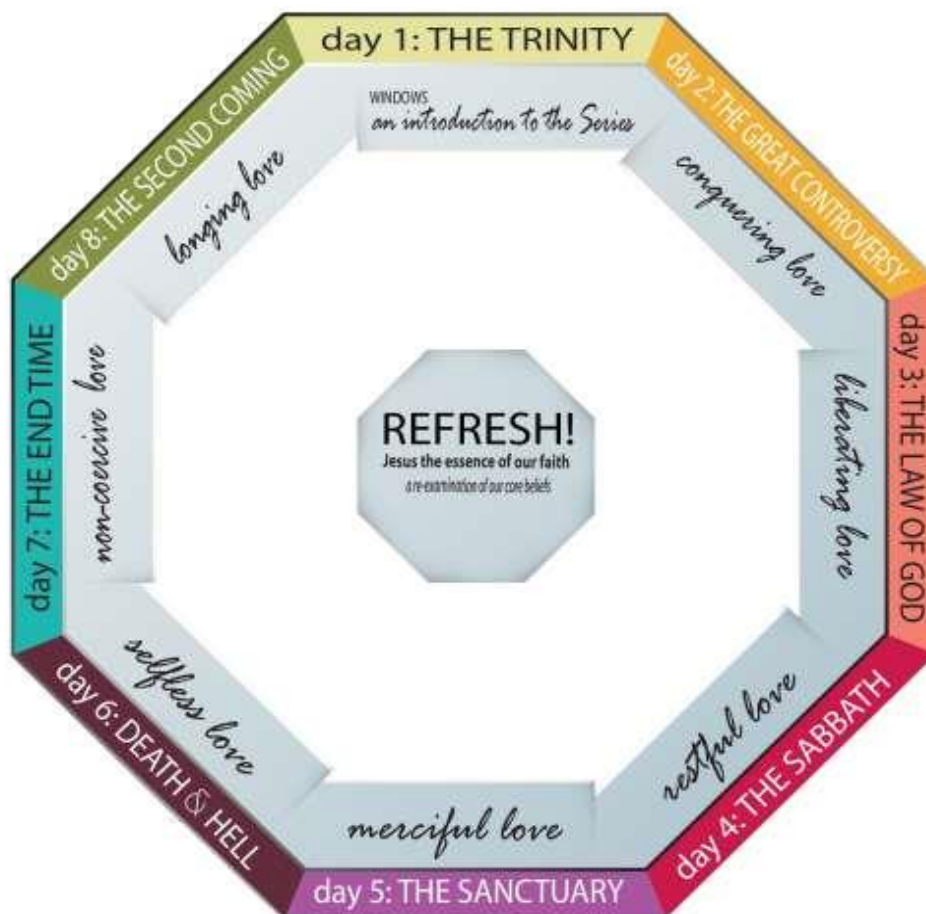
MIDLANDS ZAMBIA CONFERENCE

YOUTH WEEK OF PRAYER

March 19th -26th, 2016

THEME: Jesus- the Centre of it all

Hymn: Jesus Lover of my soul, 59 Local



INTRODUCTION:

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, my Church and your Church, was officially organized in 1863, with a membership of 3,500 in Battle Creek, Michigan, in the Northeast of the United States. By its latest census in 2011, the Church had grown to a 17.5 million-member global community of faith with a presence in 208 of the 232 countries and areas of the world recognized by the United Nations.

While Adventism shared many fundamental beliefs with other denominations, such as salvation by grace through faith in Christ's sacrifice, its proclamation focused on its distinctive biblical teachings, which it came to describe as "pillar" doctrines. Assuming that people were already familiar with the person of Jesus and what He essentially stood for, we neglected to position our Lord and Savior at the center of all our "pillar" doctrines.

It is our prayer that during this week of prayer series you will capture a glimpse of Jesus—the essence of our faith, the center of our doctrines.

DAY 1: THE TRINITY-Windows: An Introduction to the Series.

In this this week of prayer series we will be exploring eight key Bible doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Many of our people—perhaps you included—go into intellectual neutral, breathe a sigh of boredom, and expect a repeat of dry theological facts we've heard over and over again: So, then, let's employ a simple, but powerful metaphor to guide us in our series of messages for this week of prayer. The doctrinal truths of Scripture can be thought of as a series of perceptual windows through which God's character may be viewed from various different angles. For our purposes, let's imagine the structure of truth as an octagon-shaped building. On each of the eight sides of the structure, there is a window. Each window represents one of our doctrinal beliefs.

As we look into the building through each window, we see Jesus, and Jesus, and Jesus, and Jesus, true and accurate revelation of God's character. Windows are designed for looking through. A window serves its purpose when it operates as a visual passageway. No biblical doctrine is an end in itself: not the Sabbath, not the State of the dead, not the judgment, not end time prophecy. None of these truths exist to point to themselves. Rather, the Sabbath serves as a visual passageway into the heart of God. The sanctuary doctrine serves as a visual passageway into another dimension of God's beauty and so on with every biblical doctrine.

Ellen White explicitly states that this is the case:

It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. His character is to be made known. Into the darkness of the world is to be shed the light of His glory, the light of His goodness, mercy, and

truth... The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. (Ellen White, Christ's Object Lessons, p. 415).

God has been horribly misrepresented in our world, especially by religion, which professes to represent Him. And what is the form in which this misrepresentation of God's character exists? Doctrines! Belief systems! So let's get started by looking through the first of our eight windows.

Ancient Love

Do a simple thought experiment. Go lock yourself in your bathroom for the rest of your life—it's a thought experiment, so stay in your seat and use your imagination—and ask yourself a simple question: will I ever experience love? The obvious answer is no—even if you have a full-length mirror! And why is the answer No? Love, by definition, is other-centered rather than self-centered; for it to really be love, it requires more than one person. The first truth we encounter when we open the Bible is that God is a social unit rather than a solitary self. Notice the opening line of Scripture: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). The most obvious thing we see here is that there are two basic categories that compose reality: (1). God (2). And everything else.

God is the Creator and anything else that exists He created. This means that God predates and transcends all things that fall into the “made” category. The apostle John, in introducing Jesus, articulated this sublime insight with these words: “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:3). Pretty deep, I know, but hang on because it's all about to become beautifully clear. In the same passage, John said this: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1, 2).

In the beginning, who was with whom? “In the beginning... God... was with God.”

Okay, that's cool, but in what sense were these equally divine persons “with” one another? John tells us in verse 18: “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”

John wants us to understand that Jesus, whom He earlier identified as none other than God, came to our world from a very specific and special relational place: from “the bosom of the Father”. Bosom is a poetic word that conjures up the idea of closeness; the Phillips translation says Jesus lives in the “closest intimacy with the Father”. Now, with all this in mind, go back to Genesis 1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

The Hebrew word in this sentence that's translated to English as “God” is a proper name in the original language. It is a super significant name, jam-packed full of meaning.

Elohim:

The thing that makes this name so meaningful is that it is a plural noun. In other words, the God that we encounter in the opening verse of the Bible is in some sense one and yet more than one. Later on in the chapter this idea becomes even more explicit. Notice verses 26 and 27: “Then God [Elohim] said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness’... So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

Here we see that Elohim is composed of an “Us” and an “Our”. We are not to think of God as merely a “Me” and an “I”, but rather as social unit that involves more persons than a single solitary being. Remember our opening point: love cannot be experienced in isolation. Now, in the context of this simple realization, we can read with understanding the most profound and powerful declaration in the Bible: “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

We deduce from this basic reality that God has never existed in isolation. God is, and always has been, an “Us” and an “Our”—in other words, a social unit—because “God is love.” Without doing any injustice to the text, we could paraphrase the opening sentence of the Bible like this:

“In the beginning LOVE created the heavens and the earth.”

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:1-3). From this passage we see that both God the Father and God the Son were active agents together in the work of creating our world. Now go back to Genesis 1 for an additional brush stroke of the picture: “The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

We see here that the Holy Spirit was also actively involved in the creation event, along with the Father and the Son. Amazing!

So, then, the God we encounter in Genesis 1, bearing the plural name Elohim, is composed of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Within the parameters of God’s own divine reality, apart from any created beings, God is an other-centered fellowship, a self-giving friendship. As we move forward from Genesis in the biblical narrative, we encounter what the Jewish people call, “the shema” which they regard to this day as the most important of all theological declarations: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

There is a hidden beauty here in plain sight, which is brought to light by asking the question: in what sense is the Lord our God one? We find the answer in Jesus, because He intentionally employed the language of the Shema to describe the relationship that exists between Himself and the Father: “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30).

Again, we see that God is not one in the sense of being a solitary being, but rather God is

one in the sense of relational oneness. Later, in John 17, Jesus again used the language of oneness, and on this occasion He defined it as the relational dynamic of love. He prayed to the Father for His disciples “that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world” (Verses 22-24).

