

Background Characters in the Old Testament

Mission Project

1 This quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help rebuild Haiti's Adventist Church's infrastructure after the devastating earthquake in January 2010.

For more information, visit www.adventistmission.org

Unions	Churches	Members	Population*
Division	108	33,364	329,000
Belize	75	211,244	3,682,006
Caribbean	589	67,243	36,752,233
Central Mexican	1,169	275,272	45,065,000
Colombian	273	29,533	11,225,000
Cuban	618	260,805	10,090,000
Dominican	135	29,362	1,077,000
French Antilles-Guiana	693	211,069	14,027,000
Guatemala	473	335,751	9,242,000
Haitian	964	162,162	27,358,656
Inter-Oceanic Mexican	1,045	421,138	14,805,000
Mid-Central American	487	120,304	36,083,612
North Mexican	296	37,114	3,971,000
Puerto Rican	632	260,030	13,632,000
South Central American	1,032	288,847	9,415,499
South Mexican	814	219,980	28,636,994
Venezuela-Antilles	678	269,620	3,136,000
West Indies	10,145	3,232,946	288,528,000
Totals as of June 30, 2009			

*Where legally possible, offerings will go to these projects; otherwise special arrangement will be made with the General Conference for distribution of funds based on the laws of the countries where these offerings are collected.



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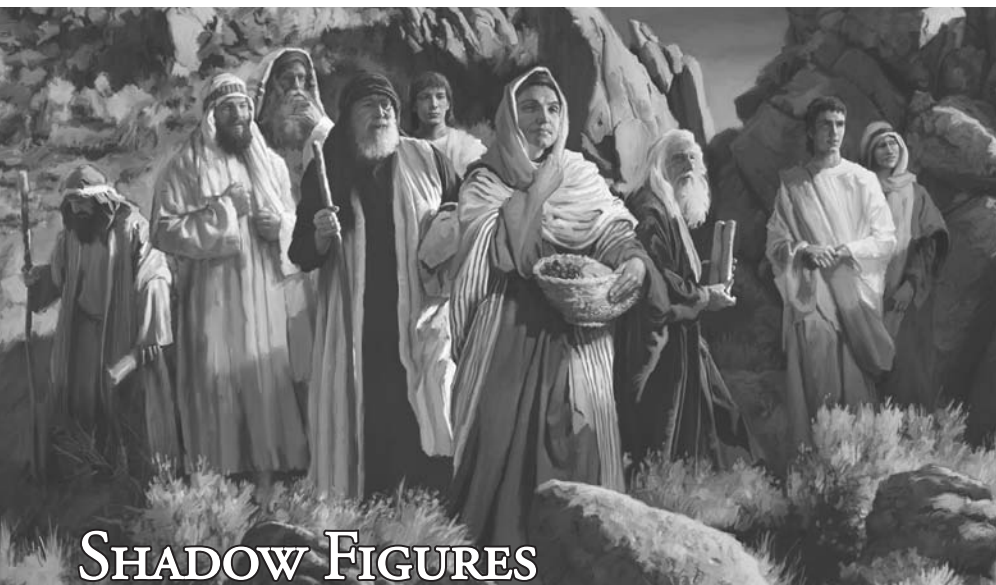
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SHADOW FIGURES

History, secular or sacred, is not told in terms of statistics, programmatic statements, tables, or figures. It often is told through stories. Jesus Himself was a storyteller, and He told them with great power too (*Matt. 7:28; 13:3*).

This quarter's lessons all are about stories but not always the common and well-known ones with the "stars," such as Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, Daniel in the lions' den, or David and Goliath. We will look, instead, at characters who did not make the headlines but who existed in the background, the ones easily overlooked and forgotten.

Our focus this quarter will be on background characters in the Old Testament. Some are the good guys of the story, some are not. Though not much is written about them, enough is written that the careful reader can learn from these characters—which include women, power brokers, servants, and royalty.

In their stories, the challenges that confront these characters are not very different, in principle, from the challenges that we face today. However different their culture and background from ours, they, too, felt the pain of living in a sin-stained world, a world struggling amid the great controversy between good and evil. What makes this battle even more difficult is that it's not always easy to discern just what is the good and what is the evil, for sometimes the line between them can appear blurry.

Often, in the context of the big picture, the lives of these background characters

might not seem so important. This is a feeling that many of us can identify with. How easy to think: *After all, in the scheme of things, what do any of us, as individuals, matter?* In the end, however, these “minor” characters made it into God’s master story, and from their stories we can learn things that can help us write a different and better story for ourselves.

Of course, it is not always easy to pay attention to the supporting cast. Instinctively, when we read or listen to a story, we tend to follow the main storyline and focus on the main characters. That’s common and understandable, which is why this quarter we are going to look at the so-called little people and thus get a fuller understanding of the biblical text.

Unfortunately, in our contemporary world, we are beginning to lose our capacity to listen carefully: too much action on the screen, too many quick cuts in the video clip, too much noise from the radio. We miss so much. Through focusing on the shadow characters of the Old Testament, we will read Scripture afresh, looking beyond the obvious to discover the joy of learning new truths from God’s Word.

Finally, as we look over the shoulders of the biblical authors and at the supporting cast, it is good to remember the power of our own lives and examples. More than anything else, people in the twenty-first century want to see something work before they consider all the intricate ins and outs of a particular cause. Our neighbors, our friends, and our family first want to see our personal story before they are ready to listen to our testimony and to biblical doctrines and beliefs.

In this sense, our stories can become powerful tools in our witness to others about what God has done for us. As with these background figures, we can become part of the great story of salvation, even if we might not be the main characters in the grander scheme of the cosmic drama that unfolds around us.

Gerald and Chantal Klingbeil, together with their three daughters, Hannah, Sarah, and Jemima, have lived in Africa, North America, South America, Europe, and Asia. Currently Gerald Klingbeil is an associate editor of the Adventist Review.

Through focusing on the shadow characters of the Old Testament, we will read Scripture afresh, looking beyond the obvious to discover the joy of learning new truths from God’s Word.



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On a good day life in Haiti is hard. In this, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, the majority of people live below the poverty level.

But when the 7.0 magnitude earthquake hit the island nation last January, it destroyed homes and churches, schools and hospitals. Thousands died, including hundreds of Seventh-day Adventists. Aid agencies, including ADRA International® rushed needed aid to the island nation, aid that meant the difference between life and death.

Now it's our turn to help our brothers and sisters in Haiti—all 300,000 of them—start rebuilding their lives and their faith. In an unprecedented move, the General Conference and the Inter-American Division have chosen to use this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Special Project Offering to help rebuild the Adventist Church in some of the hardest hit areas of Haiti.

I'm glad my church cares. I'm glad I can help. For me it's personal.



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Story *and* History



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 39:6–12, Josh. 3:9–17, 1 Sam. 24:1–6, 1 Kings 12:1–16, Job 1:1–12.*

Memory Text: “Every Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person dedicated to God may be capable and equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17, NET).

Though most folk harbor no great love for the study of history itself, most people do love a good story. Every civilization has a rich repertoire of stories that explain (or claim to explain) the origins, values, relationships, and structures of its culture. These stories, told over generations, are often teaching tools.

In the modern age, storytelling was downplayed: people looked for facts and scientific answers to explain life. However, facts alone could not answer life's most important questions. Today a new generation, often dubbed “postmodern,” has rediscovered the power of stories.

In that sense, the Bible is so contemporary because it is full of stories. Not legends, not “cleverly devised myths” (2 Pet. 1:16, *ESV*), but historical and personal stories that reveal truth about God and His interaction with fallen humanity. These stories describe real people, battling with real-life problems and interacting with the living God, who offers answers to these problems.

Every story needs a setting. This week we will explore different settings and their historical contexts in order to understand better the characters we'll be studying all quarter.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 2.*

People and Plots

Plot is defined as the succession of events that lead to a conclusion. Everyone is born, lives, and one day will die. These are the broad parameters of the *plot* of life. In between, life consists of many smaller plots that often are motivated by conflict or tension. Looking for a plot means trying to connect all the relevant parts of the story in order to see the big picture. In the book of Job, for example, there are two plots.

Identify the two plots in the story of Job. See Job 1:1–12.

If we want to understand the story of Job, we need to understand its two-dimensional plot. As a matter of fact, the Bible has no one-dimensional plots, because God always is active in history and human lives, even if working behind the scenes. In the first two chapters of Job, we can imagine changing channels, as on a TV set, as we jump between the earthly and the heavenly plots.

Stories, however, are more than plots. People make stories.

Describe in as much detail as you can the prophet Huldah as described in 2 Kings 22:14.

Characters are closely connected to the plot of the story. How we understand the character(s) depends to a large degree on the information given by the narrator, who may even be one of the characters. Let's take Huldah as an example: Is she one of the main characters in the story? No. This story actually is about the discovery of the book of the Law during the reign of King Josiah. Though Huldah may not be a main character, every character in a story is vital to the development of the story. Does Huldah have children? How old is she? We don't know the answers to these questions. Biblical narrative tends to be very concise and often abbreviated. This means that we need to pay close attention to every piece of information we are given. Huldah was regarded as a reliable prophetess of the Lord. The biblical author gives us information about her husband's family, because women during Old Testament times were identified with their husband's families. Her address also is given. As in modern times, official documents always require a name and an address to prove that a person is who he or she claims to be.

What is your plot? What kind of character are you? If your story was written as a Bible narrative, how might it read in contrast to how it *ought* to read?

Where and How?

Setting conveys reality to the story and gives it atmosphere and mood. For example, why, in Ruth 4:1, 2, does Boaz locate his legal case in the gate and not in his home or in the house of the mayor of the city of Bethlehem? Obviously, the gate—being the most public place in ancient times—adds an important legal element to the story. Setting also can give us a clue about the time period in which the narrative unfolds. If we hear a story that is located inside a car or in an airport terminal, we know without much reflection that the story does not come from the time of David or Martin Luther.

Compare the settings of the following two stories: 1 Samuel 24:1–6 and Genesis 39:6–12. How do the settings contribute to the plots of the stories?

Settings help us to better understand the action of the story. David and his men are alone with Saul, who is unprotected and extremely vulnerable. The setting highlights the stellar character of David. He does not take advantage of this ideal opportunity to rid himself of Saul before Saul seeks to rid himself of David, a fact that reveals David's respect for God's anointed leader.

The setting in the story of Joseph also paints an opportunity. Joseph is handsome and in a position of power. His master's wife is infatuated with him, and they are alone in the house. Joseph, like David, shows his sterling character in resisting this opportunity.

But setting is not the only important element of a story. We need to look at the *point of view* of the narrator, as well. We see the story unfold through the narrator's eyes, which usually provides us with important information but sometimes may withhold information from us. This particularly is true in secular stories. Though we do have points of view in biblical accounts, we must read them on the assumption that they are inspired by the Holy Spirit and that the truth revealed is God's truth.

Think of David and Joseph in those particular settings. How easily they could have rationalized doing something other than what they did. The fact that they didn't tells us so much about their character. How often do you rationalize your wrong actions?

From Victory to the “Dark Ages”

For the rest of this week we will take a closer look at a few crucial periods of Israel’s history that will function as the backdrop for all the individuals we will be studying. We begin with Israel’s entry into the Promised Land.

After God’s mighty acts during the Exodus and the wilderness journey, the people of Israel have for a second time reached the border of the Promised Land. Under their new leader, Joshua, they are about to cross over the Jordan on dry land (*Josh. 3:16, 17*), a miracle that echoes the crossing of the Red Sea during the time of the Exodus (*Exodus 14*).

Read Joshua 3:9–17. What is the purpose of this miracle?

Canaan was not taken by Israel because of Joshua’s military genius or Israel’s valiant efforts. Victory over the inhabitants of the Canaanite city-states was achieved only by God’s powerful intervention. When Israel was obedient, God gave victory; however, when the Israelites relied on their own strength, they failed hopelessly.

After the death of Joshua and the elders, some sections of the Promised Land still were dominated by the Canaanites (*Judg. 1:27, 28*). It seems that the Israelites’ faith grew smaller as their vision shrunk. Instead of seeing the whole Promised Land in their possession, they became preoccupied with their own livelihoods and lost the larger vision and ideal that God had for Israel as a people. Many scholars call the following centuries the “dark ages” of Israel.

Read Judges 17:6. What kind of moral climate does it reveal?

When we lose the big picture of what God has in mind for us, minors become majors. Israel lost its perspective as a nation; tribalism took over. Throughout the book of Judges, the various tribes and clans were ready and willing to fight one another. Religious practices were fused according to personal convenience, and compromise with the surrounding cultures was widespread. According to the author of the book of Judges, this was caused by intermarriage with the Canaanites who were still living in the land (*Judg. 3:3–7*). As a result of this spiritual decline, Israel slipped into a cycle of domination by foreign powers, liberation, idolatry, and, again, domination.

What’s so dangerous about compromise is that it comes quietly, slowly, and almost imperceptibly. How differently do you live now than a few years ago? Might some of these changes be a result of compromise?

Of Kings and Princes

Though given so much by God, and promised so much more—were they to obey—the Israelites were influenced negatively by the surrounding culture. For instance, they saw in the surrounding kingdoms a very different political structure. All of these nations had a king. Combined with the fact that Samuel’s sons did not emulate their father’s behavior and leadership but “took bribes, and perverted justice” (*1 Sam. 8:3, NKJV*), the tribal leadership of Israel felt that it was time to appoint a king over Israel (*vss. 4, 5*). Samuel is not at all happy with this decision but is told by the Lord to comply (*vs. 7*).

The Benjamite Saul is anointed as king by Samuel (*1 Sam. 10:1*) and begins his reign in Gibeon. However, as already foreseen by God, things are not easy for the new king. Tribal tensions continue. Israel’s very existence is in jeopardy due to pressure from the powers surrounding her. The new king is not committed to following God’s requirements (*1 Sam. 15:3, 8, 9*), and as a result, God finally rejects Saul.

Afterward, David is anointed as the future king of Israel. As expected, Saul does not want simply to hand over the power to the new military champion, David, and the next decade is marked by internal strife, with David always being on the run.

The next major turn in Israel’s history comes when Saul and his sons are killed in battle against the Philistines (*1 Sam. 31:1–6*). David is first made king over Judah and then, seven years later, over all of Israel. David establishes Jerusalem as the new capital of the united monarchy. His military exploits are successful; he extends the borders of the kingdom. After a forty-year reign, David dies in Jerusalem (*2 Sam. 5:4; 1 Kings 2:10, 11*). Similar to our own lives, David’s reign is marked by great victories, some bad choices, and a lot of God’s grace. He is succeeded by his son Solomon, who also reigns for forty years (*1 Kings 11:42*).

Solomon is not a warrior or conqueror. Instead, he seeks and receives divine wisdom (*1 Kings 3:3–13*); he constructs the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem; he designs efficient administrative structures that control and organize Israel; but, toward the end of his life, he turns away from the Lord, following the religious practices of his many wives (*1 Kings 11:1–8*).

Read 1 Samuel 8:7–20. How does this passage show that God’s ways are better than man’s? How often do we find ourselves doing the same thing, wanting to do things our own way instead of God’s?

Rehoboam's Folly

Solomon's death marks another important turning point in Israel's history. The strong-handed administrative approach, the labor-conscription laws, and the experiments in religious pluralism all led to great tension at the beginning of the reign of Rehoboam, the son of Solomon.

Read 1 Kings 12:1–16 and try to capture the drama of the situation. As we look at Rehoboam's leadership, what can we learn from this story about our own attitudes toward whatever power we possess in various life situations? What can we learn from his mistake?

After the division of Judah and Israel, God's once-united people began to go different ways. Seeing that the center of worship, sacrifice, and adoration was located in Judah, King Jeroboam I of Israel had two golden calves made (*1 Kings 12:26–29*) and set up two places of worship with altars—one in Bethel and the other in Dan. Things did not look good for Israel, and over the next two hundred years the Israelites had a roller-coaster experience. Some kings followed (at least halfheartedly) God's call to repentance; others stubbornly refused to listen to the prophets. Dynasties changed, and political assassination abounded. Twenty kings reigned from Jeroboam I to Hoshea, the last king of Israel in Samaria, signaling the unstable condition of the kingdom. Finally, in 722 B.C., Samaria was captured by the Assyrians, and Israel was taken into captivity.

On the other side of the border, things did not look much better. The Davidic dynasty was maintained, but not all the descendants of David could emulate the faith of their forefather. Some kings, such as Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah, tried to return to the Lord and in the process also bring Judah as a whole to repentance. Their efforts were aided by scores of prophets who spoke to particular situations and specific spiritual and social needs in Judah.

In 586 B.C. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. The leadership and much of the city's population were taken to Babylon. The temple was destroyed. The royal "experiment" had come to an end.

One would think that, with the disaster of the Babylonian destruction and captivity, that was the end of the Jewish people. What does their restoration after this calamity tell us about God's patience and grace? In what ways have you seen that same patience and grace in your own life? What should your reaction to this grace be?

Further Study: “The Lord calls upon all to study the divine philosophy of sacred history, written by Moses under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The first family placed upon the earth is a sample of all families which will exist till the close of time. There is much to study in this history in order that we may understand the divine plan for the human race. This plan is plainly defined, and the prayerful, consecrated soul will become a learner of the thought and purpose of God from the beginning till the close of this earth’s history. He will realize that Jesus Christ, one with the Father, was the great mover in all progress, the One who is the source of all the purification and elevation of the human race.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 3, p. 184.

“In reviewing our past history, having traveled over every step of advance to our present standing, I can say, Praise God! As I see what God has wrought, I am filled with astonishment and with confidence in Christ as Leader. We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history. We are now a strong people, if we will put our trust in the Lord; for we are handling the mighty truths of the word of God. We have everything to be thankful for.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, bk. 3, p. 162.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 God’s active involvement in history is a very important concept in Scripture. Read Daniel 2:21. What does this passage say about the interaction between God and human history? Why is this reality so important for us to keep in mind today, for us who are living near the true “end of history”?
- 2 Why do we like stories so much? What makes a good story? How can stories be very effective tools in teaching truth? Who are some of your favorite storytellers, and why do you like them?
- 3 The ancient Israelites had been called to be witnesses to the whole world of the true God and of His message regarding salvation by grace for everyone. Yet, look at how internal fighting so weakened ancient Israel. What lessons might we be able to draw from that sad historical truth for ourselves today?
- 4 Background is so important for understanding any situation. Yet, in most cases there’s so much background information that we just don’t know about. Because so much is hidden from us, why is it so important that we not judge others? How often have you hastily judged someone before knowing important facts about the person and his or her circumstances? How often have you been judged by those who didn’t know all the pertinent facts about you?

Samaritan on the Sea

by DARYL FAMISARAN

Muhammad was leader on his island just south of the Philippines. In his people's culture piracy and murder were accepted activities. Their boats were designed for speed and could overtake trade boats that crossed their paths.

One day Muhammad set out alone in his boat. A storm swept in, and the sea became rough, driving his boat far to the south. Muhammad realized that he was in danger, and as was his custom, he prayed to Allah to save him.

Several days after the storm had passed, Dimas, who lived on an island not far from Muhammad's home, went out fishing. He saw a boat bobbing in the water and recognized it as a pirate boat, but it appeared to be empty. Cautiously he approached and saw a man lying in the boat's hull. He was barely alive.

Dimas recognized the man as a leader of the pirate tribe, an enemy. Nevertheless, he towed the pirate's boat toward home, carried the man to his home, and cared for him. Dimas's kindness touched Muhammad, who would have used Dimas for target practice if given the chance. "Why did you save me?" Muhammad asked.

"You needed help," Dimas answered, "and God commands us to love our enemies."

Muhammad looked incredulously at Dimas and asked, "Who taught you this way of living?"

"The SULADS teachers in our school are Seventh-day Adventists," Dimas said. "They aren't like other Christians. They don't smoke, drink alcohol, eat unclean foods, or worship idols. They worship only God, the same God Abraham worshiped. They are better Muslims than we are."

Muhammad listened wide-eyed. "I owe my life to you and to the SULADS teachers," he said. "Will you ask the SULADS to send teachers to my island? I want my people to know how to read and write and how to live this new life that you describe."

Today, because Dimas extended Samaritan-like kindness to a killer and a pirate, SULADS student missionaries operate an Adventist school with 150 students on this former pirate island in the seas south of the Philippines.

DARYL FAMISARAN is field director of the SULADS student missionary program at Mountain View College in Mindanao, Philippines.

Caleb: Living With *the* Wait



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Numbers 13, 14, Joshua 14, Judg. 1:12–15.*

Memory Text: “My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning. Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption” (*Psalms 130:6, 7*).

He saw the best of times and the worst of times. Caleb knew what slavery was like. He had been there when the Lord had led His people out of Egypt with a mighty hand. He had seen the sea open before Israel and swallow the Egyptian chariots and army. He had been with Israel at Mount Sinai and had seen Moses descend from the mountain with God's law. He had been one of the first to see the land of Canaan. And through no fault of his own, he had to spend his best years wandering in the desert with the Israelites. He had watched all of his generation die there too. At last, as an old man, he was able to enter into the land of Canaan. Even then he shows courage and faith in God.

Caleb was a leader who seemed to work more behind the scenes than in front of an audience. This week we will learn from his gentle leadership style. We will get to know a great leader willing to take risks and to lead by example, someone who was generous and encouraged leadership in younger people. But beyond the many positive character traits of Caleb, we will study a story relevant to us, who live at the end of earth's history as we wait to cross over into the heavenly Canaan.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 9.*

The “Facts”

About 15 months earlier, Israel had left Egypt. Tents dot the desert of Paran, close to the border of Canaan. Everyone is excited to know about the land that is soon to be their home. At God’s direction, 12 explorers are chosen. Caleb is to represent Judah as one of the 12 who will conduct a fact-finding mission to Canaan. The spies spend 40 days exploring the land, and finally they return and prepare to give their report.

Read Numbers 13:26–14:2. What lesson can we learn from this account about living by faith and not by sight?

The spies bring along something that they can see, smell, and taste. Although the 12 spies are all exposed to the same facts, they come to very different conclusions.

Ten of them interpret the fertile land and great cities to mean that they are doomed, that there is no way these wandering ex-slaves can take the land. Conveniently, they seem to forget that they would not be standing on the border of the Promised Land if it were not for the miracles of the plagues in Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the water from a rock, and the daily manna that they received for more than a year. God did all these things for them, and now, for some reason, they fail to trust Him and His promises, going by what they see instead of what God has promised. How easy for all of us to do the same thing!

What we see, and how we interpret what we see, can have very direct personal consequences. Our interpretations of “facts” form the building blocks of our daily decisions, and these “facts” so often interact with our emotions. The idea that we can believe whatever we like without those beliefs affecting who we are and what we do is a myth.

Facing the “facts” *without* God’s Word will lead to interpretations that point away from God and toward faithlessness. Facing the facts *with* God will lead to evidence that will help us to trust God and strengthen our faith in Him.

Why is it so easy to live by sight and not by faith? When was the last time you faced something similar to what we have read today? How did you respond, and what did you learn from your response and all that followed about trusting in God and in His promises, despite the “facts”?

Standing Tall When It Counts

It is not always easy to stand out and stand tall. Group pressure is a tremendous force. The sheer power of thousands of people cheering in a stadium for the home team carries an energy that is very intimidating to opponents. Not many of us would be foolish enough to shout for the opposing team or wave the other team's colors in the middle of the opposition. This is the reason supporters of opposing teams, such as in soccer, often are kept apart during games. When they do meet, reason steps aside and violence often results.

For the Israelites, though, this was no game. Their future and their survival seemed to be threatened, and they all wept. To witness thousands of people weeping together must have been very moving. And here Caleb, who normally seems to be in the background, steps forward.

Focus on Numbers 13:30. What can we learn about Caleb and about trusting in God's promises from what he said?

The same information can be conveyed in many ways. *How* we say something is as important as what we say. Caleb shows a lot of character by not arguing with or insulting the faithless ten spies in public and not remonstrating with the people for their lack of faith. Instead, Caleb talks courageously and calls for trust and action. However, the people do not want to hear this. They have made up their minds and try to stone Moses, Joshua, and Caleb.

Read Numbers 14:1–10, 20–24. What do we see here as an end result of rejecting God's Word and thus coming to a faulty interpretation of the "facts"?

Caleb must have been bitterly disappointed. He had seen the good land. He was faithful and ready to enter. But now he must wander in the desert for 40 years because of everyone else's fault. Caleb, however, has a strong sense of community and realizes what it means to be part of a whole. He leads by example and encourages. Caleb does not break away and start a new movement. The spirit of simply leaving when there is trouble or lack of faith may be a current phenomenon, but it is not biblical. In Caleb we see a man who stays on, even during the punishment years, without a spirit of "I told you so."

In what ways have you suffered from other people's bad choices? How have you handled yourself in these situations?

Claiming God's Promises

Forty years have passed. The Israelites have crossed over the Jordan into the Promised Land. Like hungry people eyeing a table loaded with good food, they gaze toward the Promised Land. Campfire discussions center on what the best sections of land are and who is going to get them. Long before entering the Promised Land, Moses already had recognized the potential for infighting and left directions for the division of the land. The division of the land is touched on in Joshua 14.

Read Joshua 14. What request does Caleb make, and why do you think he made it? What does this tell us about him and his faith?

Amid the dividing of the land, Caleb steps forward and, surprisingly, asks for land. This is to be land not for his tribe but rather for him personally. At first glance this meeting between Joshua and Caleb, the two oldest men in Israel, seems a little out of character. Even though Caleb insists that he is strong and ready for battle, first and foremost he wants to claim a promise given to him by God.

Caleb obviously is unafraid to claim God's promises. Caleb's request is not motivated by selfish ambition. The principle of "getting to give" is deeply entrenched in the old man. Caleb does not make claim to the nicest, most lush areas; rather, he chooses the area inhabited by the sons of Anak—giants. That is, the land he is asking for isn't yet conquered. These very giants had made the Israelites so afraid 40 years earlier (*Num. 13:33*).

Caleb, perhaps, is eager to see that the current generation does not make the mistakes of their forefathers. Now Caleb demonstrates his faith in God by choosing the most challenging, instead of the easiest, territory.

Once again, Caleb is leading by example. In the process, he is living an object lesson. He is, in effect, saying: "If God can use one of the oldest men to drive out the giants, then the rest of you need not fear. God can and will give the victory." Joshua 15:13, 14 records Caleb's victory over Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmi, the descendants of Anak. What had terrified a whole nation was conquered by one old man who trusted in God's power.

Read Joshua 14:14. What does it mean to serve the Lord "wholeheartedly"? What kind of things in our lives, if not constantly put down, will make this difficult for us to do?

Passing on the Legacy

In some cultures old age is highly respected, and older people are well integrated into society and looked to for advice and wisdom. In others, senior citizens are seen as no longer productive and are ignored and marginalized. The latter view seems to be growing worldwide. Caleb gives a wonderful example of the positive use of one's old age.

Caleb avoids the extremes normally associated with the senior years. He does not allow himself to be intimidated by others because of his years. He does not simply give up on life and withdraw. He does not use his age as an excuse for not being involved in his community. Neither does he hang on to his position and see all attempts of younger people to lead as personal threats.

What does Psalm 92:12–15 say about old age?

It has been said that God has no grandchildren. As long as God remains the God of my fathers, He has nothing to do with me personally. Caleb knows that every generation must have its own experience with God. The Israelites, collectively and individually, could not live off the miracles of Egypt or even the wilderness experience of their parents. Caleb sees it as his duty to create an environment for the younger generation to take their first steps of faith.

What sort of experience is Caleb facilitating in Judges 1:12, 13?

The people of Judah are taking possession of their land. The tribes of Judah and Simeon cooperate and work together in faith in order to make good on God's promises. But on coming up against the fortified city of Kirjathsepher (*vs. 12*), they face a tremendous challenge. We know from archaeology about the often elaborate design of Late Bronze Age fortification systems in Palestine. However, instead of focusing on the walls, Caleb sees this challenge as an opportunity for growth. Here someone can claim God's promises and have the victory. Although it may sound strange to us, Caleb offers a wonderful incentive. Whoever conquers the city would become his son-in-law. Othniel, Caleb's nephew (*Judg. 1:13*), takes up the challenge, and God gives him victory. Through Caleb's nurturing, a new hero is born. Caleb's investment would pay rich dividends in later years. God would use this young man as Israel's first judge and deliverer (*Judg. 3:7–11*).

As you have matured, how have your attitudes changed? What have you learned simply by experience? How can you avoid getting entrenched in wrong habits and attitudes?

Giving Freely

Read Judges 1:14, 15. What more does this tell us about the character of Caleb?

Inheritance was very important to the Israelites. Owning land to pass on to your heirs was seen as a way of ensuring that your legacy would not die out. As a matter of fact, this was so important that detailed laws were given to provide for an heir if a man died childless, so that someone would take the deceased's name and continue his legacy (*see the Levirate laws in Deut. 25:5–10*).

At Caleb's age, he would have been thinking seriously about his own inheritance. The later genealogical records show that Caleb had sons. He would have been eager to leave them as much as possible. Although Acsah was his daughter, any land that was given to her would leave Caleb's immediate family and become part of her husband's property. We do not know exactly what prompted Acsah's request for land, but we do know that refusing her request would have been acceptable and in line with the social norms of protecting one's own inheritance.

The surprising thing is that Caleb not only gives her the field but then also gives the springs of water, too. And not just one spring of water but both the upper and lower springs.

Generosity works both ways. Proverbs 11:25 states that "a generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed" (*NIV*). When we are not ready to give freely, it is perhaps a sign that we have not yet received.

What implications does this story have for our spiritual life in, for example, the area of forgiveness? Read Matthew 6:15 and 18:21–35.

We can give only what we have. If we are unable to forgive, then it is a sure sign that we have not claimed God's forgiveness for ourselves. Caleb had received blessings from God and was happy to share them. He showed a generosity far beyond the social norms of his time.

How generous are you with what you have? Do you find that the more you have, the more willing you are to share with others, or do you tend to hoard? How can you learn to be more willing to give of yourself for the good of others?

Further Study: “Caleb’s faith now was just what it was when his testimony had contradicted the evil report of the spies. He had believed God’s promise that He would put His people in possession of Canaan, and in this he had followed the Lord fully. He had endured with his people the long wandering in the wilderness, thus sharing the disappointments and burdens of the guilty; yet he made no complaint of this, but exalted the mercy of God that had preserved him in the wilderness when his brethren were cut off. Amid all the hardships, perils, and plagues of the desert wanderings, and during the years of warfare since entering Canaan, the Lord had preserved him; and now at upwards of fourscore his vigor was unabated. He did not ask for himself a land already conquered, but the place which above all others the spies had thought it impossible to subdue. By the help of God he would wrest his stronghold from the very giants whose power had staggered the faith of Israel. It was no desire for honor or aggrandizement that prompted Caleb’s request. The brave old warrior was desirous of giving to the people an example that would honor God, and encourage the tribes fully to subdue the land which their fathers had deemed unconquerable.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 512, 513.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As Christians we are constantly bombarded with “facts” that are interpreted in ways that contradict our faith. Notice, the key word is *interpreted*. What are ways that we can confront these challenges without making fools of ourselves and yet at the same time maintain our integrity?
- 2 Dwell more on the idea that how we interpret “facts” isn’t always correct. For instance, we look at matter and see it as solid; yet, in reality, matter is almost all empty space. We look at the ground and judge it to be unmoving, even though it is moving very quickly through space. We can be in a closed, empty room and hear nothing, even though the air in the room is filled with radio waves carrying all sorts of sounds that we, left to ourselves, can’t hear. What lessons can we draw from this about what it means to live by faith and not by sight?
- 3 Drawing on the life of Caleb, how can we nurture new believers, young people, and children to fill positions of leadership and responsibility in our church?
- 4 Caleb stuck with his people, even amid their gross sins and mistakes. What lessons does this have for us today as Seventh-day Adventists?

A Little Kindness

Jyoti lived in a small village in western India. She was known for her kindness and generosity. Even though her own resources were meager, Jyoti helped her neighbors whenever she could.

Jyoti's husband was addicted to gambling and often lost all his earnings. The family was forced to live on what Jyoti earned doing odd jobs and working in neighboring farmers' rice fields.

Faithfully she prayed to her idols, asking them to help her husband quit gambling. She went on pilgrimages and made great promises if the gods would help her husband stop gambling. But nothing seemed to happen. And sometimes when she was weighed down by her troubles, she would become frustrated and scold her husband when he returned home late at night drunk and broke.

Jyoti sometimes let her children attend Christian meetings in the village. She thought they might improve their lives. The children enjoyed the meetings and often chattered happily about what they had learned. As Jyoti listened, she wondered whether the Christians' God could change her husband.

One day in desperation over her family's situation, Jyoti visited the Adventist pastor and asked him to pray for her husband. The pastor listened to her request and agreed to pray for her and the family's needs. Then he gently suggested that Jyoti start treating her husband with kindness. "If he comes in hungry, feed him without complaining," the pastor said. "Smile at him and welcome him home." Jyoti agreed to try. The pastor then invited her to attend the evangelistic meetings he was holding, and again she agreed.

Jyoti and her children faithfully attended the evangelistic meetings. She told the pastor that she was trying to show extra love to her husband and was praying to God that her own attitude would sweeten.

Slowly Jyoti's husband began staying at home more. He told his wife that he had less desire to go out and gamble, and in a short time he gave up the habit completely. As the evangelistic meetings drew to a close, Jyoti reported that her husband was no longer gambling.

Jyoti's husband asked for Bible studies and praises God for changing his gambling habit and saving his family.

Our mission offerings help send lay evangelists into villages such as Jyoti's and build churches for new believers. Thank you for sharing so others may know the true God.

Jyoti shares her faith among her neighbors in western India.

Hannah: Learning *to Be Someone*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Samuel 1; 2:1–11, 21; Job 2:12, 13; Matt. 6:19, 20; Luke 12:16–21.*

Memory Text: “Then Hannah prayed and said: ‘My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God’ ” (*1 Samuel 2:1, 2, NIV*).

One of the great struggles that many people face is the sense of their own self-worth. What are we worth in this world? What can one life mean amid teeming billions? We read about wars in which millions have perished, often without a trace. Every day thousands are born and thousands die. We sense massive forces over which we have no control, which can run over us and our dreams as quickly as a truck does a bug on the road. How, amid such overwhelming power, can we get a sense of our own meaning and purpose? Do we even have any?

The Bible, of course, teaches that we do, that we are beings created in the image of God. We're important because we are important to God. Who cares what others think of you, if the God who holds the whole world in His hands loves you? His love, above all, is what counts.

This week, by looking at the life of Hannah, a woman without any claim to political or religious greatness, we will catch a glimpse of a God who loves us intimately and personally and of a God who tells us that we are somebody, even though it's easy to get the message from the world that we are nobody.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 16.*

What Am I Worth?

Read 1 Samuel 1:1–16. Why was Hannah so distraught over not having children, even though she knew that her husband loved her?

Hannah's feelings shouldn't be that hard to understand, especially in her culture, where to have no male child meant to have no security in one's old age. Having no child at all was understood as a divine curse. Both in the public and in the family sphere, a woman without a child had to live with a stigma of supposedly being cursed by God. Obviously, this affected her value in the eyes of society, her own self-esteem, and her relationship with God. Hannah must have wondered often what she had done to deserve this. Why was this happening to her?

To understand the depth of despair that barrenness brought to women in the world of the Old Testament, look at the actions and statements of Sarah (*Gen. 16:1, 2*) and Rachel (*Gen. 30:1*). How do they help us understand how strong that sentiment was back then?

Sarah's action is reasonable in the context of the social and cultural customs of her time. However, it also provides us with a glimpse of the despair she must have felt and the burden she must have carried. What woman would encourage her husband to have relations with another woman in order to have children? Meanwhile, Rachel's heartfelt cry to Jacob echoes a bit of Hannah's emotion and the turmoil of her feelings.

For Hannah, jealousy and the sense of "being nobody" created an explosive mix of emotions that finally blew up when she poured out her heart before the Lord. What made matters worse was that Hannah was not getting younger. Time was against her, and, apparently, so was God.

Remember also that in Hannah's time, a woman's role in society was associated primarily with child bearing and rearing. There were no other career possibilities. A woman could not just change careers and find fulfillment in another occupation. We have examples of woman judges and female prophetic leadership in the Old Testament, but these are indeed limited and depended on God's direct call. It was only through children that Hannah could count the worth of her life and leave a legacy. To her, without children her life had no real meaning.

A man had lost his child to leukemia. He told the pastor that he believed his son had died because he hadn't kept the commandments faithfully, especially the Sabbath, and so God punished him. What's wrong with that kind of thinking? How can we protect ourselves from getting caught up in that same kind of rationale?

With Friends Like These . . .

Living under the supposed curse of God and feeling that her life had no real value must have been hard enough for Hannah. What added problem did she have? *1 Sam. 1:6, 7.*

Those who are closest to us often know how to hurt us most. With Peninnah's constant provocations, it is not surprising that Hannah's life became bitter. The biblical text emphasizes the repeated nature of the provocations. Year in and year out, the same old story. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for the action of Hannah's rival ("provoked" [NKJV], "taunt" [NJB]) often is used in the Old Testament to describe grave sins that provoke a direct divine reaction (*see Deut. 9:18, 31:29*). This was not just a quick, sly remark. This seemed to have been a premeditated and conscious strategy by Peninnah to provoke Hannah into doing something stupid. After all, Hannah was her only rival for Elkanah's affections (*1 Sam. 1:5*).

Though Peninnah's taunts were meant to hurt, perhaps the worst hurts come from those who don't intend harm. Who, in the midst of terrible pain, hasn't been made to feel worse by well-meaning people who just happened to say or do the wrong thing?

Skim through the first five or six chapters of the book of Job. Job's friends were truly sorrowful for what he experienced (*see Job 2:12, 13*). Yet, how did they make the problem worse for him? Why was this exactly how someone shouldn't react to another's grief?

Loss of material possessions or of people close to us causes deep hurt. Illness or the circumstances of our lives may seem daunting and cause us to despair. Sometimes it is living with unfulfilled deep longings that drains our lives of any sense of hope. Things go from bad to worse when we have to face not only deep hurt or bad circumstances but also people who seem to specialize in making our life unbearable. This combination of unfulfilled dreams and constant tensions and provocation triggered Hannah's cry before the Lord. Sometimes we need to shout out our hurt and frustrations before God. When we hit rock bottom, we need to search for answers outside of ourselves.

What are ways that we can encourage and uplift those who are going through trial and calamity right now? What would you like people to do for you if you were going through something terrible? Whatever that would be, why not do it for someone else?

Pouring Your Heart Out

Human nature can take only so much. Eventually action must be taken. For some, this action can be irrational and even dangerous.

How did Hannah handle her pain? Read 1 Samuel 1:9–16 and describe the steps that Hannah took to deal with her pain.

This prayer was no formal petition or general “please help me” kind of prayer. The biblical author describes Hannah’s prayer as “pouring out [her] soul to the Lord” (1 Sam. 1:15, NIV). The term *pouring out* normally is associated with the pouring of liquids, particularly blood and water in connection with sacrifices (cf. Lev. 4:7, 12, 18, 25, etc.). It often is used to refer to God’s actions. God can pour out judgment or blessings (Pss. 69:24, 79:6, Isa. 42:25, etc.). It has connotations of abundance and fullness. In some Old Testament passages, the term is used in connection with prayer (Pss. 42:4, 5; 62:8, 9; Lam. 2:19). This pouring-out prayer is perhaps the most intimate kind of prayer. It involves being absolutely honest with God, expressing our deepest pain and fears. Hannah was so absorbed in her prayer that she became oblivious to those around her and to what they might think of her. She was, in fact, clinging to God the way Jacob clung to his nocturnal assailant (Gen. 32:26, 27).

Describe the immediate results of Hannah’s prayer. 1 Sam. 1:17, 18.

While God does not always answer our prayers immediately, when we pour out our hearts before Him we can be assured that He hears and will answer us (Ps. 37:4) in His own time and way. This can give us hope and confidence as we wait to see God’s leading in our future.

In 1 Samuel 1:11, Hannah makes a big promise. Should God hear and answer her prayer and give her a son, she would give him back to God. In the Old Testament we find many people making vows to the Lord. As a matter of fact, vows often are seen in the context of worship and seem to belong to the same category as prayer and adoration.

Hannah’s vow is huge. The hoped-for son was to be given up. What would happen to her position as the wife of Elkanah? What would be her standing in the larger context of the family?

How often do you pour out yourself to God in prayer? Why is that so important for your spiritual walk? What keeps you from doing this as often as you need? Why not do it now? Surely you have painful and pressing needs. Who doesn’t?

Singing His Praises

Are you someone who sings when you are happy? The Bible often records people bursting into song at key moments in their lives. Miriam and the women of Israel sing at the shores of the Red Sea after having witnessed God's mighty salvation (*Exod. 15:20, 21*). In wonderful poetic language, Deborah and Barak extol God's power over human kings and armies (*Judg. 5:1–31*). When Mary visits her relative Elizabeth, she breaks out into a song of praise about God and His incredible plan of salvation (*Luke 1:46–55*). All of these songs share one common denominator, even though they appear in different historical contexts and under distinct circumstances: they all describe what happens when God intervenes in human history and responds to the pleas of His children.

Read 1 Samuel 2:1–11. What is the main theme of Hannah's song?

Hannah now knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is fully able to control the circumstances of history, as well as her own personal experience. She sees her life from a totally new perspective. Things that others strive for and take as an absolute are in reality very flimsy and could be gone tomorrow. In her song, Hannah makes surprising contrasts to underline the fact that life's circumstances are not always as they appear. The arrow of the mighty warrior breaks, while the feeble are "girded with strength" (*1 Sam. 2:4*). Things we give value to are often not as permanent as they appear.

Hannah has found that true security depends not on circumstances but on knowing our God, who does not change. He is the One who tells us that we each are special. He is the One who gives us value.

Some struggle with verse 6 in Hannah's song. How do we understand that? Is God arbitrary in His goodness or His judgments? In order to understand these verses, we need to remember the basic Old Testament premise about life. This is so different from the modern worldview: God is the Creator of life, and as Creator He has the right to do whatever He wants with His creation. In other words, nothing on this planet is beyond His control. This means that in the biblical worldview, even negative things are subject to God's control. Often the biblical authors describe this perspective in a way that could suggest God's active involvement in the design of bad things happening to humanity. In other words, what God allows, God "does."

What can you sing about? Write a list of things that you would like to praise God for. The more you praise God, the more thankful you will become for what He has done for you. That's why praise is so important.

God's Investment Plan

Even though Hannah leaves the tabernacle singing, she also leaves behind little Samuel. She no longer has the stigma of barrenness, but she still goes home to an empty house. With her son dedicated to God and working for Him, who will look after her in her old age? She has, in simple faith and trust, given her most precious possession to God. In this sense, Hannah reminds us of Abraham, another hero who was prepared to offer his son to God. As we already noted, the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah also involved a long period of barrenness. However, God "tests" Abraham's faith when the boy is already older, while Hannah has decided herself to give her son, should she have one, to God's service, even before the child is born. After the boy is weaned, he is brought to Shiloh. Can you imagine the feelings that his mother must have felt when she waved him good-bye, especially considering the fact that things were not going that well in the household of Eli, who would now function as the mentor and guide of young Samuel?

How does God honor Hannah's expression of faith and love? *1 Sam. 2:21.*

Hannah could have refused to give her boy to the Lord and selfishly clung to him as her only security. However, by giving him to God, she not only received five more children, but her giving Samuel to the Lord also had a profound influence on Samuel himself. In time, he became God's special mouthpiece and one of the greatest educators and leaders of Israel.

What dangers do we face when we hoard? *Matt. 6:19, 20; Luke 12:16–21.*

God is in the business of taking whatever we give to Him, multiplying it, and giving it completely new dimensions that we never would have dreamed of. Hannah learned that the greatest treasures are really secure only when given to God. That which we hoard for ourselves here can, in an instant, be gone.

Hannah knew who she was in God's eyes. This sense of her own worth gave her the freedom to give.

We must remember that everything we have, all that we are, and all that we own, are ours only because of God's grace and goodness to us. How should that thought help us be more willing to give back to the Lord rather than hoard for ourselves? What does hoarding tell us about ourselves, our character, and our lack of trust in God?

Further Study: “Parents, give your children to the Lord, and ever keep before their minds that they belong to Him, that they are the lambs of Christ’s flock, watched over by the True Shepherd. Hannah dedicated Samuel to the Lord; and it is said of him, ‘Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and did let none of his words [the Lord’s words through Samuel] fall to the ground.’ 1 Samuel 3:19. In the case of this prophet and judge in Israel are presented the possibilities that are placed before the child whose parents co-operate with God, doing their appointed work.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 143.

“What a reward was Hannah’s! and what an encouragement to faithfulness is her example! There are opportunities of inestimable worth, interests infinitely precious, committed to every mother. The humble round of duties which women have come to regard as a wearisome task should be looked upon as a grand and noble work. It is the mother’s privilege to bless the world by her influence, and in doing this she will bring joy to her own heart. She may make straight paths for the feet of her children, through sunshine and shadow, to the glorious heights above. But it is only when she seeks, in her own life, to follow the teachings of Christ that the mother can hope to form the character of her children after the divine pattern. The world teems with corrupting influences. Fashion and custom exert a strong power over the young. If the mother fails in her duty to instruct, guide, and restrain, her children will naturally accept the evil, and turn from the good. Let every mother go often to her Saviour with the prayer, ‘Teach us, how shall we order the child, and what shall we do unto him?’ Let her heed the instruction which God has given in His word, and wisdom will be given her as she shall have need.”—Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage*, p. 138.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Who in your church is experiencing difficult circumstances at home or in their personal lives? How can you as a group and individually help to support these people? How much of yourself are you willing to sacrifice in order to help?
- ❷ What are some cultural stigmas that abound in your society; that is, what are things that are deemed terrible by your culture? Ask yourself, Are these things that God Himself also sees as bad? Are we, as a people, in danger of stigmatizing, because of culture, things that God doesn’t? What are some examples where we might have done that? How can we know the difference between what is cultural and what is biblical?

Long Search for Hope

by GALINA STOYKOVA

I grew up in a mining town in Siberia. Everything was dusted with black soot. Even the leaves on the trees turned black. Nearly everyone in town was sick; most, including my father, had cancer.

My husband and I moved to southwestern Russia, where the air was better. Soon after we arrived, however, I began having health problems. I went to a doctor who told me that I had late-stage cancer and would likely die. They offered no treatment, so I decided to fight the disease myself.

I searched for treatments, and people brought me news clippings about various treatments and “cures,” including some very unconventional ones such as psychic healing, which is popular in Russia.

I didn’t know about God at this time, so I didn’t know where to begin looking for a cure. In the dead of winter there is a holiday called “baptism day.” On this day people believe that rivers become holy and that if people drink some water or dip into a river and whisper their wish, they can be healed. It was worth a try—anything was worth a try. So on that day I went to the river to dip in and make my wish for health. I stepped into the icy water and prayed, “God, if You exist, please heal me.” After that I had no further symptoms. I know now that it was the prayer, not the water, that healed me.