Then He closed His prayer by asking “that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (Verse 26). Here’s the picture before us: The Father is God, but not all there is of God. Jesus Christ is God, but not all there is of God. The Holy Spirit is God, but not all there is of God.

All three, together, as an intimate social fellowship, compose one divine reality. This is why we use the word Trinity, or Tri-unity, to describe God. It is not a dry doctrinal fact. It is not a cold theoretical equation. It is not a complex philosophical concept. No. The doctrine of the Trinity is a crystal clear window into God’s outgoing, other-centered, super-social character. Next week Sabbath we will celebrate a special homecoming. Our theme that day will be The 2nd Coming of Christ. This could be an opportunity for your friends who have disengaged from our church community to experience their second coming to our church community.

DAY 2 THE GREAT CONTROVERSY: Conquering Love

We are exploring what for most of us is familiar territory: eight of the core doctrines that compose the Adventist belief system. As we pointed out in our introductory message yesterday, these familiar doctrines are nothing but dry, boring, theological facts to be recited from memory. For sure, we have often made them that, but just because we have dumbed them down and stripped them of their beauty doesn’t mean there’s no beauty to be discovered.

Remember our guiding metaphor? The doctrinal truths of Scripture are like windows that look upon the God's attractive character as revealed in Christ. No doctrine is an end in itself. The Sabbath isn't about the Sabbath, per se; it's about Jesus. The Great Controversy is no exception. So let’s look through this window and find the beauty that awaits our discovery.

War in Heaven

The first rule of logic is that things are usually what they appear to be. Our world looks like a war zone because our world is a war zone. The second rule of logic is that things are not always exactly what they appear to be. The war going on in our world is of a character that is not immediately apparent to the casual observer. At first glance we see only human beings engaged in the battle, but there is more to the situation than meets the eye.

According to the Bible, we “homo sapiens” are not alone in the universe. From Genesis to Revelation we encounter an order of beings called angels. We know from Scripture that these beings predate the existence of humans (Job 38:4-7; Revelation 1:20), that they are numerous (Hebrews 12:22), powerful and intelligent (Psalm 103:20; Daniel 4:17), that they function within an orderly system of governance (Ephesians 3:10; Daniel 7:9-10), that they actively operate within our world, mostly unseen, but sometimes in visible form (Hebrews 1:14; 13:2), and that the evil afflicting our world originated with some of them (Revelation 12:7, 12).

One of the angels was called “Lucifer”, which means bearer of light. This exalted being was created to be a revealer of God’s character to his fellow angels, but he chose a different course of action. The Bible says that Lucifer was “perfect in all” his “ways” (his patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior), “until iniquity was found in” him (Ezekiel 28:15). At this point he became “Satan”, which means adversary. The Bible also tells us that the fall of Lucifer occurred because he developed a desire for self-exaltation, leading to the heady aspiration to displace God from the hearts of his fellow angels and to usurp their loyalty (Isaiah 14:12-14). As Lucifer nurtured self-centeredness inside himself, he ceased to reflect the light of God’s character and began to attribute to God his own self-serving motives. The aspiration, “I will exalt” myself, followed by, “I will be like the Most High,” indicates that Lucifer began attributing self-exaltation to the character of God as justification for his own self-exaltation. By denying the essential goodness of God’s character, Satan’s course of action was calculated to erode trust toward God and incite rebellion against Him. It is in this narrative context that the Bible says: “War broke out in heaven” (Revelation 12:7).

That is, among the angels! The word translated here as “war” is *polemos* in the original Greek, which is related to words like *polemic* and *politics*. This gives us insight to the exact nature of the “war”. It was not primarily a war of physical engagement or force of arms. It was a political war, a propaganda campaign, a character assassination scheme. Satan waged his war by disseminating lies regarding the character of God. Thus he is described as the one who “deceives the whole world” and as “a liar and the father of it” (Revelation 12:9; John 8:44).

Follow this biblical logic: Ezekiel says that Lucifer was cast out of heaven because he “sinned” (Ezekiel 28:16). John defines sin as “lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). Paul defines God’s law as “love” (Romans 13:10).

We see, then, that Lucifer rebelled against God’s law, which really means he rebelled against God’s love. He raised charges against God and against the law of love by which God governs the universe. Whereas the Bible claims that “God is love” and that His law is, therefore, a law that governs only by the principles inherent in love (1 John 4:8; Matthew 22:37-40), Satan has decided to live without love and to form a kingdom that operates without love. It serves his purpose, therefore, to portray God as self-serving and His law as a list of arbitrary rules imposed for selfish purposes. Ellen White explains the core issue of the great controversy with brilliant clarity:

Unselfishness, the principle of God's kingdom, is the principle that Satan hates; its very existence he denies. From the beginning of the great controversy he has endeavored to prove God's principles of action to be selfish, and he deals in the same way with all who serve God. To disprove Satan's claim is the work of Christ and of all who bear His name. (Education, p. 154)

Now that we understand the foundational issue involved in the war between good and evil, we are prepared to allow Scripture to paint a more detailed picture for us in seven progressive scenes.

Scene One: Dominion

Let's begin by comparing two biblical statements that together create a conceptual framework for understanding what's going on in our world: "God created mankind in His own image"(Genesis 1:27). "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Since love is the essence of God's character, it follows that His creation would be designed for love. And since love, by definition, is the voluntary giving of oneself to others, it follows that freewill had to be built into God's creation. Therefore we read in the creation account that God gave human beings "dominion" over the earth (Genesis 1:26). Dominion is a crucial biblical concept. As free moral agents made for love, Adam and Eve were given the high privilege of self-governance.

Scene Two: Abdication

Since God gave the earth to Adam and Eve, it was theirs to do with as they pleased. The Creator's intent, of course, was that they would use the power of their freewill to be fruitful and multiply and build a global society of self-giving love. It's right here that the story goes bad. Tragically, our first parents abdicated their position of authority over the earth by yielding allegiance to a foreign lord, to the fallen angel once called Lucifer, the luminous one, who was now known as Satan, the adversary. Yes, the Fall of humanity was a moral fall, but it was a legal fall, as well, because it involved a transfer of power. Adam and Eve lost their dominion because they chose to give it away. Through the exercise of human freewill, Satan became the "ruler of this world" (John 12:31) and "the god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4). Notwithstanding, Satan's power over our world does not constitute a rightful rule. He is not earth's legitimate lord. His triumph over humanity was an act of war based on deception. He led our first parents into rebellion by denying the existence of love in God's heart for them, thus breaking their capacity for trusting God.

Scene Three: The Promised Warrior

Once the cosmic conflict began, both sides immediately proceeded to organize their forces and set their principles in motion. The Creator initiated His plan of attack by declaring war and making a promise. Speaking to Satan in the hearing of Adam and Eve, God said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will

crush your head, and you will strike His heel” (Genesis 3:15, NIV). God here announced that a Warrior would be coming to Earth to crush Satan’s head, as it were.

Scene Four: Organized Forces

In tactical response to Satan’s hostile takeover, God did something remarkable, ingenious, and necessary. Moses explains:

When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel. For the Lord’s portion is His people; Jacob is the place of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land and in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest, hovers over its young, spreading out its wings, taking them up, carrying them on its wings, so the Lord alone led him, and there was no foreign god with him. (Deuteronomy 32:8-12)

Verses 15 to 17 further fill out the picture:

“Then he (Israel) forsook God who made him, and scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation. They provoked Him to jealousy with foreign gods; with abominations they provoked Him to anger. They sacrificed to demons, not to God, to gods they did not know, to new gods, new arrivals that your fathers did not fear” (Deuteronomy 32:15- 17). Here we see that God established a chosen people among the nations. Israel was called to be “the Lord’s portion” on earth, and there was to be no “foreign god” among them. It is crucial to notice that Moses informs us that the “gods” of the pagan nations were none other than “demons”, or fallen angels masquerading as deities. By calling Israel out from among the nations, God manifested His intent to take the world back from demonic dominance.

Scene Five: The Unarmed Warrior

The promised Warrior landed on earthly soil as a helpless, dependent babe in arms. Raised to manhood by humble Israeli peasants, He launched His attack against the kingdom of darkness and proceeded to systematically crush the head of the usurper without ever taking a weapon of violence in hand on the cross. We could call Jesus “The Unarmed Warrior” because he came to win back the world by truth and love rather than by deception and violence. Satan recognized Jesus for who He was.

Announcing His warrior identity and mission, Jesus explained to the people what was going down before their very eyes: “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace. But when one stronger than he comes upon him and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils” (Luke 11:21, 22).

In this little parable, the “strong man” is Satan. The one “stronger than he” is Jesus.

Clearly, a battle is underway and a final showdown is about to happen. And nobody is expecting the move that the rightful King of heaven and earth is about to make.