My husband and I were separated, and I was searching for meaning in life. I met a man who told me, “Go home and read the Bible.” I didn’t own a Bible, so he brought me one. I began reading it. Then he invited me to attend the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I hadn’t heard of this church, but I went. As I listened to the lesson study, I realized that this was where God lived. I continued attending and learned that Jesus is my Savior. I asked to be baptized.

I needed to make peace with my husband, so I went to him and asked his forgiveness. He accepted me so easily that it seemed that we had never argued. I told him that I had become a member of the Adventist Church, and to my amazement he said he also was attending an Adventist church and listening to a radio program called *Voice of Hope*. Three months later my husband was baptized.

It has been a long and painful journey, but we’ve found God and His truth. I’m grateful that today my husband and I worship God together in His church. Thank you for supporting missions, which helped us find God and reconciliation and hope for the future.

GALINA STOYKOVA lives in Krasnodar, Russia.

Jonathan: Born *for* Greatness



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Sam. 14:6–13, 24–46; 18; 19; 31:1–7; 2 Sam. 1:5–12; 2 Kings 6:8–17.*

Memory Text: “Jonathan said to his armor bearer, ‘Come on, let’s go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised men. Perhaps the Lord will intervene for us. Nothing can prevent the Lord from delivering, whether by many or by a few’ ” (*1 Samuel 14:6, NET*).

By all accounts, Jonathan should have been a spoiled, greedy, and selfish young man who believed that, as the child of privilege, everything was owed him. And why not? He was the oldest son of the first king of Israel. He was popular and well-loved by his people. He was an excellent public speaker and a top soldier and military leader. By the world’s standards, he had it all. He was born for “greatness.”

Heaven, though, uses a different measure for what’s great—and Jonathan, interestingly enough, was one of the few who was willing to turn his back on what the world sees as great and, instead, seek a different kind of “greatness”—God’s kind.

In the life of Jonathan, we learn to evaluate our lives through heaven’s eyes. What makes a life great? What makes it worthwhile? What are the important things in this world, and what aren’t?

Jonathan’s story helps answer these questions for us. It also tells us that if we choose, we too, can be great in the eyes of God—regardless of where we were born, who our parents are, and how much wealth and talent we have.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 23.*

The High Office of Friendship

Friendship is unlike most other relationships, which often are legally regulated and controlled. In many cultures parents choose marriage partners for their children. Of course, none of us gets to choose our parents, siblings, and wider family relations.

However, we can choose our friends. Friendship crosses all frontiers. Friendship can influence other relationships, as well. Song of Solomon 5:16 shows us the role of friendship in a marriage relationship. True friendship is a completely voluntary relationship, which perhaps is why it is so binding. It does not involve meeting the letter of the law but focuses, rather, on giving ourselves.

First Samuel 18:1 describes the friendship between Jonathan and David. It says that “the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as himself” (*NASB*). What characteristics of friendship are highlighted in Exodus 33:11; Job 16:20, 21; Proverbs 17:17; 27:9; Ecclesiastes 4:10; and John 15:13–15?

Most of us would expect a mother to be prepared to die in order to save her child’s life or a man to protect his family at whatever cost to himself. These strong relationships are admirable, normal, and a reflection of God’s love for us. But this is an instinct that we share with many animal species.

Friendship is much more than instinct. True friendship must be nurtured by communication. Friends are there to help in all the challenges of life, not just to share the “fun” times. We can shape our friends’ present life and future through wise counsel, encouragement, and prayer for them. Jonathan shows these characteristics in his friendship with David. In 1 Samuel 20, Jonathan shows that friendship involves more than just talk; a friend is ready to give practical help, even at great personal risk. Jonathan often interceded for David with his father, King Saul (*1 Sam. 19:4*). Jonathan took the time and the trouble to find David when he was a fugitive and to encourage him in the Lord (*1 Sam. 23:16*).

Have you ever betrayed a friend? Have you ever been betrayed by a friend? What lessons have you learned? What character traits do you need to change in you in order to be a better friend?

A Great Victory

Israel lives in a moment of extreme crisis. The Philistines have assembled to fight Israel with chariots and soldiers that seem to be as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore. The Israelite army is numerically inferior and very poorly equipped. Only Saul and Jonathan are said to have had iron swords or spears, for the Philistines tightly controlled the blacksmith industry. Indeed, all Israelites had to have their tools fixed or sharpened by Philistine blacksmiths (*1 Sam. 13:19–22*). Can you imagine the motley Israelite militia, equipped with sticks, axes, and slings, facing a vast Philistine army with state-of-the-art weaponry? No wonder Saul's army had a record desertion rate.

Think about the true balance of power in our battles if we are surrendered to the Lord (*see 2 Kings 6:8–17*). What hope can we take from that account for ourselves?

Jonathan is not intimidated by what others think. He does not lament the lack of faith and trust in Israel. Instead, he determines to do something about it. Jonathan is not out to save the day, but rather, he knows that God is so much bigger than the problem Israel faces. Jonathan does not see himself as a type of savior or hero. He knows that God can save by any means He chooses, and so Jonathan makes himself available to God. God chooses to use Jonathan and his armor bearer; an incredible victory follows.

What are the steps that Jonathan undertakes before climbing up to the enemy outpost? *1 Sam. 14:6–13*.

Sometimes the line between faith and presumption can seem very fine. Jonathan does not depend on his own impressions exclusively. He consults with another God-fearing person and shares with him his plans and ideas. Jonathan understands that God is not limited, and so he does not try to manipulate Him. Jonathan is willing to stay or go as God will reveal through the sign that he proposes. Finally, when Jonathan gets the go-ahead, he does not hesitate but immediately engages himself in the challenge.

What are your own personal battles? How can you learn to trust God in these situations? How can you learn to trust God even when things don't work out as you had hoped or prayed?

Parent-Child Relationship

Read 1 Samuel 19:1–7. How would you describe the relationship between Jonathan and Saul? What kind of conflict does Jonathan face between loyalty to his own father and loyalty to a friend?

Exactly what type of father Saul was when Jonathan was a child we do not know, but we do know that in later life Saul was not someone to look up to. Saul was very selfish, moody, jealous, irrational, and at times neurotic. Jonathan, however, gives evidence in his life and relationship to his father of a practical application of the command given in Exodus 20:12, which tells us to honor our parents.

Read 1 Samuel 14:24–46. How could Jonathan, had he wanted, used this incident as an excuse to stop honoring his father? Have not people turned on their own parents for less? What does this tell us about the kind of person Jonathan was?

Honoring our parents means a lot more than an occasional card or gift. Jonathan stands by his father in his time of crisis; he stands by him, too, despite what his father wanted to do to him.

We, too, honor our parents when we stand by them in times of crisis, such as illness or the loss of a job. We have a biblical obligation to support our parents emotionally and also materially (*see 1 Tim. 5:8*). Honoring our parents is not a subjective, passive activity. Jonathan demonstrates that this often involves giving respectful yet sound advice. Honoring our parents does not mean suspending our own judgment or defending our parents' errors, nor blindly following or condoning evil. It does mean, though, that we have special obligations to them, regardless of the kind of people they might be.

Following the example of Jonathan, what practical things can you do to improve your relationship with your parents, siblings, or other family members, especially if they are not believers?

Taking Second Place

One of the main trends in current society is to blame one's parents for most (if not all) problems in life. To be sure, some folk do carry a lot of heavy emotional baggage from their parents. We can't deny that fact.

However, it seems that the past decades have seen an incredible increase in this unfortunate tendency. We blame not only our parents but sometimes siblings, teachers, circumstances—anything or anyone else in order to avoid taking responsibility for our own circumstances.

Though we all are subjected to, and even victims of, circumstances beyond our control, Jonathan's life shows us that we can work through them, at least to some degree. Jonathan would have had a right to blame his father for most of his troubles. If Saul had been faithful, then Jonathan would have had the throne. Jonathan chooses not to play the blame game, though. Jonathan has a good sense of self-worth. Instead of letting himself become bitter and resentful, he trusts that God knows best, and so Jonathan chooses to do what he can with what he has. It probably was not easy for Jonathan to maintain this faith and trust in God when he realized that God had chosen David, rather than him, to become the next king.

Describe Jonathan's reaction to the fact that David will be king in his stead. What does this tell us about Jonathan? *1 Sam. 23:17*. Contrast his attitude to those displayed in *Isaiah 14:13, 14*; *1 Kings 1:5*; and *Mark 10:35–37*. What is the difference?

When we have our identity secure in God, we are able to face rejection or criticism without being devastated or losing our sense of self-worth. A big part of having our own identity secure in God involves our experience and relationship with Him. Jonathan had already had a dramatic personal experience with God in his victory over the Philistines in *1 Samuel 14*.

The later story of David's family is marked by rebellions and internal strife. Absalom and Adonijah both seek to usurp the throne from their father, David. They are unwilling to allow God to choose the new king. Jonathan's attitude stands in total contrast to this "I" spirit. He is willing to take second place. He tries to inspire harmony and reconciliation between his father and his friend David (*1 Sam. 19:4*). He truly stands as an example of a servant leader prepared to take second or even third place.

Use Jonathan as an example to determine what you can do when you don't get the job, position, or respect you feel that you are entitled to. How can you control feelings of rejection, envy, and hate?

When Life Isn't Fair

Read 1 Samuel 31:1–7 and 2 Samuel 1:5–12. What kind of end did Jonathan have? How do we understand this?

Most of us have been taught that good always wins in the end and that we reap what we sow. We often take this further and believe that a good person should have a good, long life and that a bad person can expect a troubled, short life. And while we know that good will win over evil in the end when Jesus comes again, the reality of the matter is that good people do not always get good in this life and that bad people do not always get bad. Sometimes we even are punished for doing the right thing. God does often step in and miraculously save and protect His children, but this is not always the case.

Who are some Bible characters who, though faithful, did not get what they deserved? *Gen. 39:10–20, Job 1, 2.*

Jonathan had been a true and faithful friend to David. He was a negotiator and tried his best to bring peace between David and Saul. Jonathan was not proud and was willing to give up his right to the throne. He was just as willing to accept David as king. He was also a good son. God had used Jonathan before to put a whole army on the run, and now the Israelite army once again faced the Philistines. Perhaps Jonathan wondered if God would once again perform a miracle to save Israel. Jonathan would fall that day on the battlefield (*1 Sam. 31:2*).

Like John the Baptist, Jonathan is an example of those who do not get what they seem to deserve now. They often suffer, lose positions of honor for the sake of Christ, and sometimes even fall at their post of duty. However insignificant or even useless their lives and sacrifices may appear, they are nonetheless key players in God's plans. They are motivated and sustained by Jesus' love and presence. They are born for greatness—not necessarily the kind of greatness that the world understands or portrays but a greatness that goes way beyond our human concepts and expectations.

So much happens that doesn't, from our perspective, make sense or seem fair. The promise, however, is that one day all things will be made right, and we will have answers to what now seems so unfathomable.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:5, 13:12, Romans 8:28, and Revelation 21:4. What hope can you draw from these passages as we face difficult questions, not just for Bible characters but perhaps for ourselves, in the struggles and trials that, at least for now, do not always have happy endings?

Further Study: “On the record of those who through self-abnegation have entered into the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings, stand—one in the Old Testament and one in the New—the names of Jonathan and of John the Baptist.

“Jonathan, by birth heir to the throne, yet knowing himself set aside by the divine decree; to his rival the most tender and faithful of friends, shielding David’s life at the peril of his own; steadfast at his father’s side through the dark days of his declining power, and at his side falling at the last—the name of Jonathan is treasured in heaven, and it stands on earth a witness to the existence and the power of unselfish love.

“John the Baptist, at his appearance as the Messiah’s herald, stirred the nation. From place to place his steps were followed by vast throngs of people of every rank and station. But when the One came to whom he had borne witness, all was changed. The crowds followed Jesus, and John’s work seemed fast closing. Yet there was no wavering of his faith. ‘He must increase,’ he said, ‘but I must decrease.’ John 3:30.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, pp. 156, 157.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How do we differentiate between faith and presumption? When and how do we go about asking for signs in order to know God’s will for us?
- 2 Some cultures promote passiveness as a virtue, while others see it as something negative. Jonathan was willing to take second place. Is this the same as being passive? Should a Christian be passive? If so, when? If not, why not?
- 3 How can you explain to a non-Christian friend the benefits of being a Christian if he or she sees that you too get sick, lose your job, or suffer the loss of loved ones?
- 4 Discuss the life of Jonathan in the light of Hebrews 11:32–40. What can you take away from those texts that perhaps could help you in situations that, at least from your perspective now, have dismal outcomes?
- 5 How does, for instance, a woman who had been sexually molested by her father show honor to him? What about physically abusive parents? How are we to respond to the command to honor them?
- 6 What are things that the world deems “great” that God doesn’t? What are things that God deems great that the world doesn’t? How can we know the difference between these two ideas of “greatness”?

Saving Grace: Part 1

Gana walked numbly down the snow-blown street of Ulaanbaatar [ooh-lahn-BAH-tr], Mongolia. Her thoughts whirled like the dusty cold winds that blew off the brown hillsides surrounding the city and bit her reddened cheeks. *How could I have failed the test?* She asked herself. *I studied hard and even asked the monk to chant a prayer for me. When Father tossed his fortune-telling pebbles, even he said I would do well!*

Gana had wanted to study economics and accounting at the prestigious national university in Mongolia. But her hopes were dashed when her scores on the entrance exam were too low to qualify to enter the school of economics. She returned to her parents' home and didn't want to leave for fear someone would ask how she had done on the exams. Even her father shouted at her for having failed the exam. She just wanted to die!

Then one day a relative stopped to visit. She listened patiently to Gana's sorrow and invited her to visit the Seventh-day Adventist Church with her. Gana was curious about these Christians, so she agreed to go. It would give her a chance to be with people who didn't know that she'd just failed her entrance exams.

Gana knew that her father wouldn't approve of her attending a Christian church, so she didn't tell anyone where she was going.

Gana enjoyed the service. She loved to sing, and the Christians sang so joyfully. After the meeting the youth stayed for a social. As the young people laughed and talked, Gana forgot her troubles.

Gana continued attending the church meetings. When her mother learned where she was going, she simply urged Gana to be sure that she believed in the path that she was choosing to take. But her father was angry and felt Christians were a foreign religion. Gana enjoyed the youth activities and continued attending the meetings at the church. Little by little she fell in love with Jesus. She told her mother that she wanted to be baptized. Her parents didn't understand the commitment she was making, or perhaps they would have objected.

The pastor noticed Gana's deep commitment to honesty and truth, and he asked her to become the church's treasurer. Gana shuddered, for she knew that in many Mongolian circles the one holding the purse strings felt free to dip into the funds. Finally she accepted the position. "It made me nervous," she said, "for I knew that God was watching."

(continued next week)

GANA is the accountant for the Seventh-day Adventist English Language School and treasurer of her church in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

Abigail: No Victim of Circumstances



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Samuel 25, Isa. 28:23, 53:12, Dan. 9:15–19, Matt. 15:10, Rom. 8:34.*

Memory Text: “Wisdom rests in the heart of him who has understanding, but what is in the heart of fools is made known” (*Proverbs 14:33, NKJV*).

Have you ever felt a victim of circumstances? Have you ever wished you could be somewhere else? Or that you were someone else? Consider, then, the character for this week: Abigail.

She was an intelligent and beautiful woman but, unfortunately, married to a selfish, short-sighted, and mean man, Nabal—a descendant of Caleb, but nothing like his esteemed forefather. Nabal may have been wealthy, but his name or nickname, which means “fool” or “foolish,” accurately reflected his character.

In the time of Abigail and Nabal, marriages were prearranged, and so Abigail probably had no choice in the matter. Circumstances seemed to speak against her in such a marriage as this. Conditions were not favorable, but in the glimpse that we are given into the life of Abigail, we are encouraged not to become victims of circumstances.

Abigail did not try to escape reality. She was realistic about her situation (*1 Sam. 25:25*), but she did not let circumstances ruin her. She decided to grow where she was planted.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 30.*

Someone Who Will Listen

Most folk have no problem talking. If the truth be known, most of us talk too much. How much better it would be if we learned to be good listeners. There are seminars given on how to be better listeners. After all, a lot is going on around us. How important, then, for us to listen.

Read Isaiah 28:23, Matthew 15:10, and James 1:19. What are they telling us to do, and why?

David and his men were on the run from Saul. While living in the wilderness of Paran, they met up with the herdsmen and animals of the wealthy landowner Nabal. Instead of helping themselves to the animals, David and his men protected the herdsmen and animals. At last the sheep-shearing time arrived, and a festive spirit was in the air. This was the time for saying thank you and giving gifts. Knowing this, David sent ten of his men to ask for provisions.

Read 1 Samuel 25:1–11. Why is David so insulted by Nabal's reply? What does David hear?

Nabal truly is making good on his name. He sneeringly calls David's men runaway slaves and sends them packing empty-handed. Nabal makes it very clear that he thinks David is a nobody. In his mind, David is so insignificant that knowing where he comes from or what he is doing is not really worth the asking. Though David has demonstrated amazing self-restraint with murderous King Saul, he, like us, feels deeply wounded when told that he is a nobody and amounts to nothing. This is compounded by the fact that he had shown kindness and was being rewarded with insults and humiliation.

Nabal is unaware totally of who he is dealing with. He does seem to know some of the facts. He knows who David's father was and that David is on the run from Saul, but Nabal is so self-centered and conceited that he is unable or unwilling to listen to his servants. Nabal's servants have lived near David's men and know that they are a fighting force to be reckoned with. The servants recognize that their master "is such a wicked man that no one can talk to him" (1 Sam. 25:17, *NIV*). And so they turn to someone who will listen—Abigail.

When was the last time your lack of attentive listening caused you or others trouble? How can you learn from your mistakes?

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Read 1 Samuel 25. What is the essence of the story? What lessons immediately can be drawn from it? What questions remain?

After having heard the report of the servant, Abigail immediately begins preparations. Abigail does more than listen; she acts. The narrator in 1 Samuel 25:18, 19 details the list of supplies she readies: raisins, figs, sheep ready to be cooked, roasted grain, bread, and wine. These supplies were luxurious and probably more than David's ten men had expected.

The next part of the story is full of movement and action. The writer of the passage moves between different scenes, building the tension. We wait and hold our breath for the moment of contact. In the heat of the moment, without pausing to listen to God or reason, David and his men march out to take revenge because of an insult. The number of men that David takes with him reflects just how angry he is. David is pulling out two-thirds of his fighting force.

When we react in anger, it is very difficult to make an appropriate response; we normally overreact. Abigail does not just send the gifts off and then wait to see what happens. She saddles up and rides to meet David. Despite the fact that she has been married to an overbearing and rash man, she has not allowed him to crush her spirit. She has not let herself be victimized. She still holds to her sense of self-worth and is ready to risk her life in order to protect her household. The odds are something like the young David facing Goliath: a woman with donkey loads of food and a few servants, going to face 400 armed and angry men.

Meanwhile Nabal, the *fool*, is also busy. While his brave wife is going out to face an angry army, he is at home having a dinner party and getting drunk.

What do the following verses teach about the significance of our actions? *Matt. 7:21, 25:31–46, James 2:14–17.*

Talk may be cheap, but our actions confirm or contradict our speech. The actions of Abigail, David, and Nabal speak volumes about what they thought, who was important to them, and which spirit motivated their actions.

If someone were to draw conclusions about you and the kind of person you are solely by your actions, what conclusions would they draw, and why? What does your answer tell you about yourself?

A Time to Talk

In a mountain valley or ravine, Abigail meets up with David's forces. She bows before David and treats him as though he were already king.

Read carefully Abigail's speech in 1 Samuel 25:23–31. Contrast that to Nabal's reply (*vss. 10, 11*). What does this tell us about the difference between the two of them?

Abigail addresses David as "my lord." Perhaps this in itself serves as a reminder to David that he should behave as would befit God's anointed king and not as the leader of a marauding band. Abigail is able to promote nobleness in David, because she has not lost her own sense of self-worth. This enables her to see the best in David and encourage godly behavior in him.

What is the first thing Abigail says to David? What do her words remind you of? What is she attempting to do? *Exod. 32:32, Esther 7:2–4, Isa. 53:12, Dan. 9:15–19, Rom. 8:34.*

Intercession is marked by one common denominator: the person interceding must closely identify with the person he or she is interceding for, whether or not the interceding person stands to gain anything from the transaction. The person must be willing to put aside his or her own selfish interests and ask for what would be best for someone else. Abigail could have seen this threat on Nabal's life as a way of getting rid of her husband and regaining her freedom; instead, she chooses to identify herself with him and pleads for his undeserving life.

Perhaps the very best form of intercession is intercessory prayer. We pray for people who are unable or unwilling to pray for themselves. We have to put our own wants, needs, and wishes aside and talk to God for these people. Our prayers give God the excuse to move deep into Satan's territory. It is in praying for others that we realize the immense compassion that God has for us. We can learn how to bless those who curse us and pray for those who mistreat us (*Luke 6:28*).

Have you ever had someone intercede for you in a situation in which you couldn't take care of yourself? How did that situation help you to understand better what it means that we have Jesus interceding in our behalf?

What Abigail Won't Do

People often are afraid of an abusive person. They are ready to cover for the abuser and will lie and pretend in order to appease the abuser.

Read 1 Samuel 25:25, 26. What does it say about Abigail that she was so open about her husband's faults? How does this make her intercession in his behalf that much more remarkable? If someone were interceding for you right now (which there is), what might be said about you?

Although Abigail is ready to risk her life to save her household, she also has personal integrity. She does not lie for Nabal. She knows that he is the one with the problem, and she is not afraid to say so even in public.

Someone in an abusive relationship often begins to feel responsible for the abuser's actions and feels guilty. Abigail does not do this. She has a strong sense of self-worth. This sense of worth is grounded in her sense of mission. She does not give herself credit for intercepting David and bringing the gift but sees herself simply as God's instrument in changing David's mind. Because Abigail knows who she is, she is able to encourage David to be all he can be. She reminds him that he is to fight the Lord's battles and not waste his time and energy in seeking revenge for personal insults. Abigail's observation that "evil [has] not been found" in David (*1 Sam. 25:28, NKJV*) is both a statement and a warning that David has not (yet) disqualified himself from the great office that he has been anointed for—to be king.

Abigail also reminds David that with his life firmly bound up in God, he has no need to "save face" or defend his honor. God would do it for him.

Remember, too, that in Abigail's world divorce and even separation were not options for a woman. From an earthly point of view, she would "belong" to her husband until the day of her death. However, Abigail does not see her life as useless or as a permanent prison. She believes that God will deal with her husband in His own good time.

Abigail's speech shows that wisdom can be found in any life situation in which we surrender ourselves to God. Wisdom is not a theory but a practical way of living and reacting to the people around us.

What does it mean to surrender ourselves completely to God? How does one do it? If someone were to say to you, "I want to give myself completely to the Lord, but I don't know how," how would you respond?

In and Out

Unlike many of us, David could take constructive criticism, and he observes in Abigail's words the workings of God. In a moment he sees the consequences of his proposed actions in perspective, and he is thankful that God has intervened to prevent a bloodbath. Abigail arrives home to discover that her husband is once again in no condition to listen, and so she wisely waits until the next morning to inform him of what has happened.

Nabal is terror-stricken. He most likely suffers a stroke and dies ten days later. David has not forgotten Abigail and sends men to make a marriage proposal for him.

Consider Abigail's last recorded words in the context of this week's study (*1 Sam. 25:41*). **What do they tell us about Abigail? What other biblical examples can you find of the same principle in action?**

Abigail was a woman of influence. She had five maids, and yet, she was willing to serve. Much later Jesus would say, " 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve' " (*Matt. 20:28, NKJV*).

Abigail's life was no fairy tale, even after her marriage to David. As was the custom in those days, David had many wives, and his family life was far from God's ideal. Abigail was David's second wife, and he had to be constantly on the run from King Saul. At Ziklag she, along with the other men's families, was captured by the Amalekites and later rescued. Here Abigail finally disappears from the biblical narrative. We would all expect to see this wise and beautiful woman at King David's side, playing an important role as David's story develops further, but there's only silence. All we know about her further is that she had a son named Daniel (*1 Chron. 3:1*) or Chileab (*2 Sam. 3:3*), who was second in line to the throne by birth order. However, both Abigail and her son disappear from the picture. Some scholars believe that both she and her son died violently. Given the later rapes, murders, revolts, and rebellions that David's oldest sons were involved in, an early death was perhaps not the worst that could happen.

As followers of Jesus, our lives are not necessarily fairy tales, either. God knows the end from the beginning, and so all the turns of our lives do not need to make sense to us. We need, instead, to trust in the goodness of God.

Submission to others, even when appropriate, is not usually easy, for it requires a sense of humility and dependency. How well do you fare in that area? How can you learn to submit when necessary? How can we learn from Christ's incredible examples of submission?

Further Study: “[Abigail’s] words could have come only from the lips of one who had partaken of the wisdom from above. The piety of Abigail, like the fragrance of a flower, breathed out all unconsciously in face and word and action. The Spirit of the Son of God was abiding in her soul. Her speech, seasoned with grace, and full of kindness and peace, shed a heavenly influence. Better impulses came to David, and he trembled as he thought what might have been the consequences of his rash purpose. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.’ Matthew 5:9. Would that there were many more like this woman of Israel, who would soothe the irritated feelings, prevent rash impulses, and quell great evils by words of calm and well-directed wisdom.

“A consecrated Christian life is ever shedding light and comfort and peace. It is characterized by purity, tact, simplicity, and usefulness. It is controlled by that unselfish love that sanctifies the influence. It is full of Christ, and leaves a track of light wherever its possessor may go. Abigail was a wise reprover and counselor. David’s passion died away under the power of her influence and reasoning. He was convinced that he had taken an unwise course and had lost control of his own spirit.

“With a humble heart he received the rebuke, in harmony with his own words, ‘Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil.’ Psalm 141:5. He gave thanks and blessings because she advised him righteously. There are many who, when they are reprovved, think it praiseworthy if they receive the rebuke without becoming impatient; but how few take reproof with gratitude of heart and bless those who seek to save them from pursuing an evil course.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 667.

Discussion Questions:

1 Spouse abuse is a big problem. As a church we have a responsibility to help. That’s why every year, on the Seventh-day Adventist calendar, the fourth Sabbath of August is “Abuse Prevention Day,” which gives us a special opportunity to educate fellow members and create awareness about this problem. What can we do to help those who are suffering from this terrible scourge?

2 “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (*Matt. 5:9*). Drawing on this week’s lesson, what are the characteristics of peacemakers? How can we make peace without compromising our principles?

Saving Grace: Part 2

Gana finally agreed to become the church treasurer. But she didn't want to give anyone a reason to question her honesty, and she was determined not to let one cent escape.

As Gana experienced God's grace, her life changed. Her father, who had once been close, drew away from her. Often when he drank, he sought to destroy her Bible and sometimes even threatened her. But she hung on.

Gana watched one of her friends share her faith with a boy she knew, and suddenly Gana knew that she too must share God's love. She invited her brother to attend church with her. He wasn't interested in religion, but he went to play basketball with the other young people and to learn to play the guitar. Soon he was attending church as well.

One day as the two talked at length about religion, they realized that they had a duty to share their faith with their parents. But how? Older people in Mongolia don't take advice from younger people. Gana and her brother decided they could show them the difference Christ makes in their lives, even if they couldn't speak it. And they began waiting until their parents were asleep and then kneeling near their bed and praying for them.

They invited their parents to a special church service. Gana and her brother were overjoyed when their parents agreed to attend. Their mother attended the new believers' class and agreed with what she heard. Their father remained silent, but after church he told Mother that he did not object if she wanted to join their children in attending church.

"I know now that it was God's will that I not attend the national university," Gana says. "He protected me from dishonesty and taught me the importance of being faithful in whatever I do. My life is happier now because I failed that exam."

The change in Gana's life has affected her entire family. Today her brother is a believer, and her mother attends church and prays. Gana has even seen changes in her father's life, though he still doesn't attend church.

The church in Mongolia is growing rapidly. Our mission offerings support new believers as they reach out to others with the love of Christ. Thank you for your faithfulness in giving so that others may hear of God's love.

GANNA is the accountant for the Seventh-day Adventist English Language School and treasurer of her church in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

Uriah: Faith of a Foreigner



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Sam. 26:5–11, 2 Samuel 11, Esther 8:17, Psalm 51, Isa. 56:3–7, Eph. 2:19.*

Memory Text: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (*Deuteronomy 6:5, NIV*).

Imagine that you are buying a train ticket. You stand in line for a long time and worry about missing your train. Finally you pay, receive your ticket, and run to the train. On the way, you count your change and discover that you have been given far too much. What do you do? Stand in line again to return the money and perhaps miss your train, or simply consider this your lucky day and move on?

What you do in this situation will depend on your understanding of right and wrong. Ethics is the way that we apply this understanding in our everyday lives. Nowadays the most popular type of ethics is situation ethics, which suggests that there are no moral absolutes. It often means doing whatever is most beneficial for oneself in a particular situation.

This week we'll see a powerful contrast of ethics between those of King David and of the soldier Uriah. However horrible David's actions are, they appear even worse contrasted with those of Uriah. Though we aren't told much about Uriah, what we discover of him and his unfortunate fate can teach us what it means to live out one's faith as opposed to just talking about it.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 6.*

The Slippery Slope

Read 2 Samuel 11 and ask yourself, How could someone so honored of God stoop so deep into sin? What warning should this present to all of us?

We cannot study the story of Uriah without looking at David. In David's association with Uriah, we can see David at his worst. The author of Samuel does not sing the hero's praises while ignoring his sins. The story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah marks a turning point in the life and reign of David. Up to this point, David is portrayed as someone going from strength to strength. Second Samuel 11 depicts the beginning of David's downfall.

Some may want to see in David's sin an excuse for their own. However, the narrator emphasizes that sin has consequences and shows how many lives one particular sin affected. The first to suffer as a result of David's sin is Uriah, followed by the child born to David and Bathsheba. David loses credibility in his family, and the repercussions spread from a family problem to a problem of national proportions. The chain reaction that David's sin has set in motion widens to include rape (2 Sam. 13:14), murder (vss. 28, 29), and many lives lost in a rebellion (2 Samuel 15). Even if repentance gains God's mercy, the author of the book of Samuel clearly points out to us that sin has grave consequences (2 Sam. 12:13, 14).

The story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah is told in a carefully structured way. The biblical author uses action words (often involving the verb *to send*) in order to contrast Uriah and David's behavior. Let's have a look at the structure of the story, based on the main action.

- David sends Joab to fight the Ammonites (2 Sam. 11:1).
- David inquires about and sends for Bathsheba (vss. 3, 4).
- David commits adultery with Bathsheba (vs. 4).
- Bathsheba sends a message about her pregnancy (vs. 5).
- David sends for Uriah (vs. 6).
- Uriah refuses to sleep with Bathsheba (vs. 13).
- David sends the death warrant with Uriah (vss. 14, 15).

As can be easily seen, "sending" is a very important activity in 2 Samuel 11. When we send someone around, we normally have power over that person. Looked at from this angle, David is truly the most powerful character in our story. He does most of the sending. He controls the members of the cast. He shapes and destroys their lives. He looks like a typical ancient Near Eastern absolute monarch of his time. However, there is one thing that David does not control: sin. Although he seems to control the outward action, sin controls his choices and motivations.

No One Is an Island

The entire story of David and Uriah is set against the backdrop of a war with the Ammonites. Read 2 Samuel 11:1 carefully. What subtle criticism of David does the author include?

David decides to stay home and sends out his army under Joab. This was, of course, David's first mistake. He had somehow begun to believe that he really was more special than his men and was, therefore, not to put himself in danger. David not yet had learned that the greatest dangers are almost always from within, not from without. The great problem with power or authority is the way it easily leads us to distort our own self-perception. We think that we are somehow better than others and above the laws or rules that hold for others.

Compare the forms of leadership that David exercises in the story of 1 Samuel 26:5–11 and in 2 Samuel 11. What difference do you see?

In the stories describing how David spared Saul's life, David leads by example and asks for volunteers. But now, in the time of 2 Samuel 11, instead of being out with his troops and leading them, and depending on God for guidance and personal safety, David finds himself on a hot, humid evening up on the flat roof of his palace (in order, perhaps, to catch the evening breeze). The palace, probably built on the highest section of the fortress city, has a commanding view of most of Jerusalem. David scans the rooftops and sees a woman bathing. Then he sends someone to find out the identity of the woman. He sends for the woman, knowing full well that she is the wife of Uriah, the Hittite. The Hebrew verb that is used to indicate David's command to Bathsheba is very strong. In other contexts it is used to indicate that something is taken by force (*Gen. 14:11*). David follows his desires and, while the hormones are pumping, he completely brackets out what he knows about right and wrong. Little does David imagine, in that moment, the far-reaching effects that will follow from this personal decision he makes. By deliberately flaunting his power, he will directly affect the lives of Bathsheba, Uriah, an unborn child, and the course of Israel's history.

Think about the decisions you make. Are they based mostly on reason, rational thinking, and logic, or are they based on emotion and passion? Which way of thinking seems to dominate you? Is there a right balance between these motives, and if not, how can you find it?

A Foreigner in Israel

Throughout this chapter Uriah is referred to as Uriah the Hittite. So who were the Hittites? The Hittites of Palestine were an ethnic group with an uncertain relationship to Neo-Hittite states to the north. In the Old Testament world, culture, nationality, race, and religion were very much interconnected. For this reason, the Old Testament strongly criticizes and prohibits intermarriage between Israel and the surrounding nations. The prohibition given in Deuteronomy 7:3 is repeated at each major revival in Israel. A key to understanding the prohibitions against intermarriage is religion. The Old Testament is full of examples of foreigners who accept the God of Israel, and the Bible regards their assimilation to Israel positively. In the case of Uriah, the assimilation is in the form of marriage, as well as religion.

What are some examples of foreigners who were assimilated into Israel? *Josh. 6:25, Ruth 1:1–16, Esther 8:17, Isa. 56:3–7.*

Ruth, the Moabitess, left her land, people, and religion and went with her mother-in-law back to Israel. Her famous words underline the important concept of adopting not only another people but also another God: “ ‘Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God’ ” (*Ruth 1:16, NIV*). The assimilation includes not only exemplary daughters-in-law but also lying prostitutes. Remember Rahab, the prostitute who rescued the two spies? Here was someone who responded very positively to the little light she had and chose to believe that the God of Israel was powerful and faithful. Sometime after the fall of Jericho, Rahab marries Salmon and, together with Ruth, is included in the genealogy of Christ (*Josh. 6:25, Matt. 1:5*).

Uriah was not the only Hittite to have served David. First Samuel 26:6 mentions Ahimelech the Hittite. However, Uriah became one of David’s elite warriors (*1 Chron. 11:41*). Interestingly, if Eliam the father of Bathsheba (*2 Sam. 11:3*) was the same Eliam who was the son of Ahithophel the Gilonite (*2 Sam. 23:34*), then Uriah had indeed married into a very influential family. His father-in-law also would have been an elite warrior and son of David’s esteemed counselor. This could explain the proximity of Uriah’s house to the palace, and it may provide a reason for Ahithophel’s later defection to Absalom’s conspiracy. It may well be that he held a grudge against David for the treatment of his granddaughter Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah.

Read Ephesians 2:19. How can Ruth’s, Rahab’s, and Uriah’s assimilation into Israel help us to establish our personal spiritual pedigree? How does this passage help us understand that no matter our background, through Christ we can be accepted into “the household of God”?

What's in a Name?

Names were very important in the biblical world. A name told of the person's cultural heritage and beliefs or pointed to the wishes of the parents for the child. Often a change in life circumstances or beliefs was indicated by a change of name.

Note the following biblical characters' new names and mark the reason given for the name change:

Abram (*Gen. 17:5*)

Jacob (*Gen. 32:27, 28*)

Daniel (*Dan. 1:7*)

After Jacob's night of wrestling with the celestial visitor, he experienced perhaps one of the most far-reaching name changes in all sacred history. Out of a "deceiver" (Jacob) became a "may-God-strive-for" (Israel), and all of his descendants became known as "Israelites," or the children of Israel.

In the case of Daniel, the name change had a different purpose. King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to make sure that the young exiles knew who was in control. He also wanted to brainwash them somehow. Daniel's name was changed from "God is my Judge" to "protect the life of the prince" (Belteshazzar) in an attempt by the heathen king to undermine Daniel's allegiance to his God.

The name of Bathsheba's husband is not unique in biblical history. During the time of King Hezekiah, a prophet by the name of Uriah communicated God's judgment against Jerusalem (*Jer. 26:20–23*). Interestingly, Uriah's name is Hebrew and could be translated as "my light is the Lord" or "flame of the Lord." While he may have been a Hittite by birth, by choice he belonged to the God of Israel. Uriah's ethnic background underlines the fact that God does not look at the outside but knows the heart. Having family members in prominent church positions or great godly ancestors does not give us a better standing before God. Neither does our family history or even our past personal history affect our acceptance with God.

By dying for all humanity, Christ tore down all barriers between all people (*Gal. 3:28*). The Cross proves us all equal before God; Christ's death was for every human being, for every human being is of infinite value in His eyes. Sure, God has at times given different groups special tasks and callings, but that's not the same as saying some people are of more value to God than others. The Cross proves that point wrong.

A Man of Principle

In the biblical narrative Bathsheba appears as a passive character, and the biblical author refrains from making any comments about her accountability or involvement. However, even though she appears to be passive in the entire account, she too will pay a high price. Her baby son will die. The only time that Bathsheba speaks is when she sends a message to David to tell him that she is pregnant (*2 Sam. 11:5*). David figures that if he can get Uriah home for even one evening, then it would appear that the baby was Uriah's, and David's sin would go undetected. And so David sends for Uriah, who has to make a tiring 40-mile (approximately 65-kilometer) trip to Jerusalem. After making some small talk, David sends Uriah home with a veiled command that he go and sleep with his wife (*2 Sam. 11:8*). In an effort to appear generous, he even sends a gift to Uriah's home, thinking that the situation is all taken care of. However, Uriah, being a man of principle, cannot be manipulated. The next morning David hears that Uriah spent the night in the gate with the servants of the king. The situation is quickly slipping out of David's control. David sends for Uriah. He is becoming frustrated. Uriah is showing him up badly. David, who was once a man of integrity, now cannot seem to understand Uriah's integrity.

What does 2 Samuel 11:10–13 tell us about Uriah's motives? What other examples can we find in the Bible of those who acted with the same kind of integrity?

Uriah's answer shows that he was not a nominal believer but had completely identified himself with the God of Israel and his comrades. Uriah believed that it was wrong to use his situation for personal comfort or advantage. The same David who once showed complete loyalty to King Saul (even though Saul was persecuting him) now cannot understand the loyalty and faithfulness of Uriah.

David resorts to a disgusting scheme. He deliberately gets Uriah drunk in an attempt to break down his principles. It is interesting to note that the same scheme was used by the two daughters of Lot, and it led to the origin of the Ammonites (*Gen. 19:30–38*)—the very people that the Israelite army is fighting. Despite his impaired reasoning, Uriah refuses to compromise his values and again spends the night among the king's servants.

Read Psalm 51 in the context of 2 Samuel 11. What can we learn from it about the nature of sin, of repentance, and of God's grace?

Further Study: “The Bible has little to say in praise of men. Little space is given to recounting the virtues of even the best men who have ever lived. This silence is not without purpose; it is not without a lesson. All the good qualities that men possess are the gift of God; their good deeds are performed by the grace of God through Christ. Since they owe all to God the glory of whatever they are or do belongs to Him alone; they are but instruments in His hands. More than this—as all the lessons of Bible history teach—it is a perilous thing to praise or exalt men; for if one comes to lose sight of his entire dependence on God, and to trust to his own strength, he is sure to fall. . . .

“It is impossible for us in our own strength to maintain the conflict; and whatever diverts the mind from God, whatever leads to self-exaltation or to self-dependence, is surely preparing the way for our overthrow. The tenor of the Bible is to inculcate distrust of human power and to encourage trust in divine power.

“It was the spirit of self-confidence and self-exaltation that prepared the way for David’s fall. Flattery and the subtle allurements of power and luxury were not without effect upon him. Intercourse with surrounding nations also exerted an influence for evil. According to the customs prevailing among Eastern rulers, crimes not to be tolerated in subjects were uncondemned in the king; the monarch was not under obligation to exercise the same self-restraint as the subject. All this tended to lessen David’s sense of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. And instead of relying in humility upon the power of Jehovah, he began to trust to his own wisdom and might.”—Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage*, p. 177.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In your class, have individual members identify roles or positions in which they have or have had power or influence. Discuss what can be done to safeguard against a misuse of power in these positions. How can we help someone who we see is in danger of misusing authority or influence?
- 2 Look at the ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic makeup of your Sabbath School class. How welcome would people from other groups or nonchurched people feel in your class? What could you do as a Sabbath School class to reach out to “foreigners”?
- 3 Uriah—honest, loyal, principled—gets murdered by the king he faithfully served. David—dishonest, treacherous, deceitful—gets a beautiful woman as a wife and lives many years. Discuss.
- 4 As a class, go over Psalm 51 and discuss what it teaches about forgiveness. How can we learn to accept forgiveness for ourselves when we might be guilty of sins as bad as David’s?

A New Life

by SEGUNDO GENARO ESCOBAL

I began using drugs when I was a teenager in Peru. Drugs led to stealing, which led to prison. I was released and drafted into the military. Then I moved to Brazil, where I slept on the streets and sold handicrafts to buy drugs.

One day my brother found me chewing coca leaves on the street. We used to do drugs together, but he had changed. “I’ve found Jesus,” he said. “And I want you to meet Him too.” He invited my family and me to live with him and learn about God’s love, but I doubted that God had any use for a drug addict.

He invited me to attend evangelistic meetings, and I agreed to go. My wife went as well. During the meetings I accepted Christ into my life and asked to be baptized. But when the pastor learned of my drug problems, he hesitated to baptize me immediately. I became angry and rebelled against God. I fell even more deeply into sin.

Then David, a man from the church, came to study the Bible with me. But I was drunk when he came, and I refused to see him. David sat down and talked to my children about God. He sang and prayed with them. I heard everything from where I was hiding. Finally David left, but he returned every week without fail. Because of his love, I surrendered my life to Christ.

I prayed for deliverance from drugs, but God didn’t take the cravings away instantly. One day I had to run an errand, yet I knew I was too weak to leave home without buying drugs unless I had God’s help. I prayed until I felt God’s strength fill me. I passed friends who invited me to have a drink or a smoke or some drugs. I hurried by, not daring to stop. After I finished my errand, I caught a bus home. At every bus stop I prayed for strength not to get off the bus and buy drugs. I finally reached home and fell asleep, emotionally exhausted.

When I awoke the next morning, I had no urge to drink or take drugs. I knew that God had answered my prayers.

God changed my life completely. Now instead of searching for drugs, I look for people who need Jesus. I give Bible studies two or three times a week, visit people in the hospital, and do whatever God puts in my path. My wife and children also are active in church outreach. God has turned our lives completely around. We are so happy now, complete in Jesus.

SEGUNDO and his family share their faith in Manaus, Brazil.

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Abiathar: The Priest



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 28:6, 39:2–7, 1 Sam. 21:1–9, 22:6–23, 2 Sam. 15:13–29.*

Memory Text: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (*1 Peter 2:9, NIV*).

Priests played a very important role in the life and history of Israel. And not just in Israel but in the surrounding nations, as well. In Mesopotamian culture the king was considered a priest; thus, he combined both political and religious power. Priestly guilds represented powerful interests at the court, and in many instances priests were king-makers. In the Old Testament especially, the role of the priesthood was central to the life of faith of Israel. Sacred history shows the influential roles of the priests in New Testament times, as well.

The priesthood of all believers (*1 Pet. 2:9*), an idea that came to prominence in the Protestant Reformation, is not entirely a New Testament concept (*see Exod. 19:6*). It seems always to have been God's ideal that believers would be holy and serve others by interceding for them and by communicating the plan of salvation.

This week we'll look at Abiathar's story, which gives us some important glimpses into the Old Testament priesthood and tells us that priesthood is not based just on pedigree or education but on personal commitment to the Lord. As in the case of Abiathar, wrong choices can disqualify a member of the priesthood.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 13.*

Lies and Tragedy

Read 1 Samuel 21:1–9 and 1 Samuel 22:6–23 and answer the following questions:

- What lie did David tell to Ahimelech about why he was there?

- What happened to Ahimelech as a result of his trust in David?

- How did Saul seek to turn his own men against David? What kind of argument did he use?

- How did Ahimelech respond to Saul regarding the character and faithfulness of David?

- What does this story tell us about just how fallen and degenerate and vengeful King Saul had become?

- Why do you think Doeg, a foreigner, would do what the servants of Saul refused to do?

- How did David respond to the news of the massacre? In what ways was his response correct?

- What promise did David make to the one son of Ahimelech who managed to escape the slaughter?

Look at the contrast in this story between honor and dishonor, faithfulness and faithlessness. Look at the havoc wreaked from dishonesty and sin. What kind of moral questions are you facing right now; what kind of moral choices must you make? Think through the consequences of your actions before you take them.

Abiathar, the Priest

We're not told how Abiathar escaped the slaughter of his family. We're told only that he escaped and made his way to David. However, before fleeing, Abiathar managed to save the ephod (*see 1 Sam. 23:6*), one of the most important objects of priesthood (a sacred vestment worn by the priests; *see Exod. 28:6, 39:2–7*), which was used to seek God's will when making decisions. On at least two occasions, the biblical author reports that David called for Abiathar and the ephod (*1 Sam. 23:9–12; 30:7, 8*).

In contrast to many of us today, the people in Abiathar's days had little access to God's Written Word. There were only a few handwritten copies of the Book of the Law (the Pentateuch), so most people had little opportunity to study the Word of God for themselves. Most of us are privileged to have access to the Bible for ourselves. God has promised to give us the Holy Spirit to explain the Word to us, personally and collectively (*John 14:26*). God also uses people to give us godly advice (*Prov. 20:18*) and works through circumstances too (*Rom. 8:28*).

What were some of the functions of Abiathar when he was priest?
1 Sam. 23:9–13, 2 Sam. 15:24, 17:15–22.

Besides functioning in these roles, Abiathar had experienced personal trauma and, like David, was a homeless refugee—which somehow prepared him even better to serve the future king of Israel, who also was constantly on the run. He could understand the frustrations, fears, and betrayals that David and his men must have often felt in the face of continued persecution.

This motif of personal identification with a person or a group of people is important in the New Testament's concept of priesthood. The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus can be our High Priest because He fully can empathize with us (*Heb. 2:17*).

Read 1 Peter 2:9. The New Testament clearly teaches that all of us have the responsibilities of priests in our communities. Ours is no self-calling. Jesus said: “‘You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name’ ” (*John 15:16, NIV*). God's calling to us does not make us into Old Testament priests or New Testament apostles but challenges us to intercede for our families, communities, and all those around us. How can you better serve in the role of “priest”?