Scene Six: The Church Militant/Triumphant

It's not merely the earth under our feet that is under dispute in the great controversy between good and evil. The real war is over the 3-pound plot of ground situated in our skulls. God makes no secret about the fact that He's after our "foreheads" (Revelation 14:1). In other words, He wants the mental, emotional, and volitional territory within us. The apostle John states that it is there, in the human forehead, that God wants to write "His name," indicating His abiding presence within the realm of our characters. Human beings are permeable creatures. Outside influences get into us. We are, in fact, designed to be inhabited, as "an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22, KJV).

The language Paul uses to describe the nature of our warfare is extremely insightful:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)

The mission of the church is to make known God's beautiful character of self-giving love as revealed in Jesus Christ. We are called upon to mobilize our talents, our energies, and our resources to the one task of reclaiming territory for Christ within individual hearts and homes, within every nation and village on earth. Within the mental, emotional and volitional realm of individual human souls, Jesus has laid claim to the territory stolen by Satan.

Scene Seven: The First Dominion Restored

"Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power" (1 Corinthians 15:24). Paul would have us understand that history is ultimately rushing toward the demise of all systems of coercion, domination, oppression and war, and to the establishment of a forever-flourishing, liberty-based kingdom of eternal love. When that day comes, God's city, the New Jerusalem, will be transferred from the heavenly realm to our very own world. Planet Earth will become the new capital of the universe:

Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:2-4)

That's where this story is going. By God's grace, I intend to go with it, safely delivered by Jesus to the new earth as an eternal citizen of that fully restored first dominion. What about you?

DAY 3: THE LAW OF GOD: Liberating Love

The Ten Commandments figure prominently into our doctrinal system as Seventh-day Adventists. While much of the Christian world preach what is called “antinomianism”—the idea that God's law was “abolished” when Jesus died on the cross—we believe God's law is eternal and changeless. Except right here we are faced with a serious problem, because in our efforts to defend God's law we have sometimes tended to reduce the topic to an argument against antinomianism, a proof-text formulation calculated to prove to other Christians that they ought to keep the law. And in the process, we have created a huge theological and experiential problem for ourselves.

Getting more to the point, Ellen White explained her concern like this:

The danger has been presented to me again and again of entertaining, as a people, false ideas of justification by faith. I have been shown for years that Satan would work in a special manner to confuse the mind on this point. The law of God has been largely dwelt upon and has been presented to congregations, almost as destitute of the knowledge of Jesus Christ and His relation to the law as was the offering of Cain. (Faith and Works, p. 18)

In other words, in our zeal to defend the law, we are in danger of presenting a legalistic theological outlook. Alarmed at the situation, she went on to explain the direction our preaching needed to go: “There is not a point that needs to be dwelt upon more earnestly, repeated more frequently, or established more firmly in the minds of all than the impossibility of fallen man meriting anything by his own best good works. Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ alone” (Faith and Works, p. 19).

The glorious fact is there's absolutely nothing we can do to earn God's favor, not because His favor is hard to win, but because we already have it! God is bursting with eager grace, full-throttle love, and lavish mercy—and there's not a thing we have done or can do to earn it. This is why Paul proclaimed what he called “the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24). Let the significance of this language register deeply in your heart. Salvation is an accomplished reality in the person and work of Christ, and there is nothing we can contribute to it. It's all there in Him.

Well, then, what about the law? Any thinking Adventist would ask that way: Take a look at 2 Corinthians 3. It is almost certain you have never heard this passage preached in an evangelistic series, except perhaps to “answer” it with an argument to explain our way around it. We believe our church is called by God to preach His law. The immutability of

God's law is one of our fundamental beliefs. And yet, this passage is Paul's magnum opus on the law and it pretty much doesn't even figure in to Adventist teaching on the law.

Let's start with verse six. He says that God has *“made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”* The ministers of God—which includes all of us as believer in Christ—are to be deliberate about communicating “the new covenant”. That's the message God has called us to proclaim. In other words, we are to handle the law of God with an intentional new covenant orientation.

The law without the gospel messes us up because it distorts our picture of God. It leaves us with a heavy emotional sense of obligation to do things for God rather than with a sense of gratitude to God for what He has done for us.

First of all, we know Paul is talking about the moral law and not the ceremonial law because he specifies that the law he's dealing with was “engraved on stones”. So we need to face the fact that whatever Paul is about to say has to do with the Ten Commandments.

This way of describing the Ten Commandments doesn't set well with us. We find it odd, even troubling, to encounter language like this regarding God's law right there in the Bible. The reflex we are inclined to as Adventists is to maneuver around statements like this or avoid them completely. However Paul is persistent and emphatic—not only here, but throughout his writings—in characterizing the law as transitional to something superior. In Romans 7:4 Paul says, “Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ.” In verse 6 he says, “But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.” In Romans 10:4 he says,

“Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” In Galatians 3:24, 25 he says, “The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.”

So let's go back to 2 Corinthians 3 now.

After telling us that the law had a certain kind of glory, Paul tells us that the glory of the law must give way to a greater glory: “For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.” Paul is clear: there is a glory brought to the world in the person of Christ which “excels” so far beyond the law engraved on tables of stone that the law “had no glory” by comparison. When the angels saw the newborn Messiah, they shouted from the heavens, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men” (Luke 2:14). Approaching the cross, Jesus said, “The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified” (John 12:23).

Here is the glory that “excels”: the glory of Mount Sinai is superseded by the glory of Mount Calvary.

In Christ something is given to the world that the law cannot give, and Paul now tells us what that is. Notice the words in verse 9: “For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory.” God saves sinners by ministering “righteousness” to them rather than “condemnation”. The Holy Spirit, operating within the new covenant framework and leveraging the achievements of Christ, communicates to our hearts a sense that we are righteous in God’s eyes. Here is the great truth of righteousness by faith, which is equivalent to what Paul calls “the new covenant”. In Romans 4:17 Paul says it like this: God “calls those things which do not exist as though they did”. God call me righteous although He knows I’m sinful. He calls me innocent although He knows I’m guilty. This isn’t legal fiction. It’s relational genius! God relates to me as if I’ve never sinned, not to excuse my sin or to leave me in bondage to it, but to liberate me from it at the level of my deepest identity.

Return again to 2 Corinthians 3 and take in Paul’s grand finale in his explanation of the two views of the law. Verses 12-18:

Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech—unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

Here Paul describes a human condition in which people know the Bible, but they don’t know it. They are textually literate and spiritually unenlightened at the same time. They know the word, but they don’t know the Word. They know chapters and verses and facts, but they don’t know the deeper relational realities to which they point. “When Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Yes, Paul is referring to the people of ancient Israel. But, no, he’s not referring only to Israel. He’s also referring to any modern people who happen to know lots of “truth” and preach the law and, because of all the truth they know, see themselves as “rich, and increased with (theological) goods, and have need of nothing,” while in reality they are “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:17).

Dear fellow Adventist, “The veil is taken away in Christ,” Paul proclaims. “When one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.” “Beholding, as in a mirror, the glory of the Lord.” Not a casual look, as if Jesus was one doctrine in a lineup sermons! “Beholding” is

the word Paul used. He's telling us to look upon, to ponder, to contemplate Christ as with transfixed gaze! To give Jesus our full, focused, undivided intellectual, emotional, theological attention. And as we do, he tells us exactly what will happen to us, in us, for us: We will be "transformed into the same image from glory to glory."

Paul hasn't done away with the law. He has simply and necessarily set forth the limits of the law's power and placed it within its legitimate sphere of function. He has not negated the law altogether, but he has emphatically negated the law as a means of salvation. The law serves one purpose, and the Bible clearly tells us what that purpose is: "The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24, 25). A Pharisee of the Pharisees, Paul experienced the definitive theological epiphany: The glory of the law is superseded by the glory of the living Christ! Do you want to experience Christ, who will keep the law in you?

DAY 4: THE SABBATH: Restful Love

In our previous message, we discovered vital insights regarding the law of God, allowing ourselves to be instructed by the apostle Paul. First, we saw that the only legitimate way to preach the law is in the form of the new covenant. Any sermon on the law that consists of simply proving that the law ought to be obeyed, without a clear declaration of the gospel of grace, is moving us in the wrong direction.

In the formative stages of Adventist theology and evangelistic approach, we as a people did not get this. We were heavily engaged in a defensive posture of trying to prove to the wider Christian world that God's law is eternal and therefore everyone ought to obey it—all of it, including the Sabbath commandment. We tended to see Sunday keepers as theological "opponents" who needed to be argued into obedience of the law, and as a result our own theology of the law went in the wrong direction. Because of our mishandling of the law, Ellen White observed that we as Seventh-day Adventists had earned an unfortunate reputation in the eyes of other Christians. Here's how she articulated the impression we had made: "...Seventh-day Adventists talk the law, the law, but do not teach or believe Christ" (Ellen White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 91-92).

We will return to this statement in a moment and consider its historical context. But right now, let's just feel the weight of her assessment. If there is any reputation the church does not want to bring upon itself, this is it. We are, after all, called to preach the everlasting gospel to the world, which is the good news of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and not by the works of the law. And yet, here was our own prophet, Ellen G. White, telling us that we had done precisely the thing we ought not to have done: we had given the impression that Jesus was nowhere on our radar.

Every Adventist evangelist and pastor has to battle the accusation that we are legalists. But Ellen White didn't deny it. She went to her grave urging us as a church to change course,

saying things like this: *The danger has been presented to me again and again of entertaining, as a people, false ideas of justification by faith. I have been shown for years that Satan would work in a special manner to confuse the mind on this point. The law of God has been largely dwelt upon and has been presented to congregations, almost as destitute of the knowledge of Jesus Christ and His relation to the law as was the offering of Cain.* (1888 Materials, p. 810)

The preaching of Christ crucified has been strangely neglected by our people. (1888 Materials, pp. 842, 844-855). These statements, and many more like them, flowed directly out of the 1888 General Conference Session, at which God tried to bring the gospel into Adventist theology through two young men by the names of Ellet Joseph "E.J." Waggoner and Alonzo T. Jones. And it was in this context that she went on to say: "The message of the gospel of His grace was to be given to the church in clear and distinct lines, that the world should no longer say that Seventh-day Adventists talk the law, the law, but do not teach or believe Christ" (Testimonies to Ministers, pp. 91-92). What an amazing outline of what Adventism could have become and still may become!

The doctrine I'm referring to is the biblical truth regarding the Sabbath.

As a people, we've tended to reduce the Sabbath to a right-day-versus-wrong-day argument. Ask the average Adventist congregation, "Do we have the truth on the Sabbath?" You'll get an enthusiastic chorus of "Amen!" So let's reexamine the Sabbath.

Rest Built Into the Story

Let's begin by taking a fresh look at the origin of the Sabbath in Genesis. But this time—rather than merely quoting chapter 2:1-3 as a piece of isolated evidence to prove that the Sabbath was given in Eden and therefore ought to be kept by all human beings and not just by the Jews—we will pause to take into account the narrative context in which the Sabbath was instituted. By looking at the full story in which the Sabbath emerges, we will discover the beautiful truth it signifies. In Genesis 1 and 2 we see that God proceeds with creation in an intentional artistic pattern: forming material spaces and then filling those spaces with life. On the first three days the Creator forms spaces by dividing the material elements of creation. On the next three days He fills those spaces with living things.

On day one God forms the heavens and the earth and separates the light from the darkness, and then on day four He fills that space with the sun, the moon and the stars. On day two God forms the spaces of water and sky, and then on day five He fills those spaces with fish and birds. On day three God forms the space of the dry land, and then on day six God fills the land with animals and mankind. Then comes the climax of the entire process: God creates the Sabbath and fills it with Himself. The seventh day is a unique space, because it's not a material space, but rather a relational space, and it is not filled with material things, but rather with the blessing of God's fellowship presence.

Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the

seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made. (Genesis 2:1-3)

What's being described here is not rest from physical exhaustion, for which sleep is required, but rest in the sense of satisfaction, for which enjoyment is required. God isn't tired, He's happy, pleased, fulfilled. He's been giving, giving, giving; pouring out His energy to create.

Notice that human beings were created on the latter half of the sixth day, after all God's "work" of creation was already "finished". Therefore, they did not participate in the work of Creation, nor did they even witness God engaging in the act of creating. Imagine the scene. The story of the Creation, positioning Adam and Eve as recipients of a finished work, communicates a powerful message: We human beings are creatures of rest before we are creatures of work. We are mentally, emotionally, and relationally engineered for receiving from God before we are able to give back to God and others.

The Creation-Salvation Continuum

Okay, then, our first discovery regarding the Sabbath is that it is a memorial of God's finished work of creation, reminding us of our position in creation as trusting recipients of His love. Now we will discover that the Sabbath is also a memorial of redemption. The connection is obvious once we see it. There is a super logical reason why the Sabbath doubles as a memorial of both creation and salvation, and it is this: both are accomplished by the creative power of God alone. Salvation is, in fact, an act of re-creation on God's part. Within the storyline of Scripture there is what might be described as a creation-salvation continuum.

In Genesis 1, the first man is created for the purpose of bearing God's image: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). In John 1, Jesus becomes the new man to redeem Adam's failure, and reveals God's glory/image without failure: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

In Genesis, once God "finished" the work of creation, "on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done" (Genesis 2:2). In John, as Jesus comes to the end of His salvation ministry, He employs the seventh day language of Genesis 2 and says to the Father, "I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4). And as He hangs upon the cross, He exclaims, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). The next verse informs us that it was "the preparation day", or Friday, when Jesus declared His work of salvation "finished" and then he rested in the tomb on the Sabbath day.

We see, then, that the Bible seamlessly tells two inextricably interwoven stories—the story

of creation and the story of recreation, and the Sabbath is the climactic point of resolve in both stories.

The Unforced Rhythms of Grace

It is not at all surprising, then, that Jesus defined salvation as involving rest from the anxiety of laboring to merit God's favor: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). The "labor" from which Jesus offers "rest" is not physical labor, but the emotional anxiety of laboring under a false picture of God's character, which leads us to believe that His acceptance must be earned. We know this is His point because He offers rest for our "souls", which is psyche in the original Greek text. When Jesus says, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," He is offering the most liberated life imaginable.

There is a stabilizing security in knowing that my salvation is His work and not mine. That is the rest Jesus offers. But it's more than just rest He offers, because with rest comes energy! Resting in Christ alone for my salvation, His grace arouses me, energizes me, and motivates me with the pure and powerful motive of love as the only true basis for obedience. I am propelled from the inside out by the unforced rhythms of His grace. Suddenly the Sabbath makes more sense than it ever has before.

I find myself face-to-face, heart-to-heart with a God who already loves me, already favors me, already accepts me, not because I've done anything to deserve it, but simply because He's good. And right here, right now, in this realization, I rest. This is what the Sabbath truth is all about.

DAY 5: THE SANCTUARY: Merciful Love

When Ellen White was a teenage girl she had a mind-blowing dream about a huge temple. She wrote:

"I dreamed of seeing a temple to which many people were flocking. Only those who took refuge in that temple would be saved when time should close." In the dream, she felt urgency to take refuge in the building, but she was afraid of being laughed at by the mocking crowd. With self-conscious fear she made her way slowly to the temple. Upon entering, she immediately saw that the building was designed with an unusual and striking architectural feature: "On entering the building, I saw that the vast temple was supported by one immense pillar."

Referencing the "pillar" symbol, Ellen White later wrote that the cross "is the central pillar on which hangs the far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory which is for those who

accept the cross. Under and around the cross of Christ, that immortal pillar, sin shall never revive, nor error obtain control” (SDA Bible Commentary, Vol. 7A, p. 457)

A Path Lies Before Us

When King David looked at the sanctuary, he saw a path. In Psalm 77, verse 13, he said, **“Your way, oh God, is in the sanctuary.”** The word here translated is *derek*. It means a path or a journey. The word conveys the idea of traveling to a set destination, moving from somewhere to somewhere else. The obvious next question is, from where to where? Well, if we just take a look at the basic layout of the sanctuary, sure enough, a path is immediately evident. Let’s take a quick tour to get a basic feel for the journey, and then we’ll take a more detailed look.

(NOTE: at this point the speaker should either put up a slide or draw a picture on a board to show the basic floor plan of the sanctuary.) Visit www.gcyouthministries.org for PowerPoint presentation of this lesson.)

First, there is the camp of Israel. This is where the people live in tents surrounding the sanctuary, three tribes of Israel on each side—North, South, East and West—with the sanctuary in middle of the encampment. God told Moses: “Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). Everyone can see the sanctuary in the distance, from their “front yard”, so to speak. It is literally “among them” at the center of their traveling wilderness city. But it's not just the building that is “among them”. The sanctuary houses the very presence of God in the form of the Shekinah glory. We'll come back to this in just a moment, but for now we simply want to notice that God wants to be with His people, and He wants to make it possible for them to be with Him, even though at present, for their safety, He can only dwell with them behind a series of veils.

As we move from the camp toward the building, we notice that the sanctuary is enclosed by a high white linen wall. White symbolizes moral purity, righteousness, and innocence. The message of the high white wall is clear: we are on the other side of innocence, on the outside of righteousness. We are sinners separated from God by our unlikeness to His character, which means, by our lack of love. But then we notice that God has provided a door of hope, a point of access, because on the east side there is an entrance through the high white wall, in the form of a beautiful curtain woven of blue, purple and red, in addition to white. As we enter in through the curtain, we find ourselves standing before a large, brass altar. A priest is there leading out in a ceremony. We see a man on his knees, his hands bearing down upon the head of a little lamb, almost crushing the submissive animal. The man confesses his sins, symbolically offloading his guilt to the innocent victim. Then the priest places a knife in the man’s hand. With one rapid move, the throat is slit and the blood of the lamb flows from its body, some of which is caught by the priest in a bowl. The lifeless sacrifice is then placed on the altar and burned to ashes.