Absalom's Revolt

Second Samuel 15–18 tells the sad story of Absalom, David's son who revolted against his father's rule. At one point Absalom's army is on its way to Jerusalem. This must have been a nightmare for Abiathar. David has decided to flee rather than turn Jerusalem into a battlefield and cause a bloodbath. All of David's faithful followers prepare to flee with him. Abiathar must have remembered his flight after the massacre of his family and village under King Saul. He gets ready to leave with David.

Read 2 Samuel 15:13–29. What does this passage teach us about the character of David, even at this time of peril? What role does Abiathar play in this episode?

Taking the ark of God, Abiathar and the priests prepare to leave the city, but David orders that the ark stay. David has learned that carrying the symbol of God's presence does not necessarily mean that God is with you. Wearing a cross, displaying a religious slogan, or keeping a set of rules does not guarantee God's presence or compliance. God cannot be manipulated. The ark was to stay where it belonged. Leaving the ark there was also an act of faith on David's part. He trusted that God would save him and bring him back to Jerusalem once again.

The ark of God is set down, and Abiathar offers sacrifices (*2 Sam. 15:24*) until all the people have finished leaving the city. In this particular moment the priests, Abiathar and Zadok, become intercessors for David and his people.

The story of David's intelligence network makes for exciting reading (*2 Sam. 17:15–29*). Abiathar and Zadok become David's eyes and ears in the city. Abiathar's and Zadok's sons wait for word outside Jerusalem. People are not what they seem to be. An unsuspecting female servant brings the message out to the young men. A young lad innocently standing around proves bright enough to figure out what is going on and tells Absalom. The priests' sons are chased by Absalom's men and find a sympathizer and climb into a well. A woman makes things appear what they are not by throwing a cloth over the well and sprinkling grain over the top, reminiscent of Rahab's method of hiding the two spies under flax stalks (*Josh. 2:6*).

In our own context, things are often not what they seem either. Many an aching heart is hidden by a smile. As Christ's followers, we are called to be His representatives. We become God's hands to reach out to those around us. We must be open and sensitive in order to look beyond appearances and see people and situations for what they really are, and we must be willing to sacrifice of ourselves to help.

Abiathar's Choice

We have no record of Abiathar's personal opinions, politics, or religious views. Everything that he says is recorded as God's Word to David. But his actions speak louder than words. Even though he is not recorded as saying anything, just being there makes a powerful statement.

In the time of David, the firstborn son was traditionally considered his father's main heir. For a king, that would mean that the firstborn son would inherit the throne. God is, however, never bound by tradition. As a matter of fact, during the history of Israel He often overlooked firstborns to call others, sometimes by divine decrees and sometimes by the circumstances and choices of the firstborn themselves (*see Gen. 4:1–5, 21:8–12, 25:21–36, 48:8–19, 1 Sam. 16:6–12*).

Read 1 Kings 1:1–8. What could have caused Abiathar, who had been so loyal to David, to do what he did here?

Solomon was not the oldest son and so by custom would not normally have succeeded his father as king. The oldest son, Amnon, had been killed by his brother Absalom. Absalom, in turn, had been killed during his unsuccessful coup attempt. And now the fourth-oldest son, Adonijah, felt that the throne was rightfully his. Adonijah conferred with Joab and Abiathar, and they gave him their support (*1 Kings 1:7*).

Solomon was younger than Adonijah and had a shameful family background. His mother was none other than Bathsheba, the former wife of Uriah the Hittite, who was murdered in order to cover David's affair with Bathsheba. But in spite of his shameful background, Solomon was loved by God (*2 Sam. 12:24*), and it was clear that God had chosen him to be David's successor (*1 Chron. 22:9, 10*). In the face of this uncomfortable choice, it may be that Abiathar could not reconcile himself with the public scandal that the choice would cause, and so he resorted to tradition as opposed to God's revealed will.

Tradition can be very comfortable, as it saves us from taking responsibility to think things through in the light of God's revealed will. It is much easier and "safer" just to say, "We've always done it like this."

How often do we let tradition get in the way of God's leading? At the same time, why must we be careful not to judge things automatically as mere "tradition" and then brush them off?

Abiathar's Fate

After the death of David and the ascension of Solomon to the throne, certain issues needed to be resolved. After Adonijah was put to death (*1 Kings 2:13–25*), there was still the issue of Abiathar the priest, who had so faithfully served Solomon's father. What was to be done with him for his part in the insurrection against Solomon?

Read *1 Kings 2:26, 27*. How does Solomon deal with Abiathar, and what reasons does he give?

A superficial reading of the verse may give the impression that Abiathar is dismissed because of a prophecy made to Eli more than a hundred years before (*1 Sam. 2:30–36*). But really what we have here is a demonstration of the way God knows our future free choices. God knows what free choices we and our descendants will make, and so He is able to prophesy the future. God knew that just as Eli's sons disqualified themselves from the priestly office by their behavior, their descendant, Abiathar, also would disqualify himself from the priestly office by being unwilling to accept God's choices.

Read *Matthew 26:14–16, 20–25*. Explain this prediction in the light of Abiathar's demotion from the priesthood. What similar principle is operating in both cases?

The fact that Jesus knew all along that Judas would betray Him did not cause Jesus to push Judas away. Judas was included in the inner circle of the Twelve. He experienced the power of God firsthand. But Judas, like Abiathar, was not prepared to accept God's will. It seems that he also shared with Abiathar some ideas about kingship and how issues of power and control should be handled. Judas wanted to see Jesus crowned king of an earthly kingdom. Frustrated, he turned to the traditional leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, and betrayed his true King.

Divine foreknowledge does not automatically translate into divine predestination. People have choices, as did Judas and Abiathar. God's foreknowledge of these choices doesn't limit our freedom in making them.

Free choice is one of the most sacred gifts God has given us. It came with a great cost, too: the death of Jesus on the cross. (Had we not been given free choice, we could not have chosen to sin, and Jesus would not have died for us.) How carefully do you think through and pray through the decisions you make?

Further Study: “God has chosen you for a great and solemn work. He has been seeking to discipline, to test, to prove you, to refine and ennoble you, that this sacred work may be done with a single eye to His glory which belongs wholly to God. What a thought that God chooses a man and brings him into close connection with Himself, and gives him a mission to undertake, a work to do, for Him. A weak man is made strong, a timid man is made brave, the irresolute becomes a man of firm and quick decision. What! is it possible that man is of so much consequence as to receive a commission from the King of kings! Shall worldly ambition allure from the sacred trust, the holy commission?”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 167.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Drawing from other parts of the Bible, dwell on the life of Saul and the question of how someone who had been given so much could have squandered it all. What lessons can we take from his story for ourselves? What mistakes did he make that started him down a path that led him to the kind of actions we saw this week?
- 2 Dwell more on the idea of how Jesus in His humanity is able to sympathize with us in our struggles. Why is the humanity of Christ so important to us?
- 3 Drawing on the experience of someone in your class who has faced bereavement, what are ways that you as a class can help? That is, what can you do beyond just speaking consoling words? Are there cases in which nothing else can be done other than “just” speaking consoling words?
- 4 One of the great questions that has challenged Christian thinkers over the centuries is the idea of God’s foreknowledge and our free will. If God knows our choices beforehand, are we really free in making them? If not, then where is personal freedom, and if we don’t have freedom, how can we justly be judged or punished for our actions? Some, to get around this conundrum, argue that certain of our actions have to be unknown to God, or else those actions couldn’t be free. Others see no problem: God’s knowing what a person will do doesn’t in any way affect that person’s freedom to make the choices. In class discuss these questions, realizing that you might not readily solve the issues. What’s important to know is that we are free beings, and yet, even while respecting our free choices, God is in control.

Escape From Evil

Hilario slipped out of the house and walked down the dusty road in southern Angola. He never turned back.

Hilario lived with his grandmother after his parents were killed when he was a baby. She taught him to pray and took him to church on Sundays. He wanted to become a priest, but the civil war forced him to flee to southern Angola, where he lived with an uncle.

One of his cousins died, and another became seriously ill. Hilario's uncle took the family to a traditional healer who told the family they must take special baths to rid themselves of the curse on them. Something about the woman troubled Hilario, and he didn't want to take her treatments. But his uncle insisted.

Hilario began having symptoms of spirit possession. Often he felt as though someone was trying to suffocate him. The healer invited him to live with her and learn how to use his new "gift." When he refused, she told him, "If you don't stay with me, you will die."

Hilario's uncle told him he must go, so he obeyed. Hilario realized that this woman's powers were from the devil. He begged God to help him escape. Several times Hilario tried to flee the house, but a force stronger than himself held him, and he couldn't move. The woman reproached him for trying to leave and reminded him that he would die if he left.

Hilario prayed for deliverance, and God answered. One morning he set out on an errand and never turned back.

He fled to the city where his grandmother lived. There he met a girl and took her for his common-law wife. One day he found a Bible and began reading it, searching for truth about God. When he found a verse that spoke of the Sabbath, Hilario stopped. It was so clear. Why had he never understood this before? He remembered an uncle who was a Seventh-day Adventist. He visited him and asked about the Sabbath.

His uncle took him to church. During the worship service Hilario realized that the spirits that had troubled him were gone. He asked Christ into his life. But when he asked to be baptized, his wife left him.

Hilario prayed for her as he prepared for baptism, and several months later she returned. She attended church with him and in time asked to be married and baptized. "We are living in God's freedom now," Hilario says. "We are new and transformed. We thank God for delivering us and saving us."

Millions still live in spiritual darkness. Your mission offerings help bring light and hope and healing where it's needed the most.

HILARIO and his wife share their faith in Luanda, Angola.

Joab: David's Weak Strongman



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Sam. 2:17–23, 3:23–27, 11:15–25, 20:7–11, 1 Kings 1.*

Memory Text: “All a man's ways seem right to him, but the Lord weighs the heart” (*Proverbs 21:2, NIV*).

Joab's story is a story of power politics, intrigue, misguided loyalties, jealousy, and stubbornness; Joab's time is a time during which survival is not guaranteed by a strong central administration and a comprehensive retirement plan. Strong people survive; weak people quickly seem to fade away. It is during Joab's tenure as David's strongman and caretaker that Israel truly becomes a nation. After the clan feuds and tribal rivalry that characterized the period of the judges, it is the figure of the king (beginning with Saul and later on, to a much stronger degree, with David and Solomon) that unites Israel, even though the Bible makes it clear that centuries of clan thinking will not be done away with in a matter of 30 or 40 years. Joab's life, as depicted in the Bible, is marred by wars, feuds, and even genocide.

Though we might not be involved in the kind of things that Joab was, we may come to face some uglier sides of our own character when we look at his story. It is here that, through the negative example of Joab—the weak strongman of David—we may be able to identify some of our own character faults and seek the only answer to them: Jesus.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 20.*

A Family Affair

Even though Joab, linked to David's family (*see 1 Chron. 2:13–17*), had the responsibility of being in charge of David's troops, we get a glimpse of his true character for the first time in 2 Samuel 2. Saul and Jonathan had been killed in battle. Judah readily appointed David as king. Joab's counterpart in King Saul's army was Abner, who somehow survived the battle in which Saul and his sons had fallen.

Abner and David had a history. It was Abner who had led Saul's troops on numerous manhunts for David. Abner was not about to accept as king the man he had been hunting. Accordingly, Abner puts Ishbosheth (*vss. 8, 9*), the fourth son of Saul, who was not in the battle, on the throne of Israel and starts a war against Judah and David. Although Israel was numerically stronger, David's kingdom went on from strength to strength.

Read 2 Samuel 2:17–23 and summarize what takes place.

During the skirmish Joab's younger brother unwisely chases Abner. Abner warns him off repeatedly, but the rash young man won't hear of it, and Abner kills him in self-defense. Joab never forgets this event.

After a while, Abner realizes that things are going nowhere under Ishbosheth, who is a very weak king. And so he defects to David and offers to bring over the other tribes (*2 Sam. 3:1–22*). Meanwhile, Joab has been away. On returning home, he learns of these new developments, which greatly unsettle him.

How does Joab cope with this change that he did not initiate? *2 Sam. 3:23–27*. Contrast what Joab says to David and the reason Joab ultimately kills Abner. *See also 2 Sam. 3:30*. How does Joab attempt to portray Abner's motives? What does this reveal about him?

Perhaps Joab truly believed he was acting in David's best interest when he killed Abner. This brings out an important point: think about your actions. What are the real reasons for some of the things you do, as opposed to reasons you use to justify them in your own mind? How can you learn to know the difference between the two when they are, indeed, different?

The Cost of Sin

It seems that David is not in a position to do anything about the murder of Abner at the time, even though he publicly mourns for Abner and rebukes Joab's actions (*see 2 Sam. 3:28–35*). To avoid future reprisals, Joab tries to ingratiate himself as closely as possible with David. He sets about to make himself indispensable. He is ready to do the dirty work for David. But striving to make oneself indispensable rather than focusing on doing the right thing often involves violating one's conscience. If that happens again and again, the voice of our conscience becomes duller and duller, until we are unable to stand up when it really counts.

Sin also breaks credibility. We see this principle repeated several times in the life of David. Because of his sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah, David, even though he has been forgiven, is unable to discipline his sons. When his oldest son rapes his half sister (*2 Samuel 13*) and his second son becomes a murderer (*2 Sam. 13:23–39*), David stands helplessly by, knowing that he is guilty of similar sins.

Read 2 Samuel 11:15–25. What does this passage tell us about Joab?

Joab has the same problem. Having the blood of Abner on his hands makes him unable to react appropriately and help save a good man's life. And so Joab adds to his list of crimes by becoming, in effect, Uriah's assassin. Notice in 2 Samuel 11:17 that Uriah is not the only victim. Joab sends some other men along on this foolhardy expedition in order to make the whole thing look more authentic. Although we know from the life of David that God is merciful and forgives us when we repent, the consequence of a ruined credibility and a lack of integrity is still something that we will have to carry with us.

In the previous example Joab obeyed David's orders. Now read 2 Samuel 18:5–15. What does his action here tell us about him? How might he have rationalized this deed, as well?

It is interesting to note that Joab follows David's orders even when they violate God's commands, but he has no trouble disobeying the king's express orders when he stands to gain personally. After all, had Absalom succeeded in his revolt, Joab probably would have been killed himself (*2 Sam. 19:5, 6*). Joab seems to be looking out for no one but himself.

How easy it is to fall into the same trap!

Joab the Politician

Second Samuel 13 tells the story of Absalom's premeditated murder of his half brother Amnon. Absalom flees the country and bides his time. David is once again in a difficult situation. Amnon was guilty of the rape of his half sister Tamar, Absalom's sister. It seems that David—paralyzed by the memory of his own sin—is unable to administer justice. By taking things into his own hands, Absalom avenges the rape of his sister and restores the family honor. (Honor and shame were two very important elements of the value system during the time of David.) Second, and as a nice benefit, once Amnon, David's oldest son, is dead, Absalom is now in line to inherit the throne. David's heart is torn between his grief for his dead son, his love for Absalom, and the keen knowledge that all of this mess is somehow rooted in his own sin.

Amid all this, Joab decides to become involved. However, since he does not see a direct way to put this item on the agenda of King David, he resorts to cunning and uses a wise woman of Tekoah.

Read 2 Samuel 14. What does the woman of Tekoah's story communicate about God's love and forgiveness? At the same time, what does this passage also tell us about Joab?

The story that Joab put into the mouth of the woman suggests that Joab knew about God's great love toward the sinner. His theology was correct. Unfortunately, for Joab this remained head knowledge only. His own life continued to be characterized by revenge and a lack of forgiveness. Joab had become immune to God's love in his own life. For him, everything, even religion, had a political end and could be used for self-promotion. Joab recognized Absalom's potential and wanted to begin to ingratiate himself with the future king. It seems, however, that Joab met his match in Absalom. Joab receives no Thank-you notes for his initiative in bringing Absalom home. Absalom simply wants to use him and quickly shows Joab that he can be every bit as cunning and dangerous as Joab can be. He did this by burning Joab's fields in order to force him to arrange a meeting with David (*2 Sam. 14:28–33*). The point is that thanks to Joab's interference, the stage was now being set for an awful rebellion that would lead to civil war.

How easy is it to let personal ambition, pride, and desire for self-supremacy motivate your actions? How can you learn to recognize these things in yourself? How can you, through God's grace, defeat them before they lead to your ruin?

Living by the Sword

Read 2 Samuel 20. What role do we find Joab in again? How was Joab's treachery justified?

Amasa and Joab were cousins (2 Sam. 17:25). Amasa was commander of Absalom's forces. After Joab disobeys David's orders in the case of Absalom (2 Sam. 18:5, 14), David wishes to rid himself of Joab and promises Amasa the high command of his army (2 Sam. 19:13). After all, it was Joab's scheming and planning that set the stage for the rebellion. Obviously, David's design is not motivated only by anger toward Joab (who had consciously disobeyed the king's order and killed his son). Amasa's appointment was also a political move that would signal reconciliation to the rest of the pro-Absalom forces.

What does 2 Samuel 20:1, 2 tell us about the political situation in Israel?

David ignores Joab, for he has promised the command to Amasa, and now he sends Amasa to round up the troops in order to deal with a new revolt. Amasa is not able to do this in time. David then sends for Abishai, the brother of Joab, and turns to him rather than to Joab in this time of crisis. Joab and Amasa finally meet, and, borrowing a leaf from Abner's assassination, Joab murders Amasa. The biblical writer emphasizes the total unexpectedness of the attack (2 Sam. 20:8–10). Joab coolly murders his cousin, simply because he has been passed over and is no longer number one.

One of Joab's men tries to legitimize Joab's actions by linking Joab to King David. The people are being led to believe that loyalty to David means loyalty to Joab (even though the king has explicitly distanced himself from Joab), and being loyal to Joab means that Joab's right to be judge, jury, and executioner in the case of Amasa cannot be questioned.

Look at Joab's duplicity in how he betrayed Amasa. How careful we need to be that we don't betray someone who trusts us, using that trust to do them dirty. How easily Matthew 7:12 should apply here.

Joab's Last Stand

The timing seems to be perfect. David is a very old man now, who cannot keep warm at night. A beautiful young woman is found who becomes King David's personal attendant. The biblical author specifically emphasizes the fact that David has no sexual relations with her (*1 Kings 1:1–4*), which further underlines the feeble state of the king. David does not “know”—not only young Abishag but also what's happening in his kingdom. Adonijah, as the oldest remaining son, now decides that it is time to arrange his coronation.

Read 1 Kings 1. What is Joab up to now? What more does this tell us about him?

First Kings 1:7 makes it clear that Joab is one of the key players in this coup attempt. Joab, as he has done several times before, simply goes ahead and acts, thinking that old King David will be powerless to do anything about it. However, this time David, with the help of Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan, does act. He foils Joab's and Adonijah's plans by publicly declaring Solomon as his co-regent.

Joab seems to take God completely out of the equation. While he may have all of the theological knowledge about God, God doesn't seem to have relevance in his life. Joab thinks that he always can live as he pleases and escape the consequences. He forgets that God is not David. God cannot be fooled; even though retribution may not come immediately, it will one day come—if not in this life, then in the final judgment. However, often at the end of the day in this life, even a very long day, “a man reaps what he sows” (*Gal. 6:7, NIV*).

Before final judgment, there always is mercy. Joab gets a last chance, in that Solomon does not punish him for his scheming with Adonijah and allows him to retain his position. However, Joab shows no remorse and makes no apology, and he is involved in a second coup attempt. When this does not work, Joab finally realizes the gravity of his situation. He flees to the sanctuary and takes hold of the horns of the altar. Joab forgets, however, that the altar provides asylum only for those who have killed unwittingly (*Exod. 21:14*). Joab's unconfessed past has finally caught up with him. The man who lived by the sword now dies by the sword (*1 Kings 2:28–35*).

However scheming, ambitious, and deceitful Joab was, everything he did could have been forgiven by the Lord had Joab come to God in faith, humility, and repentance. What about you and your defects? Forgiveness is there if you are willing to claim it for yourself.

Further Study: “We should not only take hold of the truth, but let it take hold of us; and thus have the truth in us and we in the truth. And if this is the case, our lives and characters will reveal the fact that the truth is accomplishing something for us; that it is sanctifying us, and is giving us a moral fitness for the society of heavenly angels in the kingdom of glory. The truth we hold is from heaven; and when that religion finds a lodgement in the heart, it commences its work of refining and purifying; for the religion of Jesus Christ never makes a man rough or rude; it never makes him careless, or hard-hearted; but the truth of heavenly origin, that which comes from God, elevates and sanctifies a man; it makes courteous, kind, affectionate, and pure; it takes away his hard heart, his selfishness and love of the world, and it purifies him from pride and ungodly ambition.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 9, 1878.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How far should we go in our expression of loyalty to our families, employers, and country? What are the limits to these important relationships?
- ❷ Reread the Ellen White quote in Friday’s lesson study. What evidence can you see in your own life that the truth has taken hold of you? While it’s important to focus on Christ and not on ourselves, we also need to be honest with ourselves about where we stand in regard to the faith (*2 Cor. 13:5*).
- ❸ Many evil acts have been done throughout history by those who said, “I was only following orders.” How are we as Christians to deal with situations in which we are ordered to do things that we know are wrong? More important, how can we develop the kind of faith we need to stand firm, even when it means defying orders, when it could be very costly to ourselves and to our loved ones?
- ❹ Is it practical or even possible to forgive and forget when we have been hurt? What principles can we learn from this week’s study about forgiveness, lack of forgiveness, and the consequences of not forgiving?
- ❺ Oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller used unscrupulous business practices in order to buy out competitors. He would justify his actions by telling competitors that they needed to sell their companies to him and let him take on the risks of the oil business for them. “Get into the ark,” he would tell them, making it sound as if he were doing something charitable for them when, in fact, he was swallowing them up. What lessons can we learn from this about how easy it is to justify immoral deeds?

Called Out

Bobby Issai sat on the wooden step of his simple home in a village in Papua New Guinea. He wrinkled his forehead trying to make sense of what he was reading. He had never questioned his church's teachings until a friend gave him a Bible. But as he read it, questions flooded his mind. *Why do we baptize by sprinkling when the Bible speaks of baptism by immersion? What is this Sabbath that's spoken of throughout the Bible?* Bobby became convinced that the Sabbath, not Sunday, was God's holy day, and that he must keep it. But how? He knew of no church that worshiped on Saturday.

Bobby determined to follow God, even if he was the only one who did. He shared his convictions with others, and a small group began meeting with him on Sabbath to study the Bible. The group grew to 20 people before villagers complained to local church leaders. Bobby was told to stop meeting, and when he refused he was forced to leave the village.

Bobby moved to another village and again shared his faith. Soon 30 people were meeting with him. Once more village leaders complained to the local religious leaders, who removed Bobby's name from the church membership. Bobby was relieved, for at last he was free to worship without restraint. But still the question gnawed at him: Where could he find a church that observed the Sabbath? How could he find a pastor to teach them?

Bobby got into his canoe and paddled down the river to the nearest city in search of a church that kept the Sabbath. He was directed to a nearby Seventh-day Adventist church. On Sabbath morning Bobby rejoiced as he entered the church and listened to the members singing hymns of praise to God.

After the worship service a young man introduced Bobby to the pastor. Bobby told the pastor about the little group of believers up the river, and the pastor agreed to return with Bobby to teach them.

The pastor spent three days with the believers, encouraging and teaching them. He returned often to teach the little group. Bobby continued studying with the little group, and two years later Bobby and his wife were among those baptized. The group swelled to almost 50, and they were assigned a regular pastor.

Although some have fallen away, Bobby and the faithful believers continue to share their faith and claim God's promises.

Almost a half million Seventh-day Adventists live in Papua New Guinea. Our mission offerings help train and supply lay workers such as Bobby to lead their fellow villagers to greater truths found in the Bible.