We move forward in the symbolic path and watch as the priest washes his hands and feet in

the second piece of brass furniture in the courtyard, called the laver of washing. The priest then proceeds with the bowl of blood into the first room of the sanctuary, called the Holy Place. Standing in the Holy Place, as we look to the right, we see a gold table with two stacks of fresh-baked flatbread placed upon it. As we turn around and look to the left, we see a candlestick with seven branches, each one bearing a bright, flickering flame. As we turn and face forward in the path, we see a golden altar with incense burning upon it, filling the room with fragrance. We then notice that the priest is doing something that looks very planned and intentional: he is dipping his fingers in the bowl of blood and sprinkling the red liquid on the veil that hangs just beyond the altar of incense. He counts under his breath: one, two, three... He dips and sprinkles exactly seven times.

Curious as to what lies beyond the veil, we draw it aside and step into the second room of the sanctuary, called the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies. Within this room, there is one impressive piece of furniture. It is an ornately-designed rectangular box, called the Ark of the Covenant. Inside the box are the two tables of stone, on which the very finger of God has engraved the Ten Commandments. On top of the box is a solid gold lid, called the Mercy Seat. On either end of the Ark there are two solid gold angelic figures. These are called the two covering cherubs. As we turn and look around, we notice that the veil and the ceiling are embroidered with golden angels. Most impressive of all, above the Ark, radiating between the two covering cherubs is a bright light. This is the Shekinah glory, the visible presence of God.

Clearly, the path marked out in the sanctuary has three basic steps, or experiential phases:

The Courtyard. The Holy Place. The Most Holy Place

We can summarize what we've learned so far like this:

The sanctuary provides a way, a path, and an experiential journey for the people to get back into immediate, unveiled fellowship with God. It is God's plan for restoring intimacy between Himself and us!

Jesus Is The Journey

When we come to the New Testament, we learn that every symbol of the sanctuary pointed to Jesus, depicting the various aspects of His saving ministry to sinners. First of all, as we open the Gospel of John, we see that Jesus is described with sanctuary language. Notice John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." The word translated here as "dwelt" literally means tabernacle or sanctuary.

But things get even clearer, and more amazing, as we move through the Gospel of John. In John 2:19-21 we read: "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' Then the Jews said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?' But He was speaking of the temple of His body."

Here we see that Jesus is explicitly identified Himself as the “temple” to which the ancient temple was pointing. He has come to the world to act out in reality all that the sanctuary presented in symbol.

Remember what we read in Psalm 77:13? “Your way, oh God, is in the sanctuary.” Now notice what Jesus said about Himself in John 14: 6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

Each of the three phases of the sanctuary could only be accessed through a veil. Jesus said of Himself, to Him and the great work of salvation. And the apostle Paul said that through Jesus we have “a new and living way, which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh” (Hebrews 10:20). The main ceremony of the sanctuary was the sacrifice of the lamb on the brass altar. Pointing to Jesus as the sacrifice for our sins, John the Baptist proclaimed, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The laver that was used for ceremonial washing pointed to Jesus as “the living water” (John 4:11) and teaches us about “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). The bread on table in the Holy Place pointed to Jesus, who said, “He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

The seven-branched lampstand was kept burning to provide light in the sanctuary. Jesus said of Himself, the sacrifice for our sin, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (John 8:12).

The altar of incense pointed to a specific aspect of Christian experience: “He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of the saints” (Revelation 8:3). The fragrant incense burning in the sanctuary symbolized our prayer arising to God through Jesus.

The Ten Commandments, God’s ten laws of self-giving love, were kept inside the Ark of the Covenant, symbolizing God’s desire to write the principles of His love in our hearts and minds: “I will put my laws into their minds, and in their hearts I will write them” (Hebrews 10:16).

So what is the sanctuary all about? It’s all about Jesus! It’s all about Jesus fulfilling the many dimensions of His saving ministry on our behalf! It’s all about Jesus leading us step-by-step back to a completely restored relationship with the Father!

Salvation History:

Okay, let’s back up now, take a deep breath, and look at the sanctuary from another angle. What we’ve seen so far is that the sanctuary symbolically represents the personal journey of the individual believer in Christ. But the sanctuary also represents salvation history as a whole. The Courtyard, with its altar of sacrifice directs, our attention to A.D. 31, when Jesus was crucified on our behalf. After His resurrection, Jesus ascended to heaven where

He took up His role as our heavenly High Priest in the Holy Place of the “true tabernacle” in heaven. This phase of His ministry began in A.D. 31 and continued until 1844, at which time He moved into the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary to engage in the final phase of His High Priestly ministry.

Within the scope of the Jewish year, there were two basic ceremonial services that depicted the entire story of redemption: the daily service and the yearly service. The Daily Service, which is outlined for us in Leviticus 1-4, was a very simple but meaningful series of ceremonial enactments. The process centered around the priest making regular sacrifices for the sins of the people and symbolically transferring their sins into the sanctuary by sprinkling the blood on the veil before the Most Holy Place. This pointed to the perfect sacrifice for sin that was to be made by Christ when He would die on the cross. There was an illuminating genius in this daily symbolic service. While the surrounding pagan nations were engaging in the heinous practice of human sacrifice, prompted by demons masquerading as gods (Deuteronomy 32:16-17; Psalm 106:37), the Hebrew people were being taught through the sanctuary that God would give Himself to suffer and die for humanity.

God was communicating the awesome truth that our salvation cannot be earned by any sacrifice we might make. God cannot be appeased, because He already loves us. We don't need to persuade Him by our deeds to save us, because He has already determined to save us at any and all cost to Himself. Day by day throughout the year the ceremony was repeated, reinforcing in the people's minds that God would make all the sacrifice necessary for our salvation. The ceremony was a constant, receptive declaration from God, saying, I love you so much that I will suffer and die to rescue you from sin and death.

The Yearly Service is outlined in Leviticus 16. On the last day of the annual sacrificial cycle, the symbolism of the sanctuary service reached its completion. The event was called, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On this climactic day, a special ceremony was enacted to symbolize the final resolution of the sin problem—complete atonement and the total eradication of evil. As all of Israel gathered before the sanctuary, two goats were brought to the high priest. One was designated “for Lord” and the other for “the scapegoat”, Azazel in Hebrew. The Lord's goat was slain, again pointing forward to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross as the only means of salvation. Again, God was saying, Me—not you! I will make the sacrifice for your salvation, not you. Some of the blood of the Lord's goat was brought into the Most Holy Place and sprinkled seven times on the mercy seat over God's broken law, thus indicating that final and full atonement was made for all the sins Israel had confessed throughout the year in the daily service. Thus, the Day of Atonement equated to a final, irrevocable judgment in favor of the people, in favor of their salvation, in favor of their perfect standing before God.

Then the high priest placed both hands on the head of the scapegoat and confessed over it the sins of the people. However, Azazel's goat was not slain. Rather, it was led into “an uninhabited land” to perish in “the wilderness” alone. Since the scapegoat was explicitly

not “the Lord’s goat”, and since its blood was not shed as a sacrifice, Azazel must symbolize another figure that bears responsibility for the existence of evil and the fall of humanity. The ancient Hebrew people understood that Azazel represented Satan, the originator of evil and the tempter of mankind, and Jewish scholars to this day hold this view. This is the picture of Judgment.

The truth of the judgment is a call to receive and give mercy. And that makes it extremely good news, unless, of course, I choose to live in condemnation of others. But why go that route? There is a beautiful, healing path stretched out before each of us in Christ: through the door of His inviting love, to the altar of sacrifice, there to receive complete forgiveness for all our sins, making our way over to the laver to be washed clean of a guilty conscience, into the Holy Place to feed on the bread of life, to live by the illuminating light of God’s goodness that streams from Jesus, and to lift our grateful prayers to God mingled with the fragrance of Christ’s righteousness, and finally onward into the Most Holy Place to be judged by God with eternal favor and to have His law of love written in our hearts. Come on! Let’s take the journey set before us by God’s merciful love.

DAY 6: DEATH & HELL: Selfless Love

The value of any given doctrine lies in its ability to communicate something regarding kind of person God is. Any truth claim that contradicts the foundational premise that “God is love” (1 John 4:8) proves itself false by virtue of that contradiction.