Rizpah: The Influence of Faithfulness



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Deut. 30:19, 2 Sam. 3:6–11, 21:1–9, Mark 13:13.*

Memory Text: “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart” (*Psalms 91:4, NIV*).

The story of Rizpah is the story of an outsider playing an insider's role. Only two biblical passages mention her explicitly, and both are connected to the early time of David's reign, probably before the affair with Bathsheba (*2 Samuel 11*). Most Bible commentators agree that the events in *2 Samuel 21–24* do not unfold sequentially after *2 Samuel 20*, but rather, they provide further information that does not fit into the general storyline of David's life.

Rizpah exists on the edge of King David's story. As a woman and a concubine of an earlier king, she had few options. As a matter of fact, her prospects looked bleak and dreary. Her two sons dead, the larger family of her deceased “husband” at the brink of annihilation, she nevertheless acted nobly, instead of sitting in a corner and lamenting her bad fortune. Her presence in two crucial moments of David's history makes her a kingmaker and a nation builder. We can all learn something incredibly important from Rizpah: faithfulness is not conditioned by circumstances or good (or bad) fortunes. Faithfulness is an unconditional commitment to do what's right regardless of the cost.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 27.*

The King's Concubine

There are many references to concubines in the Old Testament (*Gen. 25:5, 6; Judg. 8:30, 31; 2 Sam. 5:13–16; 1 Kings 11:2, 3*). **What can we learn about them from these and other references?**

Concubines often were taken from the ranks of female slaves or maids of a family. Their express purpose was to produce heirs, and once they had produced male offspring, their status and social standing were similar to those of regular wives. A man was regarded as his concubine's husband (*Judg. 20:4*), and their children appeared in genealogies (*Gen. 22:24*) and would receive a part of the inheritance (*Gen. 25:5, 6*). It is interesting to note that concubines appear mostly in the patriarchal period; during the early monarchy, concubines were connected to royal households.

Read 2 Samuel 3:6–11. What can we learn about Rizpah and about her circumstances in that particular time?

Rizpah, whose name means “live coal” (*see Isa. 6:6, which uses the same word*), is part of the royal household of Ishbosheth (“man of shame”), the only remaining son of Saul, who, through the help of Abner, has been made king over Israel and has moved across the Jordan to Mahanaim (*2 Sam. 2:8–10*). The mere fact that the biblical author included information about Rizpah's father (“daughter of Aiah”) suggests that her family must have been important and that she was not a slave. Ironically, the name of the son of Saul appears in another form in the genealogy of Saul, as Eshbaal, “the man of Baal” (*1 Chron. 8:33*). The form used in 2 Samuel 2:8–10 seems to be a subtle insult by the biblical author: the man of Baal is an embarrassment to the house of Saul and thus a “man of shame.”

Rizpah's personal circumstances are far from ideal. She belongs to the household of Saul, and even though the able general Abner is propping up Ishbosheth, the weak descendant of Saul, as Saul's concubine, Rizpah has no security. Her fate seems totally out of her hands, controlled by forces and circumstances way beyond her authority or control.

Jesus tells us that if a man lusts after a woman, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart (*Matt. 5:28*). However, many men of God had concubines in the Old Testament. How do we reconcile this fact with what Jesus said? (As you think of an answer, remember that just because something is mentioned in the Bible as being practiced doesn't mean God approves of it or that it is the best way to live.)

The Mention of Her Name

Things are not going well for Ishbosheth in the war between the house of Saul and the house of David (*2 Sam. 3:1*). In contrast to the deteriorating situation at Ishbosheth's court, the biblical text inserts at this point in the story a list of the sons of David that are born during this time in Hebron (*2 Sam. 3:2–5*). The list reflects David's increasing strength, since sons mean a future and security.

As we have seen (*2 Sam. 3:7–10*), Ishbosheth, the “man of shame,” accuses his general, Abner, of having slept with the concubine of his father, Saul. Judging from Abner's strong reaction, this was a very serious offense.

Read the following verses and explain what sleeping with a wife or concubine of a powerful man meant in the time of the Old Testament. *2 Sam. 16:21, 22; 20:3; 1 Kings 2:21, 22.*

Rizpah is not very active in the story, which focuses on Abner and Ishbosheth. After all, she is just the concubine. She seems to be another pawn in the power play between two men. The biblical text is not clear about whether Abner really slept with Rizpah in order to try to usurp the throne. The fact that he so quickly changes sides suggests that it was just a bad rumor that had made the rounds at the improvised royal court in Mahanaim. If he really wanted to be king of Israel, would he have been so ready to join forces with David, the “anointed of the Lord”?

Abner makes good on his threat of defecting to David (*2 Sam. 3:9, 10, 12*). Ishbosheth's accusation moves the major power broker of the house of Saul to swear loyalty to the house of David, which all but ensures the demise of the house of Saul. This, in fact, came shortly after (*see 2 Samuel 4*). It is really the mention of Rizpah's name that has effected this change. Although Rizpah is not active in the narrative, she is highly significant.

Without Abner's reaction to Ishbosheth's accusation, the war between the two parties most likely would have lasted much longer. We don't know what happened to Rizpah next. She reappears only in David's memoirs in *2 Samuel 21:1–14*, where she plays a subtle but incredibly important role in the bringing together of tribes and factions.

So often we find ourselves caught up in circumstances that we cannot control. What, though, can we always control, and why, in the end, is that the most important thing? *See Deut. 30:19, Mark 13:13.*

An Eye for an Eye or a Convenient Solution?

There is a bad famine in Israel. The Hebrew text emphasizes the long period without any rain (“for three years, year after year”). This was not normal. People considered God directly responsible for giving rain and withholding rain. David sought “the face of the Lord.” We are not told by what means he received God’s answer, but its content was very clear: “There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house” (2 Sam. 21:1, *ESV*).

Read 2 Samuel 21:1–6. Why should Saul’s descendants suffer for their forefather’s guilt? Does this not contradict Deuteronomy 24:16; Jeremiah 31:29, 30; and Ezekiel 18:1–4?

This is a hot issue and causes debates among scholars. Where is God’s justice here? Is justice something collective or something individual? Some commentators suggest that David used the famine as a convenient excuse to get rid of possible rivals for the throne and that the “[speaking] of the Lord” in 2 Samuel 21:1 was a clever manipulation of divine messages for David’s own purpose; yet, there is no indication in the biblical text that this was David’s motivation. What the text clearly states is that Saul sought to annihilate the Gibeonites, who are connected with the “Amorites,” the original inhabitants of Canaan before Israel took control of Palestine.

The text highlights a very important principle of Scripture: although salvation may depend on our decisions, our actions and choices affect those around us and never take place in isolation. When faithful kings reigned in Jerusalem, Judah followed God’s law and sought to live accordingly; on the other hand, unfaithful kings brought down many in Israel.

In the historical texts of the Old Testament, there are no references to Saul’s attempt to destroy the Gibeonites. However, the example of Saul’s revenge on the priestly town of Nob (1 Samuel 21) suggests that Saul was capable of this. Saul’s zeal looks good from the outside (after all, the Gibeonites were foreigners), but the divine evaluation of this act underlines God’s high regard for faithfulness (*Josh. 9:15–21*). God expects us to honor our promises. As we will see, Rizpah gives us (and King David!) an object lesson in faithfulness.

Though we don’t fully understand why there should be a famine because of Saul’s sins, we must always remember that our actions come with consequences—always. Yet, as Christians, shouldn’t we avoid doing wrong, not because of the potential consequences of the act but because of the wrongness of the act itself? What keeps you in line more: fear of the consequences of your wrong actions, or your desire not to do wrong, period?

Faithfulness Is a Way of Life

David consents to the request of the Gibeonites, and seven descendants of Saul are found. It is here that we meet Rizpah again. Her two sons by King Saul are among the ones selected to be executed so that “atonement” can be achieved. Second Samuel 21:3 uses the Hebrew word *kaphar*, which functions as a technical term to mark atonement and also appears in contexts such as the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16.

Read 2 Samuel 21:1–9. How are we to understand this passage? Or can we understand it? In what ways is this an example of something in Scripture that we can’t fully explain but that we simply need to trust the Lord on? What other examples like this (of things that we don’t fully understand) can you find in the Bible in which, despite our lack of understanding, we need to trust in God’s goodness and mercy anyway?

David remembers his promise to his friend Jonathan (*1 Sam. 20:12–17, 42*), and consequently, he does not surrender Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth to the Gibeonites. This emphasizes an important point in the biblical text: even though Saul broke Israel’s vow to the Gibeonites, David honors his vow to Jonathan, even after his death.

What does Rizpah do when her sons are killed? *2 Sam. 21:9, 10*. What does this tell us about her?

The author emphasizes his high regard for Rizpah’s actions by again mentioning her father’s name (*cf. 2 Sam. 3:7*), in contrast to David, who is not referred to as king or by his lineage. We only can imagine Rizpah’s pain and grief as she watches over the seven bodies of the executed. She builds a makeshift hut from sackcloth, and there, under the open sky, she camps close to the decomposing bodies and protects them from desecration by birds and animals. Rizpah does not do this for one day or seven days, but it appears that she watches over the bodies for many weeks, until the autumn rains begin. Not only is Rizpah a devoted mother, but she stands out as an example of faithfulness in the midst of a story dominated by men who are not always faithful.

Building a Nation

Rizpah's example of faithfulness comes to David's attention. The biblical author again includes the complete pedigree of Rizpah when David is told about her action. She is not just any mother; she is the daughter of Aiah and the concubine of Saul. Her being on the mountain "before the Lord," close to the seven bodies, seems to motivate David to consider a very important act: he orders the proper reburial of Saul, Jonathan, and the descendants of Saul.

Read 2 Samuel 21:11–14. How was David affected by Rizpah's actions?

Many of Israel's neighbors considered a proper burial to be essential to the deceased's ability to reach a place where the gods would mete out judgment. The pyramids in Egypt were huge tombs, testifying to the importance of burial in Egyptian culture. In contrast, Israel's burial practices were not elaborate, because the biblical authors considered death to be a state of no consciousness (*Eccles. 9:5, 6*). This funeral, however, is very significant, as it marks the end of intertribal fighting and lays the foundation for a united Israel.

Read again 2 Samuel 21:1–14. What caused the end of the famine?

The famine does not end after the seven descendants of Saul are executed. God responds to the plea for the land only after David has provided a respectable resting place for the remains of Saul and his descendants. In other words, although justice and righteousness are important elements of our interaction with one another, reconciliation is required as well. Rizpah's example of faithfulness, even under hopeless and desperate conditions, appears to have brought about faithfulness and reconciliation on a much larger scale, resulting in an Israel that can begin to heal the wounds of intertribal warfare. Rizpah's role in this crucial part of David's reign teaches an important lesson that echoes through the centuries: circumstances alone do not make or break a child of God; rather, we determine by our choices, for good or bad, whether we will be pawns or whether our quiet faithfulness will powerfully influence the lives around us. By living faithfully, Rizpah subtly influenced the outcome of a nation.

Look at the power of example: through Rizpah's actions, the concubine of David's enemy greatly influences David. What should this tell us, regardless of who we are, about the power of our influence? Think about those whom you are influencing. How might you be a better influence than you are right now?

Further Study: “The gospel is a message of peace. Christianity is a system which, received and obeyed, would spread peace, harmony, and happiness throughout the earth. The religion of Christ will unite in close brotherhood all who accept its teachings. It was the mission of Jesus to reconcile men to God, and thus to one another.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 47.

“It is one thing to read and teach the Bible, and another thing to have, by practise, its life-giving, sanctifying principles engrafted on the soul. God is in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. If those who claim to be his followers draw apart, showing no affectionate or compassionate interest in one another, they are not sanctified to God. They have not his love in their hearts.”—Ellen G. White, *The Review and Herald*, March 17, 1910.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In your Sabbath School class, think of ways to demonstrate God’s faithfulness to the people of your community who do not know God personally.
- 2 What is faithfulness? Have different class members define faithfulness, using biblical characters as examples.
- 3 Many times we seem to be helpless and without any choices in our circumstances. What can we learn from a woman like Rizpah, who, despite her circumstances, acted so faithfully before the Lord?
- 4 Men of God with concubines? Descendants suffering for the sins of their fathers? This story leaves the modern reader with a lot of unanswered questions. Of course, as with everything in life, there are always unanswered questions. Part of what it means to live by faith is to live with unanswered questions (after all, if all things were answered, where would the need for faith come in?). How have you learned to live with the unanswered questions in your own existence? What have you learned from not having answers that could help someone else who struggles with questions that beg for answers that, for now, aren’t coming?
- 5 Dwell more on the power of example. Who are the powerful examples in your culture and society? Are they good or bad examples? What about your own example? What kind of influence do you think you have on those who watch your behavior? How different is your example at home from your example in public or in church? Would those who might admire your example in public be shocked if they saw your example at home?

God on the Battlefield

by BENJAMIN SCHOUN

Haben grew up in an orphanage in Ethiopia. When he was 15, he left to make his own way in life.

War broke out, and Haben was drafted into the military. He trained as a soldier and spent three years on the battlefield. War terrified the teenager, and during his free time he listened to the radio. He discovered Adventist World Radio and the *Voice of Hope*. The programs comforted him and turned his thoughts to God. He began praying to the God he didn't yet know.

Several times Haben faced death on the battlefield. Once his unit fought for three days without food or water. Most of his fellow soldiers were killed or seriously wounded, and Haben found himself and one other soldier facing a well-equipped advancing enemy force. The two men crowded behind a small boulder, partially exposed to enemy fire. It was a matter of time before he'd be injured or killed. He prayed, "God, if You want me to die, I'll see You in the resurrection. But if You save me, I will serve You the rest of my life."

Hours later fellow soldiers rescued the two men. "I have no doubt that God saved me," Haben says. "In the thick of battle I saw for myself the love of God."

On another occasion, as Haben and his fellow soldiers moved toward battle, he felt a hand pressing him to the ground. Suddenly a bomb exploded where he had been standing. His men were amazed to find him alive. "We saw that bomb fall on top of you!" they said. But Haben didn't have a scratch. He pulled his small Bible from his pocket and shared God's love with his men.

The war ended, and Haben settled in Addis Ababa, where he took a job with the government. But he remembered his promise and prayed that God would lead him to His true church and show him how he could serve Christ for the rest of his life.

A fellow soldier directed Haben to the Adventist church in Addis Ababa, where Haben received Bible studies and was baptized. He studied theology and worked as a Global Mission pioneer church planter. Today he helps produce programs for Adventist World Radio, the station that led him to God on the battlefield. He has given his testimony over the airwaves and has received many letters from soldiers who want to know more about the God he serves.

Your mission offerings help support Adventist World Radio and many other outreach programs of the Adventist Church. Thank you for your faithful gifts.

BENJAMIN SCHOUN is president of Adventist World Radio.

The Man of God: Obedience Is Not Optional



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exodus 32, 1 Kings 13:1–34, Dan. 5:13–17, Luke 16:31, John 15:24, 2 Tim. 4:3.*

Memory Text: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20, 21, NIV).

This week we will look at one of the strangest stories in the Old Testament. On first glance we discover a renegade king, a prophet who makes specific food prohibitions, an altar that splits open like a cracked egg, and then, more disturbing, a lying old prophet, and a selectively dangerous lion.

The story takes place in the first years of the divided monarchy, a time of political and religious tension. Under the leadership of Jeroboam (and with the express blessing of the Lord [1 Kings 11:29–39]), the ten tribes of Israel have separated themselves from Rehoboam, the son of Solomon and heir to the Davidic kingdom. War hangs in the air, and it is during this time of instability and change that God sends His prophet with a specific message to King Jeroboam about the idolatrous worship in the northern kingdom, which would prove ultimately to be its ruin.

Below the surface of this story about a nameless prophet lies the important issue of obedience and how seriously God takes our obedience. Whatever the unanswered questions, this story shows that any expression of the gospel without resulting obedience is, of necessity, a false gospel.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 4.*

The Politics of Religion

After the death of Solomon, the poor judgment of Rehoboam, his son, led to the division of the nation, with King Jeroboam ruling in Israel, the northern kingdom, and Rehoboam in Judah, the southern kingdom (see *1 Kings 12*).

Not long after the break, Jeroboam set the northern kingdom on a very dangerous path. He did not deliberately set out to lead Israel from a worship of God to idolatry; instead, he was acting from political expediency. He created two centers of worship, one at Bethel and one at Dan. He claimed to be trying to make things easier for the Israelites, so that they would not have to travel all the way to Jerusalem in order to worship. The golden calves were simply to be a visual reminder of God (not a representation) and were to make worship more credible for the common Israelite. What started as a political move, however, led to the breaking of the Ten Commandments (*Exod. 20:4, 5*).

What similarities can be noted between the golden calf episode in Exodus 32 and Jeroboam's golden calves? See *1 Kings 12:25–33*.

It is necessary to be innovative in worship and adapt worship to our specific cultural contexts, but we must be so careful. Even a small deviation from a clear command of God has far-reaching effects. In the case of Israel, the golden calves led the nation on a path toward blatant sin. But things did not stop there. Jeroboam was obliged to make other changes as well. He wanted to persuade some of the Levites, living within his borders, to serve as priests at his newly established shrines. However, they saw the dangers and were not prepared to contradict God's commands; thus, Jeroboam was compelled to make priests of common people (*1 Kings 12:31, 32*), which in turn degraded the sacred office.

The story of Jeroboam's religious-political changes should have served as a warning to the early Christian church; however, the same thing happened. Divine commandments were changed due to political or social influences. Sunday instead of Sabbath was now the new "holy" day, in order to distinguish the church from the Jews. The veneration of saints was introduced in order to make the worship of God more visual for heathen believers. The pressures that led to these changes are by no means limited to the time of Jeroboam or early Christianity. Today, as a church, we face many similar challenges.

**What kinds of cultural pressure is your own church facing?
How susceptible are you to cultural pressures around you?
How willingly do you compromise on "little" things?**

God's Move

In the middle of Jeroboam's political moves, God steps in and makes Himself heard. He speaks through a prophet from Judah. This unnamed prophet makes his appearance just as Jeroboam is standing before his altar at the dedication ceremony for the shrine. Anyone who was anybody in the kingdom of Israel would have been there. God selected the most opportune moment to act. The result is dramatic.

Read 1 Kings 13:1–6. What happens here? What immediate lessons come to mind from this narrative?

The prophet, though not named, is referred to as the man of God. This was a common title used for a person recognized as a messenger of God. It was used for Moses (*Deut. 33:1*) and Elijah (*1 Kings 17:18*). This title connects our nameless prophet with some of the great prophets of the Old Testament; thus, the reader's expectations for him are high. The man of God cries out against Jeroboam's altar and gives a prophecy. In the prophecy, a specific name, Josiah, is mentioned (*1 Kings 13:2*). This is amazing, because Josiah is born almost three centuries afterward. It reminds us of Cyrus, the Persian, whose name is mentioned by the prophet Isaiah about two hundred years before his birth (*see Isa. 44:28, 45:1*).

What are the main points of the message the man of God brings? First, the altar is illegal, and the man of God predicts that a descendant of David named Josiah will defile it. This is exactly what Jeroboam most fears. He is establishing these worship centers especially to avoid losing his kingdom to someone who sits on David's throne. The second part of the message provides an immediate demonstration of God's power, thus guaranteeing the prophecy's future fulfillment. Before the eyes of everyone, the altar splits apart. Perhaps this is meant to remind the onlookers of the tablets of the Ten Commandments that Moses broke at the worship of the first golden calf.

It seems as if Jeroboam has learned nothing from history. He has two golden calves instead of one. And now instead of being repentant, Jeroboam points at the man of God. Pointing the hand, stick, or scepter has always been a sign of judgment in biblical times. Jeroboam wants to have him arrested. So much for surrendering to the will of God.

How, in this story, do we see the mercy of God presented, even to someone as stubborn as Jeroboam? How often do you find yourself expressing a similar attitude toward the clear leading of God? What have been the personal consequences of that attitude?

The Giver of Gifts

It is a spectacular miracle. Jeroboam's hand, which had "dried up, so that he could not pull it in again" (*1 Kings 13:4*), is immediately restored. After such convincing evidence, we would expect at least a public confession from Jeroboam, the king. But miracles cannot change our will. Even after a dramatic intervention by God, it is surprisingly easy to find a "natural" explanation or just simply go back to our old habits.

What did Jesus say about the connection between miracles and belief? *Luke 16:31, John 10:25–28, 15:24*. **Why** do you think this is so true of us?

Instead of abandoning his worship activities and wholeheartedly beginning a reformation, Jeroboam simply changes tactics (*see 1 Kings 13:7–10*). He invites the man of God home with him and offers him a reward. This was a political move aimed at neutralizing the effect of the message on the people who witnessed the miracle. King Jeroboam is offering to take the man of God into his employ. Only the one who is in charge or who is soliciting a service is in a position to offer a reward, but God's man is never to be on sale. He owes his allegiance to God and cannot let his messages from God be modified by whoever might be sponsoring him.

Read *2 Kings 5:14–16* and *Daniel 5:13–17*. **How** did the prophets respond to the offers of gifts?

Giving a gift places the giver in a position of power, and the receiver "owes" the giver. The man of God refuses the king's gift and goes on to state that he will not eat or drink in the territory of Israel. By not accepting Jeroboam's hospitality, the man of God says "No" to mixing true worship with idolatry. God's people should not be for sale. They should walk a different route. The man of God did not have too far to walk, because the inauguration of the shrine at Bethel took place about 2 kilometers (1.4 miles) from the border with Judah. The next town in Judah's territory was Mizpah, a 10-kilometer (7-mile) walk from Bethel. The man of God was to show how revolting the idolatrous system was to God through a dramatic object lesson of not eating and drinking and even by taking a different route home.

How is the giving of gifts or favors viewed in your culture? Are you indebted to anyone by gifts that you receive? Pray for God's wisdom in helping you disentangle yourself from any compromising situations that you might find yourself in because of gifts given you.

Tempting Lies

God's dramatic intervention at the inauguration ceremony gives the ordinary people plenty to talk about. Some young men go home and tell their father all about the man of God. The father's name is not given, but we learn that he is old and that he is actually a prophet himself. This old prophet decides to go after the man of God and finds him sitting under a tree.

Read 1 Kings 13:11–19. Compare this passage with the first temptation and lie in Genesis 3:1–5. What similarities are there, and what can we learn from these episodes?

The man of God must have understood something of the urgency of his mission. He was told to give his message to the king and then not to take any time for eating or drinking but to return straight back. However, here he is, sitting under a tree in Israel, taking it easy. He could have walked the 2 kilometers (1.4 miles) and then could have sat under a tree in Judah. By losing his sense of urgency, the man of God was opening himself to temptation.

The old prophet deceives the man of God. We do not know what motivates the old prophet to deceive him. Whatever his motivation, the Bible tells us that “he lied” (*1 Kings 13:18, NKJV*). In this moment the old prophet becomes an agent of Satan, the father of lies (*John 8:44*). Perhaps an even more disturbing part of the story is that the man of God seems so easily taken in. After so obviously being led of God, after so obviously doing the Lord's will, he just falls for the trick and goes directly against what God has told him to do.

It's really hard to understand, isn't it? We would like to excuse him for disobeying God, since he was led astray. But God never excuses belief in a lie when the lie is directly opposed to a clear command that He has given.

Temptation revolves around the choice to disobey God's revealed will. Temptations don't change as much as the forms of the temptations do. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus was tempted as we are. The same basic temptations we face (albeit in modern disguise) were faced and conquered by Jesus. Jesus promises us insight and a “way of escape” so that we would not be taken in by Satan's lies (*1 Cor. 10:13*).