Problem is, we often study and preach the Bible with Jesus nowhere in sight, or if He is in sight, it is as a footnote. If there is anything we need to be clear on, it is this: Jesus is not part of our message. Jesus is our whole message. To the degree that He is not, we are not preaching “the truth,” no matter how much we imagine we are. Our state-of-the-dead doctrine is an example of a biblical truth that has massive potential to reveal God’s amazing love in Christ. Sadly, however, it has often been reduced to a mere a text-by-text argument for the sake of proving that people are unconscious when they die and winning the argument that no one goes straight to heaven or hell.

So let’s dive into this remarkable subject and see what we discover.

Death According To the Bible

The first thing we need to understand about death is that in the Bible we are taught that there are two kinds of death. In the book of Revelation, we are told that there is something called, “the second death” (Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). We can logically deduce from this language that if there is a second death and then there is of necessity a first death. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus explains the basic difference between the two: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” The first death is merely the killing of the body. This is the common

death that everybody dies, that all human beings are familiar with. As Seventh-day Adventists we understand that the first death puts a human being into an unconscious, sleep-like state. When a person dies the first death, he or she does not go immediately to heaven or hell.

However, this is not the end of the story, because when a person dies the first death that is not his or her end. From the first death, there is a resurrection, both of the saved and the lost. Jesus stated this explicitly: “The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28, 29).

So what about the second death? What is it? How does it happen?

Let's return to Matthew 10:28, where Jesus distinguished between the first and the second death: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” The word that is here translated “soul” is *psyche* in the Greek text. It basically refers to the mind in all of its content, what we referred to earlier as a person's character, or the total content of one's individual identity. Whereas the first death merely involves the killing of the body, or the biological aspect of a person, the second death involves the complete eradication of the individual's body and soul from existence. It constitutes the final annihilation of the wicked, “as though they had never been” (Obadiah 16).

Revelation 20 vividly describes the scene:

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

What we want to notice in this passage is precisely how the wicked experience the second. There are four basic features brought to view:

Number One; The second death is initiated by a full revelation of God Almighty, seated upon “a great white throne” with His “face” fully exposed to the astonished gaze of all.

Number Two; As the wicked stand before God, there will be found “no place for them”. These are no doubt the saddest words in all of human literature. The second death is total aloneness, a deep inner sense of complete un-belonging.

Number Three; As the wicked stand before God, “the books” are “opened” and they are “judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books”. In other words, they face the full reality of their sin and all the guilt that it entails comes upon their consciousness with perfect awareness. This is what Jesus was referring to when he said that they are resurrected to “condemnation”. The second death brings the soul face- to-face with the full, ugly reality of one’s sin, untempered by any sense of divine mercy.

Number Four; Then, as the wicked face their life's records and experience the total weight of their guilt, they are destroyed by fire. And Paul simply states, “Our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29). God’s total being is described as a consuming fire for one simple reason: because the pure reality of His selfless love stands in distinct contrast to all that is contrary to love.

What we have just discovered is the true nature of hell. Hell is equivalent to the second death. God will not subject the wicked to eternal torture in the flames of some underworld or some remote region of His universe. They will be resurrected to face the record of their lives in one final reckoning, then they will be eternally annihilated “as though they had never been” (Obadiah 16)

Oh, What Love!

The ultimate wages of sin is the second death. It logically follows that Jesus can only save us from what He has endured and conquered for us. If Jesus only experienced the first death, then he can only save us from the first death and we must still face the second ourselves. However, the glorious good news is that Jesus faced the full, horrific reality of the second death. Pay attention as Jesus and His disciples enter the Garden of Gethsemane. Something astounding is about to happen. Something far more than astounding is about to happen.

Watch!

Jesus is staggering under the weight of some invisible burden. The disciples can see that something is wrong. Jesus explains what’s happening to Him: “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death” (Matthew 26:38). Here He opens to our understanding the nature of His suffering. Notice that He used the same word He had employed earlier to describe the second death as distinct from the first death: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Again, the word here translated “soul” is psyche in the Greek text and that is precisely the word Jesus uses now to communicate what He’s enduring. In Gethsemane, Jesus says He is dying at the psyche level of His being. He is dying from the inside out, under the lethal power of our sin and guilt.

No physical abuse has yet been inflicted upon Him. And yet, He is dying! No blood has yet been drawn from His flesh by violence. And yet, He is bleeding! Luke tells us: “And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood

falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). He is bleeding through His pores due to the intense internal stress the shame of our sin is imposing on Him.

This is nothing short of astounding, because this means that Jesus entered the dark realm of our sin and shame. He took it all into His own conscience as if He were the guilty party instead of us. From Gethsemane, Jesus is taken to the cross. Yes, nails were hammered through His hands and feet. Yes, His body was tortured. And yet, He never uttered a word about the physical pain, because His mental suffering was so intense that it nearly eclipsed His physical pain. Take in every line of this amazing statement by Ellen White:

Many have suffered death by slow tortures; others have suffered death by crucifixion. In what does the death of God's dear Son differ from these? It is true He died upon the cross a most cruel death; yet others, for His dear sake, have suffered equally, so far as bodily torture is concerned. Why, then, was the suffering of Christ more dreadful than that of other persons who have yielded their lives for His sake? If the sufferings of Christ consisted in physical pain alone, then His death was no more painful than that of some of the martyrs.

But bodily pain was but a small part of the agony of God's dear Son. The sins of the world were upon Him, also the sense of His Father's wrath as He suffered the penalty of the law transgressed. (Testimonies for the Church, Vol. 2, p. 214).

And in Gethsemane He told Peter:

“Do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? (Matthew 26:53).

Don't miss what all this means. Jesus faced the prospect of eternal death, and yet, for love of your soul and mine, He did not pull back. He was literally willing to die for ever and never be reunited to His Father to save us. No wonder Paul called what happened at Calvary, “the love of Christ which passes knowledge” (Ephesians 3:19). When Jesus gave His life on the cross, He demonstrated with astounding clarity and beauty that God literally loves all others more than His own existence. This is the incredible truth the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of death and hell opens to view.

How could He love me so deeply, so passionately, so selflessly? Is this really what God is like? Can it truly be that the Almighty God of the universe is this incredibly beautiful? Calvary answers with a resounding yes!

DAY 7: THE END TIME: Non-Coercive Love

As Seventh-day Adventists, we are a people of end-time Bible prophecy, or what theologians call “eschatology”. First, we believe that the movement we're part of was

foretold in Bible prophecy. Second, we believe we're living in the final phase of human history. These are big claims that have the potential to either illuminate or darken people's minds, depending on how we communicate them.

Preachers should not present Bible prophecy in a manner that arouses fear. God's purpose in revealing end-time events is not to scare us, but to prepare us; not to freak us out, but to pull us in; not to impose anxiety upon us, but to generate hope and peace within us. If I try to get right with God because time is short, I don't actually know or love God. I am merely on a self-preservation trip. While I may look like I'm serving God, I'm really serving myself. There is only one legitimate motive for serving the Lord. In Ellen White's words: "Jesus is attractive." His love is the actuating motive we need to keep in focus as we preach end-time prophecy. The attractive loveliness of His character, when we see it, moves us from the inside out! Listen to King David on this matter:

One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple. For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock. (Psalm 27:4, 5)

Notice that David's focus is not on the time of trouble, but rather on the beauty of God's character. In the context of that focus, he has a sense of confidence, not fear, regarding the time of trouble. Now that is a healthy perspective on the time of trouble, and on all end-time events! Each of us needs to ask ourselves if we resonate with David's sentiments toward God.

It is literally impossible for us to rightly interpret end-time events when we allow the events to eclipse Jesus. Doing so inevitably distorts the eschatological picture into a disfigured composite of fear-based speculations and false alarms calculated to get people hyped up on predictions about the future rather than settled into Christ as their security.

.

The Core Dynamic of End-Time Events

We will begin our exploration of eschatology by asking a simple question:

What is the core dynamic we can expect to see unfold in the final events of human history?

Jesus gives us the answer in John 16:1-4:

These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me. But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them.

Don't miss what Jesus is telling us here, because it is hugely significant. Essentially, He says, "This is what's gonna go down at the end of the world: there will be those who hold a picture of God that will drive them to kill in God's name. Their theological construct will dictate violent actions. They will engage in a mass persecution campaign, all the while imagining that they are serving God as they do it." But if they knew God as God really is, they would never exercise force in His name. You see the implications, don't you? This means that the most crucial issue you and I need to address is the picture of God's character that we hold in our hearts. It also means an accurate revelation of God's character is the message we need to be passionate about giving to the world! Amazing!

Now we understand the core issue that will play out in the end-time events of human history. When the world is finally divided into the persecutors and the persecuted, every person will act out their picture of God. Now let's go a little deeper.

A Different Kind of Power

In Matthew 24 Jesus delineated a list of what we call "signs" of the end times. In verse 14 He named the final and most significant sign of all: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come." When Jesus said this, He was using very specific and familiar language to the people of His time. In using the word translated as "gospel", which is euaggelion in the Greek text, He was employing the common term for military victory. When an ancient empire would win a battle by force of arms, euaggelion was the word used to herald the "good news" of victory. Jesus came along and deliberately employed the common word for military victory, flipping its meaning in order to signal the arrival of a new kind of kingdom based on a new kind of power. His kingdom is like no other. It is, in fact, totally opposite to our world's power structures.

The church was not to be a civil system imposing its beliefs by means of law, but rather a covenantal system setting forth the attractive beauty of God's character as an invitation to which all were free to say yes or no. Once we understand that non-coercive love is the foundational principle of the gospel, we are prepared to discern, by contrast, that every political and religious system that attempts to use force in the name of Christ is, in fact, anti-Christ. And this brings us to the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation.

Daniel and Revelation

Daniel shows us a series of world empires. Each one seeks to advance its claim of superiority by means of brute strength, and each one inevitably falls to the dominance of another. Daniel describes the self-defeating cycle of violence in Daniel 8:4-9:

I saw the ram pushing westward, northward, and southward, so that no animal could withstand him; nor was there any that could deliver from his hand, but he did according to his will and became great. And as I was considering, suddenly a male goat came from the west, across the surface of the whole earth, without touching the ground; and the

goat had a notable horn between his eyes. Then he came to the ram that had two horns, which I had seen standing beside the river, and ran at him with furious power. And I saw him confronting the ram; he was moved with rage against him, attacked the ram, and broke his two horns.

There was no power in the ram to withstand him, but he cast him down to the ground and trampled him; and there was no one that could deliver the ram from his hand. Therefore the male goat grew very great; but when he became strong, the large horn was broken, and in place of it four notable ones came up toward the four winds of heaven. And out of one of them came a little horn which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the Glorious Land.

Notice the escalating pattern of self-exaltation Daniel outlines: “great”, “very great”, “exceedingly great” And also notice the language of power and violence: “with furious power”, “confronting”, “moved with rage”, “attacked”, “cast him to the ground”, and “trampled him” Each kingdom advances over the other by means of force. Describing the last kingdom in the prophetic lineup, Daniel says this in verses 24-25: His power shall be mighty, but not by his own power; he shall destroy fearfully, and shall prosper and thrive; he shall destroy the mighty, and also the holy people. Through his cunning he shall cause deceit to prosper under his rule; and he shall exalt himself in his heart. He shall destroy many in their prosperity. He shall even rise against the Prince of princes; but he shall be broken without human means. As with the kingdoms that preceded it, destruction and deceit are the means by which this kingdom exalts itself. But then Daniel shows us something new, something totally different. This powerful system conquers everything in its path until it rises “against the Prince of princes”, which is the Messiah. In Jesus, self-exaltation has met its match, but not in the way we might think. As this kingdom comes against Jesus, Daniel says that it will be “broken without human means”. In other words, Jesus does not conquer by the same principles commonly employed by human power structures. He operates on principles that run directly contrary to the principles employed by the kingdoms of this world. They use deception and force. His weapons are truth in love. In chapter 9 Daniel gives us a more detailed description of the Messiah’s path to victory, and it is astounding. Notice verse 26: “Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself.” And verse 27: “Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering.” This is a prophecy foretelling the self-sacrificing death of Jesus. The one true king of the world would voluntarily give His life at Calvary—“but not for Himself”. Powerful! Daniel wants us to understand that King Jesus operates by a different kind of power. Jesus went to the cross for His enemies, for all of us as rebellious, fallen human beings. He allowed us to vent our rage upon Him and He kept on loving us. The way this prophecy played out was that Jesus gave Himself without resistance to the combined power of church and state. The religious system of Judaism and the political power of Rome united to kill Jesus. Astoundingly, He was crucified by a church-state alliance. The amazing thing is that being God, He actually had power over them, but He freely submitted to their violence. In John 10:18, Jesus said,

“No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself.” In Christ we have before us the king of the universe conquering the kingdoms of our world. But how does He do it? By sacrificing Himself to our hatred and rage!

Jesus comes along into this system of cyclical violence and does something completely counter-intuitive to human nature: He loves in the face of evil. Peter explains in 1 Peter 2:23, 24: “When He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.” Only love for one’s enemies has the power to crush the enmity and birth a new relational dynamic. And that’s precisely the healing genius of the cross. What we see on display in Jesus is a love that cannot be overcome by hate and violence.

When we come to the book of Revelation, we see the same story playing out: love conquering evil. John opens Revelation by telling us that the Star of the book saves and rules by means of self-sacrificing love. Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Revelation 1:4-6)

John wants us to understand that Jesus is a king like no other. His dominion arises from the fact that He laid down His life for us. This message becomes clearer when John describes what’s going on in the throne room of the universe. Let’s read Revelation 5:6, 7:

And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.

Now notice verses 11-13: Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!” And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: “Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!”

Jesus is the center of focus and praise precisely because He gave His life for us. It is against this backdrop of victory through self-sacrifice that Revelation brings to view the final events of history. The people of Jesus will overcome the force of Satan’s end-time persecution system by responding with the love of Christ rather than retaliating. In the

story of Jesus, the true winners win by losing, because non-violent love is the deep secret principle of true conquest.

Love that refuses to respond to evil with evil! Love that submits to abuse rather than resorting to abuse! Love that would rather die than hate the haters!

In Revelation 13 we encounter the Sea-beast and the Land-beast, Roman Catholicism and Protestant America. The prophecy warns us that these two powers will eventually unite to enforce upon the world the “mark of the beast.”

Worship laws will be enacted that will seek to coerce conscience in the name of God.

Religious liberty will eventually be overturned and the lamblike beast will “speak like a dragon.”

Protestant America will become the political engine that will bring upon the world a crisis of individual conscience and character.

The system will dictate that “no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name” (verse 17). There are two kinds of power on display in Revelation: Lamb Power versus Dragon Power. The power employed by Satan and the earthly systems that follow his lead is that of force. In total contrast, the power employed by Jesus is self-sacrificing love. Love versus force! That’s the whole story of Daniel and Revelation in a nutshell. And if that’s the story, then the crucial question that come through to each of our hearts is simply this: Do you and I really know Jesus as the true revelation of God’s character? When the final events of history unfold upon the world, each of us will act out our picture of God. Each of us will either side with those who violate the principle of religious freedom in order to preserve ourselves, or we will stand faithful for liberty of conscience in harmony with God’s non-coercive love. And on that note, the world will end.

DAY 8: THE SECOND COMING: Longing Love

Leader to share with the youth ahead of time: *On this homecoming Sabbath our theme is the 2nd Coming of Christ. This could be an opportunity for your friends who have disengaged from our church community, to experience their second coming to our church community.*

As Seventh-day Adventists, the biblical truth of the second coming of Jesus is built into our name, which is pretty cool, as we are about to discover. The word “advent” simply means “arrival”. When we say we are Adventists, we are identifying ourselves as a people who cherish the brightest hope imaginable. Our name declares that the same Jesus who came to our world 2,000 years ago—born of Mary in Bethlehem, crucified on a Roman cross, resurrected on the third day, and ascended to heaven—is coming again to end all evil and pain and usher in a whole new world of perfect relational harmony.

However—if we're not careful, we are liable to miss the why of His coming as we become preoccupied with proving how He will come. Traditionally, we have devoted most of our evangelistic focus to the manner of His coming against the secret rapture doctrine. Yes, we need to clearly proclaim the true manner of our Lord's return, but not to the neglect of why He's coming. Like all biblical truths, the second coming serves as a window into God's love. So let's take a look through the window.

Heavenly Lover

When Jesus came the first time, He was specifically identified by John the Baptist as the heavenly lover seeking His earthly beloved. When John's followers were manifesting jealousy over people turning their focus from him to Jesus, John had this to say: "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears Him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:29, 30).

Did you catch that?

John called Jesus "the bridegroom," and he identified himself as "the friend of the bridegroom," or what we call "the best man".

We are super familiar with the idea that Jesus came to our world as our Savior from sin and guilt, and we praise God for that, but here we are given an additional insight. Not only did He come to save us from sin, He also came to draw us into His love. The plan of salvation does not merely get us out trouble, it gets us into God's heart. Our redemption has an aim, a goal, and a purpose. We are delivered out of a really bad situation into a really good one. Out of sin into love! Not only does God pity us, He wants us with the passion of a pursuing lover. That's the bigger picture.

In Ezekiel 16 God tells us a very emotional story. Notice verses 4-8:

"As for your nativity, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed in water to cleanse you; you were not rubbed with salt nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you; but you were thrown out into the open field, when you yourself were loathed on the day you were born. And when I passed by you and saw you struggling in your own blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' Yes, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I made you thrive like a plant in the field; and you grew, matured, and became very beautiful. Your breasts were formed, your hair grew, but you were naked and bare. When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine," says the Lord God.