How easily do you allow temptations to lead you into direct conflict with God's revealed will? What can you do, what choices can you make, to protect yourself from the temptations that so easily trap you?

Twin Temptations

The man of God faced two temptations. The first, which he powerfully resisted, came from the king; the second, which he succumbed to, came from the old prophet. What important lesson can we take from this for ourselves? *See 2 Tim. 4:3, 2 Pet. 2:1, Jude 4–16.*

The greatest threat to our faith is not persecution from the outside by political powers but rather false prophets and teachers who come from within us or who claim to speak in God's name.

It is important to have a clear word from the Lord. In other words, we need to study God's Word, the Bible, for ourselves. A true prophet or teacher will not contradict other inspired revelation. Because God never contradicts Himself, any new prophecy or teaching from God will add to established truth and not subtract from it. It also will encourage obedience and never disobedience. Finally, we can judge prophets and teachers by the results of their teaching for their audience and in their own lives.

Read 1 Kings 13:20–34. What happens next, and what lessons are there for us?

What is hard to understand in all this is why the old prophet lies to the man of God to begin with. He starts out in the role of Satan, the deceiver, and then, before the chapter is over, he is the one delivering the "Thus saith the Lord" (*vs. 21*) to him. Although much is hard to understand, one thing in this story shouldn't be: the man of God should not have so directly and blatantly disregarded the clear command of the Lord.

The death of the man of God is not without effect. Unlike the king, who witnessed a miracle and continued in his sin (*see 1 Kings 13:33, 34*), the old prophet believes that God's Word will be fulfilled. He tells his sons that when he dies they are to lay his bones beside the bones of the man of God. The prophecy made by the man of God from Judah is literally fulfilled by Josiah three centuries later (*2 Kings 23:15, 16*). As prophesied, Josiah burns bones on the altar; however, he spares the bones of the man of God and also, consequentially, the bones of the old prophet who was buried with him (*2 Kings 23:17, 18*).

Look at this verse: "It is the man of God, who was disobedient unto the word of the Lord" (1 Kings 13:26). What ironic but important message can we take from this for ourselves?

Further Study: “The Saviour overcame to show man how he may overcome. All the temptations of Satan, Christ met with the word of God. By trusting in God’s promises, He received power to obey God’s commandments, and the tempter could gain no advantage. To every temptation His answer was, ‘It is written.’ So God has given us His word wherewith to resist evil. Exceeding great and precious promises are ours, that by these we ‘might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.’ 2 Peter 1:4.

“Bid the tempted one look not to circumstances, to the weakness of self, or to the power of temptation, but to the power of God’s word. All its strength is ours. ‘Thy word,’ says the psalmist, ‘have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against Thee.’ ‘By the word of Thy lips I have kept me from the paths of the destroyer.’ Psalms 119:11; 17:4.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 181.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Truth is progressive. As we better understand God’s truth, we may have to make changes in our lives, beliefs, organization, outreach, and so on. Keeping the *status quo* is not an option. Discuss in your class how we can know whether our proposed actions arise from God’s leading or society’s influence.
- 2 Discuss Jesus’ model of socializing with sinners as opposed to the duty of the man of God not to socialize and thus condone sin. How do we meet people where they are? Give practical examples in your Sabbath School class to show how you have come close to people and shown acceptance without encouraging sinful practices.
- 3 In many societies, the paying of bribes or giving of special gifts is part and parcel of almost all business, legal, and political deals. How can we, as Seventh-day Adventists, individually and as a church, survive in such societies? Based on this week’s lesson, as a class write some guidelines for dealing with this problem.
- 4 Imagine that someone in your church stands up and claims to have a message from the Lord or that your head elder claims to have new biblical light on last-day events. What would you do? How would you evaluate the claims?

Hopeless Case: Part 1

by LIONEL WALCOTT

I had a difficult childhood. I quit school when I was 12 and could barely read or write. I stayed away from home as much as possible, spending most of my time sleeping in boats or on the beach in my homeland of Barbados. I hung around places where tourists passed and I begged for something to eat. I stole and used drugs; as my crimes grew more serious, I went from juvenile homes to jails to prison.

I fled Barbados for a place where the police didn't automatically suspect me of every crime that was committed. But I continued stealing, dealing drugs, and smuggling. Again I was arrested, and this time I was put in a maximum-security prison on a remote island.

It was a terrible place, reserved for the worst criminals. We had almost no food, no change of clothes, no electricity, no toilet facilities—just jungle, snakes, and alligators. People died in that prison.

Desperate, I planned my escape. I borrowed the prison boat and paddled with a plank to an island in the distance. But I was captured and beaten. Prison guards came to get me, and again I was beaten. When I arrived back at the prison, I was beaten again. I was barely alive.

I spent the next 18 months in solitary confinement in an underground cell barely big enough to lie in. When I was finally released, I was malnourished and could barely walk. Once more I was living on the streets, eating from trash cans. But drugs were always available, and I was quickly addicted.

I returned to Barbados and landed in prison again. I tried to commit suicide, but I failed. I pleaded with my mother to get me out, and she posted bond. Once more I was on the streets, where my life of crime had begun.

One day I saw a tent a few blocks away. I was curious and discovered that it was an evangelistic meeting held by Seventh-day Adventists. I went to the meetings with drugs in my pocket and body odor perfuming the air. I sat in the back and listened to the speaker.

After the meeting I waited until everyone had gone. Then I asked Bruce, the night watchman, some questions about God. He answered my questions and became my friend, even when he had to chase us away from the tent where we were smoking and talking. But I sensed that my life was changing.

(continued next week)

LIONEL WALCOTT *shares his faith in Barbados, an island nation in the Caribbean.*

The Widow of Zarephath: The Leap of Faith



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Kings 17; Job 38; 42:5, 6; Luke 4:24–28; Heb. 11:1; Rev. 1:17.*

Memory Text: “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (*Philippians 1:6, NKJV*).

She was no stranger to death. She had seen her husband die. And now she watched, helplessly, as everything around her died. The grass dried up, the trees dropped their leaves, the cows were gaunt skeletons, and the goats bleated pitifully. Every day she scanned the cloudless sky, hoping against hope for a cloud and rain. She had been rationing the flour and the oil in an attempt to make it stretch until the end of the drought. The little round, flat daily loaf was unevenly divided. Her son needed all the nourishment she could give him. It pained her to see the lad so thin and without energy. But her sacrifice seemed pointless, for she feared that both would soon starve to death. There was enough for one final meal. Holding her son's hand, the widow leaves the dusty town of Zarephath to scrounge for firewood in order to cook their final meal. And here the unnamed woman steps into the biblical narrative and into sacred history, where her story teaches us lessons that we can, thousands of years later, apply to ourselves. This week we see the great controversy between God and Satan played out in miniature in the life of an unnamed widow who chooses God and is led step by step into a journey of faith.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 11.*

To Zarephath

Although our story begins with God's command to the great prophet Elijah to go to Zarephath, we must remember what led to this command. The kingdom of Israel had fallen into idolatry. Baal worship had become the official state religion. God dramatically had "challenged" the storm god by declaring through His prophet Elijah that there would be no more dew or rain (*1 Kings 17:1*).

What irony is found in the idea that God tells a kingdom that was worshipping the storm god that there would be no rain? What does this tell us about God's power in our world in contrast to every other power? See also *Ps. 86:8, Jer. 10:6, Heb. 1:1–3, and Job 38*.

Elijah had been hiding at the brook Cherith (*1 Kings 17:3*) while the country of Israel withered under a devastating drought. The brook finally ran dry, and God commanded the prophet to leave and go to Zarephath (*1 Kings 17:1–9*).

God commands Elijah to leave Israel and go to a foreign land. Zarephath is located on the Mediterranean coast between Tyre and Sidon. It is within the territory of Phoenicia, which is where the terrible queen Jezebel comes from. One of the important Phoenician national deities is Baal, and Jezebel, as King Ahab's queen, actively imported Baal worship to Israel from Phoenicia. In the ancient world, gods were normally thought of as belonging to a specific city or region. Zarephath, situated outside of Israel in a foreign country, is supposedly far removed from the Lord's area of influence. The people of this heathen nation also should be far out of God's reach. But no one ever is out of His reach. Right in the very center of Baal worship, God is going to make His presence and power known.

It's important to note that God uses the prophet's need to reach out to a woman in far-off Zarephath. As believers in Jesus, we do not have to project a perfect front to all those around us. We do not have to cover up our problems or pretend that we have no needs, because, as we all know, that's just not true. As Christians, we still suffer, we still hurt, we still need at times the solace and help of others who, in fact, might not be of our faith or of any faith at all.

What's wrong with the attitude that says we show a lack of faith when we seek help from others? What are ways that we might, through our needs, reveal to others the goodness and character of God?

An Unusual Instrument *(1 Kings 17:7–12)*

The widow, out gathering firewood to make a last meal for herself and her son, immediately recognizes Elijah as a believer in God. The text doesn't say what it was, but something let her know that Elijah was a worshiper of the Lord.

Read carefully verse 12. The woman acknowledges that God exists, but what does that, at this point, mean to her? Dwell on her phrase “that we may eat it, and die.” What does it imply?

What similarities can you detect between 1 Kings 17:3, 4 and 17:8, 9?

God directs and guides His prophet Elijah in order to save his life. First He tells him to hide by the brook Cherith. Ravens are commanded to feed him. Following this, God commands again and sends Elijah to Zarephath, where he has “commanded a widow” (*vs. 9*) to feed him.

She seems an unusual instrument for God. She is a non-Israelite. She is a widow with no social standing and no influence or power. She herself is on the brink of starvation.

What an incredible lesson can be learned from observing this divine strategy. More often than not God chooses us—not for a particular strength that we may have—but rather in spite of our weaknesses (*2 Cor. 12:9*).

Yesterday we saw that God is not limited geographically. Today we see that God is not limited by human limitations. God is the One who orders in this story. Throughout this narrative it is clear that God is in control, a point that also is very important in the larger context of Elijah's ministry in the great battle between the Lord and Baal. Nothing and no one can stand in the way of God's ultimate will. Later in the story we will see that even death cannot interfere with God's purposes. Even though things and events that are hurtful or detrimental to our lives will be thrown at us, God's purposes for us always are good (*Jer. 29:11*), although we may not see this immediately. We need to learn to trust Him in all situations, both the good and the bad, for we will inevitably find ourselves at some point in both.

How has the Lord been able to use you despite your weaknesses? How much more could you do were you, through His power, able to overcome those weaknesses?

Total Surrender *(1 Kings 17:13–16)*

Read 1 Kings 17:13–16. What’s the first thing Elijah says to the widow, and why? What great leap of faith is Elijah taking in asking her to do this?

Widows were marginal characters in the biblical world at the best of times. Especially if they had no grown children to take care of them, they easily were victimized and had limited legal recourse. A widow in the time of a great drought was even worse off. Each family was fighting for survival, and there would be no handouts to poor widows. This woman is now asked to feed the prophet. She is really the most unlikely candidate, when we consider her social and economic reality. Only a handful of flour and a little oil stands between this poor woman and starvation.

Whom does he tell her to feed first? What kind of thoughts must have gone through her mind when she heard that? What kind of faith was required on her part?

In many of our cultures it is more appropriate to offer to others before taking for ourselves. However, to add insult to injury, the prophet not only wants to take from a person who cannot afford to give, but he wants to be served first.

Remember that throughout this story the prophet really is standing in as a representative of God. By asking the woman for her last bread, the prophet is inviting her to take a leap of faith, to surrender all she has.

What other examples can you find in the Bible in which the Lord asks for complete surrender? *See, for instance, Genesis 22.*

When we give God everything we have, we always gain in the end. The woman originally had enough for only one meal. In giving that meal to the prophet first, this pagan woman reached out in raw faith, trusting in what she could not see or understand. In a sense, isn’t that what faith is all about (*see Heb. 11:1*)—trusting in a God we can’t see and in promises we don’t fully understand? What’s amazing, too, is that this isn’t even an Israelite woman but a woman from a pagan land who practiced a degrading form of worship. And yet God somehow communicated with her (*see vs. 9*), and she responded in faith, doing what she had been commanded to despite how foolish, from a worldly perspective, her actions might have seemed.

When was the last time you had to reach out in raw, naked faith, trusting in what you could not see or did not understand? What lessons did you learn about what it means for us, as fallen beings, to live by faith?

Remembering My Sins *(1 Kings 17:17, 18)*

The widow gave her last loaf of bread, and God performed a miracle. She and her son miraculously escaped starvation and had a constant source of food. It's hard to imagine the astonishment she must have felt to see this incredible miracle happen, not just once but day by day.

What is the natural human response to contact with God? *See Job 42:5, 6; Isa. 6:5; Dan. 10:8; Luke 5:8; Rev. 1:17.* **Why do you think that reaction is so common?**

Through the prophet Elijah, the widow came into contact with God. As we come into contact with a holy God, our sins become more apparent. And then, when something terrible happens, we may feel that the Lord is punishing us. In 1 Kings 17:18, the widow blames God's prophet for being there and consequently bringing her to God's notice.

Look at her reasoning (*vs. 18*). **Why might she have thought the way she did?**

Perhaps she saw the kind of faithful and holy life that Elijah lived, and she felt convicted in his presence when she contrasted herself to him. Or, living day by day with such a miracle, perhaps she felt the presence of God and His holiness as never before and thus felt her sinfulness more than ever before. Thus, in that context, she saw her sins as the cause of this tragedy.

In many ways this is such a common reaction. We often blame ourselves and our sins for the tragedies that hurt us or our loved ones. What did I do that caused my child to get sick? What sin has caused this calamity in my life? Though it is true that many times pain and suffering result directly from the sinful choices we make, it's also true that tragedies come for which we see no apparent reason and certainly through no fault of our own. Remember the story of Job. Even God admitted he was a righteous man, and look what happened to him. We need to be very careful in how we seek to explain the cause of tragedy in our lives. What's more important is how we respond to those tragedies, and fixating on the supposed cause most likely won't help.

We all face unexpected and inexplicable tragedy, don't we? It's part of what it means to be fallen beings in a fallen world. How can you learn to trust and love God, even amid painful times?

Testing Faith

How was the faith of both the widow and Elijah tested here? *1 Kings 17:17–24*.

Notice the struggle that Elijah himself had with the death of the boy. It doesn't seem as if he knows for sure that the Lord will raise him. His prayer seems to reflect some of the attitude of the woman herself, blaming God for the death. What this shows is that even prophets can struggle with understanding things that happen (*Matt. 11:1–3*).

No question, for quite a while both the widow and Elijah were living in the presence of a miracle—the continual supply of flour and oil—which should have been more than enough to keep their faith strong. And yet, even with something as dramatic as that, their faith was put to the test.

How often, too, we might have had some incredible experience with God, something that really touched us in a powerful way, only to question Him later when events unfold that we don't like. That's why, though miracles can have a role in the building of faith, they shouldn't be the center of it.

How does Elijah refer to the Lord? What does that tell us about his relationship with God?

Elijah has a very intimate relationship with God; he calls God “my God.” Having a close relationship with God does not mean that one has all the answers. Elijah cannot understand why God has permitted the child to die. But it is when we have an intimate relationship with God that we best can experience the power of God in our lives. The miracle does not occur by a special magic formula or even the attempt of the prophet to keep the boy warm. The writer of the account makes it clear that it is God who resurrects the boy.

Elijah himself is thrilled at the results. “Look, your son is alive!” he probably shouted to the widow. No doubt, whatever this incident did for the faith of the woman, it surely helped Elijah, as well.

The widow's response ends in a faith statement. She now knows that the God of Israel is able to sustain life and also give life.

Read Luke 4:24–26, where this widow is mentioned again. How do Christ's words here help us better understand this story as a whole? What lessons might we draw from it for ourselves, we who are part of a privileged group?

Further Study: “ ‘And He said, verily I say unto you, No prophet is acceptable in his own country. But of a truth I say unto you, There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; and unto none of them was Elijah sent, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman, the Syrian.’ Luke 4:23–27, R.V.

“By this relation of events in the lives of the prophets, Jesus met the questionings of His hearers. The servants whom God had chosen for a special work were not allowed to labor for a hardhearted and unbelieving people. But those who had hearts to feel and faith to believe were especially favored with evidences of His power through the prophets. In the days of Elijah, Israel had departed from God. They clung to their sins, and rejected the warnings of the Spirit through the Lord’s messengers. Thus they cut themselves off from the channel by which God’s blessing could come to them. The Lord passed by the homes of Israel, and found a refuge for His servant in a heathen land, with a woman who did not belong to the chosen people. But this woman was favored because she had followed the light she had received, and her heart was open to the greater light that God sent her through His prophet.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 238.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What is the connection between sin and suffering? The widow of Zarephath thought that her sin caused her son’s death. In the New Testament the disciples thought that being blind was the result of the individual’s or his or her parents’ sins (*John 9:2, 3*). Should we relate differently to people who are suffering as the result of their own sins as opposed to those who seem to be suffering through no cause of their own? Or should we not even make that judgment call? Defend your answer.
- ❷ A child is born with a rare genetic disorder, and the mother feels that God is punishing her for her rebellious youth. What advice and comfort can you as a class offer her?
- ❸ Ask if anyone in class ever witnessed a miracle, something that could have come only from God. What was the person’s reaction? How has the impact of the miracle in the person’s life changed over time? Did he or she ever struggle with doubt again, despite having witnessed something so amazing? What lessons can we learn from these experiences about what it means to live by faith?

Hopeless Case: Part 2

by LIONEL WALCOTT

My life had been dismal and hopeless until I noticed a tent near my brother's place. Evangelistic meetings were being held, and I went out of curiosity. But there I found hope.

One night I skipped the meeting to buy some drugs for my brother. In a quiet moment I heard a voice saying, "Is this what you want for yourself?" I had heard that voice once before in prison. It was God. I knelt down and for the first time in my life I prayed. "Jesus, help me! I'm a sinner, and I want Jesus in my life." That night I gave God my addictions, and He took them away.

I bathed and cut my long hair. People noticed that I was changing. Church members were glad, but my brother was angry. When he heard me playing Christian music, he smashed my radio. Normally I would have reacted violently, but peace filled my heart, and I didn't become angry. This surprised both of us.

Church members nurtured me in my new faith. I was baptized, and a year later I left my job in construction to become a literature evangelist—even though I couldn't read or write.

Because I couldn't read, I listened to the Bible on tape. I listened to Adventist books on tape, and God gave me the memory to remember what I had heard. God taught me how to speak in public and present my canvass. I became a successful literature evangelist. I would memorize a list of Bible texts so I could give Bible studies. During evangelistic meetings I volunteered to be a Bible worker. God blessed me in this job. Eventually I became the associate publishing director in Barbados.

One day I met a schoolteacher in the Adventist bookstore. We talked, and eventually I asked her out. I married her. She worked hard to teach me to read and write.

God has blessed me with so many souls through the literature work. A woman living nearby owned a rum shop, a bar. I invited her to study the Bible with me. She became an Adventist, closed her rum shop, and reopened it as a children's day-care center.

I met a young woman who had lost her parents. She wanted to commit suicide. I told her a bit of my past, and we prayed. She and her sister accepted Jesus into their lives, and God turned their lives around.

I know that God can change anyone; after all, He changed me.

LIONEL WALCOTT *shares his faith in Barbados, an island nation in the Caribbean.*

Gehazi: Missing the Mark



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 39:4–6; 2 Kings 4: 5; 8:1–6; Jer. 9:23, 24; John 13:1–17; 1 Tim. 6:10.*

Memory Text: “It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him” (*Deuteronomy 13:4, NIV*).

Gehazi was a servant. Not just any servant but the servant of one of the greatest prophets in Israel's history: Elisha. Elisha had been called by the Lord to minister to the prophet Elijah, in preparation for Elisha's own prophetic ministry (*1 Kings 19:16*). For many years Elisha served Elijah and listened, observed, and thus understood what it meant to be a prophet. When Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind of fire (*2 Kings 2:11*), Elisha's time had come. His ministry was not as fiery and glamorous as Elijah's, but he exerted a far-reaching influence.

Thus, Gehazi had a wonderful opportunity to be closely associated with someone as blessed of God as Elisha. It's hard to imagine all that he could have learned and seen in the years that he worked with the prophet.

Yet, as we will see this week, despite so much potential and so many great opportunities, Gehazi became a miserable failure. His story serves as an example of someone who gets sidetracked and becomes unable to distinguish the important from the peripheral. How crucial it is for us to learn from his mistakes!

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 18.*

Write a brief job description of a servant, based on the following verses: *Gen. 24:2–4; 39:4–6; Luke 14:17; 17:7, 8; Acts 2:18.*

Being a servant means primarily that one puts aside one's own wants, wishes, and comfort and involves oneself totally in someone else's life. A servant is there to assist the master in carrying out the master's plans, wishes, and activities. Sometimes being a servant involves carrying messages, accompanying someone, acting for the person, and doing menial jobs that need to be done. At other times it involves managing finances and households, but always the servant acts not to further his own ends but to further his master's.

Gehazi was the servant of prophet Elisha. Being a servant to a prophet was a unique privilege. It involved more than menial labor. It was a type of apprenticeship. Elisha himself had served as Elijah's servant (*1 Kings 19:19–21*). Although the job of prophet depended on a divine call, it would seem that this special time of serving together helped the would-be prophet develop his faith and trust in God. By serving his master Elijah, Elisha would be learning to put himself aside and serve others. This would prove to be the best qualification for any future ministry. We have no record of Gehazi's calling, but we will see the opportunities that he was given.

This servant idea is by no means restricted to Old Testament times. Jesus said that the willingness to be a servant was a prerequisite for any leadership position in the church (*Mark 9:35*).

Read *John 13:1–17*. How does this passage show the link between leadership and servanthood?

The disciples have been with Jesus for three years. They have learned from His teachings, they have even shared in His healing ministry, and yet they are not ready to go out as God's ambassadors. They were ready to learn in theory and enjoyed the association with Jesus, but they still were not prepared to put themselves aside and humbly serve one another.

How do we get the humility and the death to self needed in order to serve others? How do we learn to serve others with an attitude of seeking nothing back for ourselves?

Learning Firsthand

A good teacher teaches by example and gives plenty of opportunities for the student to apply what he or she is learning. Elisha was this type of teacher.

Read 2 Kings 4:8–17. What is Gehazi’s role in the narration? What opportunities is Elisha giving Gehazi?

The story of the woman of Shunem follows another miracle involving a woman. In 2 Kings 4:1–7, Elisha helps a widow clear her debts and keep her two sons from being sold into slavery. And now Elisha is on his way to Shunem. Given the general status of women in biblical times, it is strange that the narrator gives a married woman such status. Her husband’s name is not given. All we know is that he is consulted about the building of the guest room and that he is old, even though he still seems to be fit enough to supervise the harvesting of his fields. In the first part of the story Elisha actively involves Gehazi. He sends him to call the woman and includes Gehazi in his expression of thanks. He asks Gehazi’s opinion and acts on Gehazi’s suggestion. Gehazi rises to the occasion by being observant and showing sensitivity to the woman’s real needs. Elisha gives Gehazi the opportunity to initiate a miracle. Within a year the miracle child is born.

Read 2 Kings 4:18–31. What change in attitude do we see here in Gehazi as compared to what we saw in the previous story?

The miracle child is now a young boy. Gehazi is still Elisha’s servant, but something of the sensitivity he once had seems to be gone. When the woman arrives and brushes past him to grab hold of the feet of Elisha, Gehazi tries to push her away. He sees only the “rudeness” of the Shunammite woman, who oversteps any type of social convention in her action (*vss.* 25–27). He does not seem to be able to see her deep distress as does Elisha.