It is just amazing that the Almighty Creator of the Universe is the kind of God that would tell a story like this! He obviously wants us to understand something and to feel something.

Let's take in the picture. So God finds a baby abandoned in an open field—naked, bloody, and unwashed. The umbilical cord is hanging from its body, as if the child was ripped from the womb without any sympathy. “No eye pitied you,” God says. Another version says, “No one loved you.” What a graphic and revealing depiction of our terrible predicament as human beings. We realize here that it is a lack of love that defines our fallen condition.

We... Need... Love! And He knows that His love alone can save us.

So He says, “And when I passed by you and saw you struggling in your own blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ Yes, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’” We were dying in our sins, but God came along and took us up into His arms—the abandoned the baby that nobody loved—and He spoke the word of life over us. He says to us: “Live! Live!” Then, under the influence of His nurturing care, the baby thrives and grows up into a beautiful woman. “Indeed your time was the time of love,” God says. Another version says, “I saw that the time had come for you to fall in love” (Today’s English Version).

Wow!

Ellen White got this. According to her, falling in love with Jesus is what we’re supposed to get out of the Bible. Check this out:

You should search the Bible; for it tells you of Jesus. As you read the Bible, you will see the matchless charms of Jesus. You will fall in love with the Man of Calvary, and at every step you can say to the world, ‘His ways are ways of pleasantness, and all His paths are peace.’ You are to represent Christ to the world. You may show to the world that you have a hope big with immortality. (Life Sketches, p. 293)

Now come back to the story in Ezekiel 16. When God sees that we are ready for love, He says, “I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine.” Amazing!

Here we see God essentially saying, “I love you so much I want you to be My wife.” God gives us life—or salvation—by loving us into a condition of thriving. Then He swears a marriage oath to us with the hope that we will say “Yes” and love Him back. That’s the real goal of the plan of salvation.

The prophet Hosea opens our understanding further on this point. He describes the fallen human condition as sexual promiscuity in 2:13: “‘She decked herself with her earrings and jewelry, and went after her lovers; but Me she forgot,’ says the Lord.” All sin is spiritual adultery, because all sin basically boils down to a lack of love. Every sinner is a whore, pursuing illicit love affairs with things that displace God from the center of our affections and passions. So what is God going to do? How is He going to save us? By forcing us? By manipulating us? No.

Force and manipulation are contrary to the ways of love and therefore contrary to the

character of God since “God is love” (1 John 4:8). So He has a different plan. Through the prophet Hosea, God described His course of action. Look at Hosea 2:14: “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her.” God the allurer!

Upon the cross, giving His life in total self-sacrifice, Jesus gave the ultimate revelation of His love for us. And that love, if we look upon it, will exert a drawing power upon us. It will generate attraction in our hearts toward Him and allure us to His heart. Now come back to Hosea 2:16: “And it shall be, in that day, says the Lord, that you will call Me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer call Me ‘My Master.’” What an incredible God! This is the most powerful being in the universe and yet He refuses to overpower us. He does not want a master-servant relationship with us, but rather a husband-wife relationship. In other words, He wants voluntary love to be the motivating power that defines our relationship with Him.

In verses 19 and 20 God pledges Himself to be our faithful spiritual husband: “I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in loving-kindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord.” Jesus came to our world to fulfill this prophecy. Standing before us with the promise of unwavering faithfulness, He offers Himself to us for an eternal union that will never be broken, which just happens to be what His second coming is all about.

To Be With Us

Let’s return now to John 14:1-3, this time noticing this the famous second coming passage:

Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.

Now that we’ve seen the matrimonial context in the Gospel of John, and in the whole of Scripture, what Jesus said here about His second coming makes perfect sense. What we’re seeing here is that Jesus foretold His second coming by employing language that invoked the marriage customs of His time. First, there was the wooing phase. If a man loved a woman, he would interact with her in such a way as to draw her to himself. Once drawn to him, the couple would enter into the courtship phase, getting to know one another and growing in their love. Then the man would propose. If her answer was yes, the man would then depart from his bride-to-be with a promise to return for her. The reason of his departure was practical. He would go away so that he could prepare a place for her in his father’s house.

In other words, Jesus did not merely promise to return, He promised to return for His bride. He is coming back to Earth for one reason: because He deeply, passionately, longingly loves us and wants to spend eternity in intimate fellowship with us. Don’t miss the fact that He says, “I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be

also.” Later, just before He was to die on the cross, Jesus again expressed His heart in John 17:24: “Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am.”

“With Me”

That’s what He wants. Jesus desires that you and I would simply be “with” Him. Think of someone you like to be with, someone whose presence you desire and enjoy—your spouse, your mom or dad, your best friend. The point is simple and beautiful: we like to be with those we love. That’s who we are to Jesus. He longs for our presence, for our friendship, for the enjoyment of our love. When the apostle Paul talks about marriage, he uses it as a symbolic springboard to describe the love of Christ for His church. Let’s read Ephesians 5:25-33:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

That last sentence is key: “This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”

Paul is saying that the marriage relationship holds before us a deep, secret truth regarding our relationship with Jesus as His eternal bride. God has something in mind for us beyond our wildest dreams. Some things must be experienced in order to be understood. Such is the case with our marriage to Christ. It defies mere intellectual comprehension. So Paul calls it a “mystery”, a deep, secret truth. Even so, the more fully we experience the love of Jesus, the more we will come to grasp the glorious wonder of who we really are in God’s plan, who we really are to God’s heart. Presently, we are in the courtship phase of the relationship. He is wooing and winning us, revealing to our minds the beauty of His character so that we can mature in our love for Him. The total reality of our identity as the bride of Christ will not dawn upon us until the wedding itself. A point will come in salvation history when the church is spiritually “ready” to enter the marriage with her Lord. The whole on-looking universe will witness our readiness and make the wedding announcement. Look at Revelation 19:6-8:

And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, “Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.” And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen,

clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

The entire biblical story rushes forward to a single point of climactic beauty: Jesus returning to earth to receive the church as His eternal bride.

Eternal Shalom

The Song of Solomon is a prophetic love song that offers a unique window into the love of Christ for His church. In this most epic of all love songs, we get a penetrating glimpse into God's matrimonial love for His people and where it ultimately leads. Chapter by chapter, verse by verse, expressions of devotion are exchanged between the man and the woman. They describe one another's virtues with lyrical dexterity. They compliment one another with exuberance. They ache with passion to be with one another. And just as we're thinking that this is just another one of our world's silly love songs, wondering why it's in the Bible, the climactic point of the song has the woman saying something very profound to her man:

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised. (Song of Solomon 8:6, 7; ESV)

Suddenly, we are led to realize that the deepest love known to human beings—that which exists between a bride and her groom—tells us of God's love for His church, and His hope that we love Him back. Dying on the cross, Jesus did, indeed, reveal to us a quality of love that is stronger than death, a love that no force in the world can quench. Still, there is something more to notice. There is a poetic pattern to the song. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, King Solomon paints a picture of two lovers with—get this—the same name. His name is Solomon, which is the masculine form of the Hebrew word shalom. She is identified as Shulamite, which is the feminine version of shalom. And watch this. The love between Solomon and Shulamite reaches its climactic point when she has this amazing realization in 8:10: “Then I became in his eyes as one who found shalom” (Song of Songs 8:10).

With poetic beauty and high spiritual significance, the song reveals Solomon courting the heart of Shulamite until shalom defines their union. We most commonly translate shalom as “peace”. In Hebrew the word carries the idea of complete fulfillment, wholeness, a sense of total well-being from which nothing is missing. In the song Shulamite finds a sense of complete wholeness in Solomon's love. He is what she desires and exactly what she needs. Within his love she is totally fulfilled. Solomon and Shulamite are a perfect match. Shalom, the woman finds shalom the experience in Shalom, the man. She is at home in him, for he is the perfect companion to her deepest heart's desire. The Bible on a whole is the story of the perfect match between the human heart and the divine heart, between the One who is the source of all true love and those who desperately need His love for their

eternal wholeness and wellbeing.

Solomon is a messianic type of Jesus. Shulamite is a type of the church.

Salvation is the plan by which Jesus allures our hearts back to Him and establishes eternal shalom between Himself and us. And the second coming of Jesus is when the lover of our souls comes back to get us so we can be with Him forever. Now that's good news! We are Seventh-day Adventists and that means we eagerly long for the return of Jesus in the light of the fact that He looks upon us with longing love. He wants to be with us. That's why He's coming back. The question is... do we want to be with Him?

GOD BLESS

Summarized from the original 134 pages booklet by Pastor Victor Banda

Note that 26th- 28th March, 2016 are baptismal dates following the Week of Prayer.