It sometimes is easy to be so self-centered and self-absorbed that we become insensitive to the feelings and needs of others. Who hasn’t been on both ends of that equation? How can you learn to be more sensitive to the feelings and needs of others? Also, how can you learn to bear gracefully the insensitivity of others toward you?

A Question of Faith

Read 2 Kings 5:1–19 and answer the following questions:

- Why did the king of Israel react as he did? Was his reaction reasonable or unreasonable? What did he really fear was going on?

- Why did Naaman react as he did to Elisha's command to him? What good reasons did he have for his reaction? In what ways did his reaction reflect the king of Israel's toward the letter?

- Read verse 12. What kind of logic is the captain using there? What mistake is he making?

- How does Naaman refer to himself before Elisha after the miracle happened? What does that say about him?

- Why do you think Elisha refused to take any money from the captain? Why would it be important that he not take any?

- Read carefully verses 17–19. What is going on here? How do we understand Naaman's request and Elisha's response to it?

Gehazi's Fall

It's hard, at least from our perspective today, to understand why characters in the Bible did what they did at times, especially in the face of so many miraculous events. The incredible healing of Naaman happened right before Gehazi. He saw not only the power of God but the actions of his master, who refused to take any money from the captain. One would think that would have been more than enough to humble him before God and man, but apparently it didn't.

Read 2 Kings 5:20–27. How did Gehazi, at least at first, rationalize his actions? What little bit of nationalism, or ethnic prejudice, is hinted at in Gehazi's thoughts?

The Bible is full of warnings against the love of money and the dangers of earthly possessions. These warnings are directed not only toward the wealthy. It is not the amount of material possessions that we have that is the problem but rather our attitude toward what we have. The battle against greed requires constant attention. We continually have to adjust our thoughts toward our possessions and surrender them to God. We can keep our perspective by consistently giving not only material possessions but also time. The love of material things blinds us to our true mission and purpose in life and in the end can cause our eternal ruin if we are not careful.

It is strange that Gehazi swears to himself by the living God and then goes off to deceive. Does he think that the living God does not see him? What a powerful testimony to the power of our own corrupt hearts to deceive us!

Naaman, meanwhile, is very generous about giving Gehazi the gifts, but he probably goes away with some questions, especially when his two servants return and report Gehazi's strange behavior. Gehazi has let his greed interfere with the witness that Elisha wants to give to this new convert.

Of course, in the end the same God who performed miracles revealed the truth to Elisha about what Gehazi did, and, just like that, his ministry and life were ruined.

It's very easy to underestimate the incredible hold that the love of money (*1 Tim. 6:10*) can have on us. What examples, from either biblical or nonbiblical history, can you think of in which money led to someone's ruin? How can we learn to protect ourselves from what can be a very dangerous temptation?

Living on Leftovers

We last hear of Gehazi in 2 Kings 8:1–6. What do we find the ex-servant of Elisha doing?

Many years have passed since the great miracle of the raising of the Shunammite's son. Gehazi's skin disease must not be too disfiguring, for we now find him in the royal court. Gehazi, Elisha's "ex-servant," is talking about what has been. He is bragging about Elisha and his miracles, and in doing so he is most likely reflecting on his own importance by his connection to Elisha.

We never may have heard of this storytelling session had it not been for the timing of this event. The biblical author tells us that at the precise time that Gehazi was telling about the miracle of the Shunammite's son being brought back to life, the Shunammite appears before the king. God in His providence uses Gehazi's bragging to help the woman of Shunem. The woman of Shunem is by now most probably a widow, as no mention is made of her husband, and it is unusual that a woman would appear before the king on such business instead of her husband. She is most likely in charge of her family until her son becomes of age. She has been out of the country for seven years during a severe drought. Having the right relationships and knowing the right people may be important and seen as advantageous from a human point of view, but God views things differently.

What relationship really counts, and why? *See Jer. 9:23, 24.*

And so Gehazi fades from history. The sad part of the story is the fact that Gehazi could have been doing God's work. He could have learned from Elisha. He could have been the next major prophet or perhaps a leader and teacher in the schools of the prophets. Now all he can do is speak about the good old days when he worked with the prophet. Gehazi could have been making history; now all he can do is live in the past.

We need to recount and remember God's dealing with us in the past. But at the same time, we need to be careful about dwelling on what happened in the past, at the expense of living correctly in the present. How do we strike a right balance here? How can dwelling too much on the past negatively influence our walk with the Lord today?

Further Study: “Solemn are the lessons taught by this experience of one to whom had been given high and holy privileges. The course of Gehazi was such as to place a stumbling block in the pathway of Naaman, upon whose mind had broken a wonderful light, and who was favorably disposed toward the service of the living God. For the deception practiced by Gehazi there could be pleaded no excuse. To the day of his death he remained a leper, cursed of God and shunned by his fellow men.

“ ‘A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall not escape.’ Proverbs 19:5. Men may think to hide their evil deeds from human eyes, but they cannot deceive God. ‘All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.’ Heb. 4:13. Gehazi thought to deceive Elisha, but God revealed to His prophet the words that Gehazi had spoken to Naaman, and every detail of the scene between the two men.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 252.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What are some of the warning signs that money or the pursuit of it is taking the place of God in our lives? How can we learn to use money and not let it use us? What role do tithing and giving offerings play in connection with the whole question of the influence and power of money over our lives?
- 2 As a class, go over your response to the last question in Thursday’s lesson. What are the things that really matter in life, and why is it so easy to lose track of what really matters?
- 3 What reasons might have led Gehazi to think that he could get away with his deception? He knew God existed; he had seen miracles take place, some quite incredible, in fact. Yet, despite all this, he tried to deceive his master. Perhaps he had done similar things before and gotten away with it. Perhaps in his own mind he truly rationalized his actions. We don’t know. What we do know, however, is that it’s not that hard to deceive ourselves. What are ways we can learn to protect ourselves from falling into the same self-deception?
- 4 Go back to 2 Kings 5:17–19. What lessons should or should we not draw from Naaman’s request to Elisha about bowing down in the house of Rimmon?
- 5 What are some practical ways you can serve others?

Unexpected Christmas Gift

by NATALIA CHRISTOVA

Last year, as soon as I accepted the Adventist message, I wanted to share my new joy and love for God with others. But I wasn't sure how. Then at Christmastime the pastor gave us copies of a short version of *The Great Controversy* and challenged us to give them away. I took one and prayed that God would show me the person He wanted me to give it to.

I decided to give the book to a former classmate, Antonia. She thanked me and looked at the table of contents. One chapter that deals with what happens when a person dies intrigued her. She wanted to know more about what I believe, especially about what happens after death. But since I was a new Adventist Christian, I didn't know how to explain it to her. I offered to visit her every week and share the previous week's Sabbath School lesson.

While I was visiting with Antonia, her older sister, Antonetta, came over. Antonetta seemed interested in what we were discussing, and I decided to visit her too, even though I hadn't been invited. She invited me in, and after we talked for a while, I offered to present a set of Bible lectures that included pictures and Bible texts that were designed for public evangelism. I told her that I would do it for Antonetta and anyone she wanted to join her in her home.

Antonetta accepted and invited her husband and children to join her. I needed some moral support, so I invited the youth leader from my church to join me. We presented the material in Antonetta's home, and then we invited her and her husband to visit our little church.

Antonetta and her husband agreed to attend. They were thrilled with the friendly congregation of believers and with the new truths she was learning in her home. "I've been a Christian for some time," she says. "But it was only when Natalia invited me to the Adventist church that my eyes were opened to the truth.

"I never expected to receive a gift of God's love when I visited my sister last Christmas," Antonetta adds. "That gift of love has transformed my family forever. Our lives are happier, and we're healthier now that we understand God's will for our lives."

Antonetta and her husband are preparing for baptism, the fruits of a small Christmas gift to a friend. Antonetta's sister, Antonia, is still interested in learning more, so Antonetta and I visit her and share our faith with her.

NATALIA CHRISTOVA shares her faith in Chirpan, Bulgaria.

Baruch: Building a Legacy in a Crumbling World



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 53:1–5, Jer. 7:1–11, 28, 45, Matt. 6:25–34.*

Memory Text: “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (*Isaiah 8:20*).

The world, as Baruch knew it, was drawing to a close. Jerusalem and Judah were in their final moments. Assyria, which had dominated the ancient Near East for more than two hundred years, was internally divided, engaged in civil war, and losing its grip on its vassal states. Meanwhile, a new superpower was on the horizon: Babylon. For a little time Judah had some respite and, under good King Josiah (640–609 B.C.), the nation managed to expand its territory and renew its commitment to the worship of the true God. However, with rapid changes occurring at the end of the seventh century B.C., time was running out for Jerusalem. King Josiah died in battle against the Egyptians (*2 Kings 23:29*). His sons, reigning after him, did not have the same status as their father, and they rebelled repeatedly against Babylon, a fatal mistake. Finally, in 586 B.C., Jerusalem was taken, the temple destroyed, and many Judeans taken captive.

Baruch lived in this time of dramatic change and loss. However, though his world was crumbling, he left a legacy that no king or war could destroy.

What can we learn from Baruch, our final background character in the Bible?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 25.*

Baruch's World

Baruch's world was constructed around certain political, economic, and religious realities that dominated his nation at that time. Politically speaking, the country of Judah was chafing under the yoke of Babylonian domination. Strong nationalistic undercurrents affected all areas of society. People wanted to be free of Babylon. Economically, things were going quite well, at least for a sector of the population growing wealthier by exploiting the poor. And, of course, there was the religious system of ancient Judah, which was to form the foundation for all the society.

Read Jeremiah 7:1–11. What are some of the crucial moral and spiritual problems the people were being warned about? What parallels might we be able to draw to our own time today? Give special attention to verse 4. What were the people being told there, and what lesson can we take from that for ourselves?

Baruch's name means "one who is blessed," and Baruch does seem blessed. He was a scribe, which meant that he was a highly educated man. He seems to have come from a family of scribes, and he had the correct family connections.

Exactly how Baruch is drawn into the service of the priest and prophet Jeremiah we are not told. Perhaps it is the solidness of Jeremiah's connection to God that draws Baruch to him. Indeed, the social, political, and economic ideal that Jeremiah preaches is firmly rooted in God's revelation. Jeremiah is not afraid of standing up for the Word of God, even when it is deemed politically incorrect to do so. Through his visions Jeremiah has unique insights into the fallibility of the structures that his society trusted in, and he was called upon by the Lord to warn the people about what their actions would lead to if they didn't change their ways. Perhaps it was his desire to be a part of this that led Baruch into his special role.

Read again Jeremiah 7:1–11. How might these words apply to you in your own walk with the Lord? What things in your life need amending? What "lying words" might you also be trusting in? What other "gods" might you be walking with? How open and honest with yourself are you willing to be in confronting these questions?

Jeremiah's Scribe

The book of Jeremiah provides us with some unique glimpses into the writing process of the Bible. Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe, actually is participating in the transmission and preservation of God's Word. In Jeremiah 36:4, Jeremiah calls Baruch and—as he dictates a message to the people—Baruch copies it all down on a parchment scroll. This is an excellent illustration of how inspiration works. First, God does not physically take control of the prophet Jeremiah and move his hand as he writes. Rather, God gives Jeremiah visions and messages. Normally the prophet then formulates the message and writes it down. In this particular case, Jeremiah himself did not do the writing but dictated to Baruch, who then wrote it down. Baruch also communicates the message in public. Because Jeremiah is out of favor in the court and has been denied access to the temple, Baruch reads the prophetic message in the temple on a holy day. Baruch never claims to be speaking for himself or even for Jeremiah; the message comes from God.

Read the story of Hananiah in Jeremiah 28. In what ways does this narrative reveal the principle revealed in Isaiah 8:20?

God's message does not flatter or bend to public opinion. It is not always, or even very often, "politically correct." Nor does God's message contradict itself; human interpretations of the message might be contradictory but never the message itself.

In Jeremiah 28:7–9, the prophet refers to the unity of Scripture built on the firm foundation of fulfilled prophecy. The false prophet's untimely death in this chapter vividly reinforces this important principle.

The point is that God has given us not only His Word but also very good reasons for trusting in that Word, even when we come to parts that we don't understand or sections that offend our sensibilities. The Bible doesn't save us, Jesus does; but He has revealed Himself to us more fully in the Scriptures than He has anywhere else.

There are many forces at work to weaken our trust in the Word of God. Identify some of those forces and ask yourself how you can protect yourself from them. After all, if we stop trusting in the messages of the Bible, what is left to trust in?

Thwarted Ambitions *(Jeremiah 36)*

The seriousness of the situation finally seemed to be dawning on the people of Judah. In Jeremiah 36:9, the people gathered in the temple for a day of fasting before the Lord. Through his professional connections with other scribes, Baruch manages to secure a good public place, in the window of Gemariah at the entrance to the temple. Here Baruch proceeds to read the scroll that he has written at Jeremiah's dictation. After Baruch's reading of the message, court officials ask him to give them a private reading. After inquiries as to where the message has come from, the officials decide to bring it to the king's attention. For a brief moment it looks as if there might be change in Judah.

For Baruch this is a moment of hope. Should things turn around, then his support for Jeremiah will pay off. In the possible reformation he will be a man of importance, maybe elevated to a high position in the government.

What did the king's response mean to the future hopes of Baruch, at least on a professional level? *See Jeremiah 36.*

Scrolls were made of papyrus and were expensive. They had to be copied by hand. This made each scroll a scarce and precious resource. This particular scroll was God's message to King Jehoiakim. The king and his servants showed a deliberate insult to God by systematically cutting and burning the scroll. The burning of the scroll meant the loss of many hours of hard work by Baruch.

Baruch, who may have hoped for an honored position in court, now realizes that he has backed the "wrong" player and effectively sabotaged his future as a scribe at the royal court of Jerusalem. He also has angered the most powerful man in the kingdom. Here's a clear case where someone's stand for the Lord has cost him something.

Together with Jeremiah, Baruch is now a marked man. Royal agents comb the city, seeking to get hold of these "defeatists." Following God is no path for cowards or people who want to use God in order to make a nice career for themselves. Being God's messenger does not represent a life driven by personal ambition but rather involves letting God's will unfold in our lives, whatever the cost. At times that cost can be very great.

What has following the Lord cost you? When was the last time you had to lose or sacrifice something important to you because you stood for a biblical principle or for a commandment from God? Think through the implications of your answer, whatever it is.

Woe Is Me!

The Lord has a special message just for Baruch (*Jeremiah 45*). And no wonder, considering the circumstances.

First, the historical reference to the fourth year of Jehoiakim in *Jeremiah 45:1* puts chapter 45 after chapter 36. *Jeremiah* is most probably in prison, and the prospect of a revival among the leaders of Judah no longer seems probable. Second, Baruch's future, at least from an earthly perspective, seems bleak at best. Thus, as *Jeremiah 45:3* states, Baruch is having what might be called "a bad day."

Of course, feeling dejected, sad, or depressed is a natural part of our human existence on our fallen earth. There are many reasons for feeling this way, and one never should think that it's wrong or sinful to have these feelings. Depending upon the circumstances, it almost would seem inhuman not to have them. Certainly plenty of biblical characters had their moments of despair (see *1 Kings 19:4*; *Job 6:2, 3*; *Ps. 55:4*). We fool ourselves if we think that somehow we are going to escape them ourselves.

Read Isaiah 53:1–5. What kind of mood and feelings are depicted here, and who is the one who is suffering these feelings? What should that tell us?

What's most important for us to remember during times of emotional distress and sadness is that this doesn't mean that God has forsaken us. It means only that, as with all fallen humanity, we will suffer in this life. Whether the suffering is our own fault or not doesn't, in one sense, matter. What matters is that we, amid our suffering, do not let the evil one use our grief to turn us away from the Lord or make us bitter and resentful against Him. What matters is that we claim God's promises of forgiveness, of healing, of a better future and a new life in a new heaven and a new earth.

We all long for things to go well; we all long for a better existence here and now. But often, given the nature of our world, that doesn't happen, or at least it doesn't happen as we imagine we would like it to. Hence, how important that, amid whatever we are going through, we don't forget the great hope that awaits us once the horrible experience of sin, suffering, and death is forever over.

What are some of your favorite Bible promises about the new heaven and new earth? Read through them, pray over them, and ask the Lord for the faith to hang on until the time when you, yourself, will be living in them.

What Is in It for Me?

Read Jeremiah 45. What does this passage tell us about God? What does it tell us about Baruch?

Baruch is sad, in pain, restless, and worn out. Baruch sees all of his lifework being uprooted, all of his dreams vanishing like a mist.

God's heart is pained too. He has tenderly planted and watched over Israel. Like a parent agonizing over a stubborn, rebellious child—the Lord has warned and pleaded with His people for more than a thousand years. Baruch's pain and sadness are but a faint reflection of God's. Perhaps this is why God's heart always is touched by our sorrows. We never weep alone. The God who knows the “number of hairs” on our heads takes the time to address a despondent scribe and gives him hope and encouragement. In the judgment that was soon to fall on Israel, Baruch would be saved. God would preserve his life. The expression found in verse 5 (“thy life will I give thee for a prey”) also can be found reflected in other parts of the book of Jeremiah (*Jer. 21:9, 38:2 and 39:18*). It evokes the figure of a soldier escaping with his life after a defeat in battle.

Paradoxically, salvation comes only through “defeat.” It was in the humiliation and apparent defeat at the cross that Jesus won the victory. It is only as we are willing to stop fighting and surrender our lives, plans, and future to God that we can find security. It's when we are willing to totally surrender all that we become secure in the Lord.

What similarity can you note between Jeremiah 45:1–5 and Matthew 6:25–34?

In Jeremiah 45, God reminds Baruch of what really is important. In Matthew 6, Jesus reminds us that our lives are more important than our earthly possessions. For all his dreams of greatness, in the hour of disaster all that really mattered was Baruch's life. Ironically, even though Baruch missed out on a great future in the Jerusalem political scene because of his loyalty to Jeremiah, this connection really saved his life and gave him a far bigger legacy than anything he ever could have dreamed of.

It is this legacy that we have searched for in the shadow figures of the Old Testament that we have studied over the past 13 weeks. Most of the people we have gotten to know a little better were not the major power brokers of their particular time, but their names or titles have been recorded in Scripture so that we can learn from them, from both their successes and their failures.

Further Study: “Taking another roll, Jeremiah gave it to Baruch, ‘who wrote therein from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire: and there were added besides unto them many like words.’ Verses 28, 32. The wrath of man had sought to prevent the labors of the prophet of God; but the very means by which Jehoiakim had endeavored to limit the influence of the servant of Jehovah, gave further opportunity for making plain the divine requirements.

“The spirit of opposition to reproof, that led to the persecution and imprisonment of Jeremiah, exists today. Many refuse to heed repeated warnings, preferring rather to listen to false teachers who flatter their vanity and overlook their evil-doing. In the day of trouble such will have no sure refuge, no help from heaven. God’s chosen servants should meet with courage and patience the trials and sufferings that befall them through reproach, neglect, and misrepresentation. They should continue to discharge faithfully the work God has given them to do, ever remembering that the prophets of old and the Saviour of mankind and His apostles also endured abuse and persecution for the Word’s sake.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 437.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What is our understanding of how inspiration works? How has the life and ministry of Ellen G. White helped us understand this important topic?
- 2 What biblical characters had their personal ambitions thwarted because they remained faithful to the Lord?
- 3 In class, talk about what things people have had to give up in order to stand for the Lord. What can you learn from one another’s stories? Ask whether anyone thought what it cost to serve the Lord wasn’t worth what the person has received in return.
- 4 How do you respond when reproved for wrong actions? Are you more likely to repent on your knees or, figuratively speaking, cast the reproof in a fire and seek to imprison the messenger? What does your answer tell you about yourself and what you need to change?
- 5 How can we better understand that just because we are suffering (even as a direct result of our sins), this doesn’t mean that the Lord has forsaken us? How can we learn to hold on to our faith while going through tremendous pain?

The Invitation

by DALTON SWARAY

I live in Sierra Leone in western Africa. I grew up in a non-Christian religion with strict rules. My mother would punish me if I didn't observe the specified times of prayer each day. When I grew up a bit, I asked her what good it did to repeat prayers in a language I didn't understand. I wanted to know God personally. She understood and allowed me to search for my own faith.

I attended some evangelistic meetings in my area just to see what they were about. I was amazed. People gave testimonies and sang such great songs. That day a desire was born in my heart to become a Christian.

I studied at a Christian high school. By this time I believed that God created the world and that Jesus Christ died for sinners. I knew that the Bible was the Christians' holy book, but I seldom saw anyone at school reading it. I wasn't sure that this church was the true way to God.

Then I met Giba, a childhood friend whom I hadn't seen for a long time. We talked for a while; then he invited me to attend evangelistic meetings at his church. "God loves you," he said. "He wants you in His fold. Please come." I didn't go, but I felt restless. Finally I visited Giba's church on Sabbath morning.

It was different from any Christian worship service I'd seen. After a mission story the congregation divided into groups to discuss a Bible topic from a book they had. I wanted to know more. I received a lesson quarterly before I left and studied it at home. Every point was supported by Bible texts.

I continued to attend the Adventist church and compared what they taught with what I had learned elsewhere. I wondered why Adventists worship on Saturday, but as I studied the Bible I discovered that God hadn't changed His holy day; men had.

As I studied the Bible, I realized that I didn't choose God; God chose me.

Giba and I studied together, and he helped me understand God's Word. Sadly, he died before I was baptized. But his ministry continues. Giba invited me to meet God, and now I am inviting my friends as well. One of my friends has been baptized, and we are working together to bring others. My greatest desire is to lead my parents to God's wonderful family.

Your mission offerings helped me answer God's invitation to follow Him. Thank you so much!

DALTON SWARAY *studies and shares his faith in Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa.*

Next quarter's Bible study guide, *Jesus Wept: The Bible and Human Emotions*, by Julian Melgosa, will look at human emotions and will give us biblical principles on how we can understand our emotions and seek the power of the Lord to bring them under His loving sovereignty. It's our prayer that these lessons will, in the context of understanding our emotions, help us reach out to the Lord, who has bestowed on us the greatest emotion of all: love. No matter what our emotional ups and downs are, may each of us learn to bask in that love, especially in the down times, and then through God's grace reflect that love to others. In the end, no matter what our sorrows, "love never fails" (*1 Cor. 13:8, NKJV*).

Lesson 1—Emotions

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **Negative Emotions** (*2 Samuel 13*)

MONDAY: **Positive Emotions** (*Col. 3:12–14*)

TUESDAY: **Jesus' Emotional Manifestations: Part 1** (*Mark 8:1–3*)

WEDNESDAY: **Jesus' Emotional Manifestations: Part 2** (*Luke 19:41–44*)

THURSDAY: **God's Plan for Painful Emotions** (*John 16:20–24*)

Memory Text—*John 16:20*

Sabbath Gem: Emotions are a vital part of our personalities. They can play an important part in our overall well-being. How important it is then to examine our emotions and how they impact our lives.

Lesson 2—Divine Provision for Anxiety

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The First Fearful Experience** (*Gen. 3:6–10*)

MONDAY: **Do Not Be Afraid** (*Gen. 15:1–3*)

TUESDAY: **Trust Against Anxiety** (*John 14:1, 2*)

WEDNESDAY: **Of Birds and Lilies** (*Matt. 6:25–33*)

THURSDAY: **One Day at a Time** (*Matt. 6:34*)

Memory Text—*1 Peter 5:7*

Sabbath Gem: Through divine power we can have relief from fear and anxiety. Trust in God and contentment are key factors in looking at the future with confidence.

Lessons for the Visually Impaired: The regular *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free each month in braille and on audiocassette to sight-impaired and physically handicapped persons who cannot read normal ink print. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097.