

Spiritual Exercises for Adventists

**“HE THAT HATH MY COMMANDMENTS, AND
KEEPETH THEM, HE IT IS THAT LOVETH ME:
AND HE THAT LOVETH ME SHALL BE LOVED OF
MY FATHER, AND I WILL LOVE HIM, AND WILL
MANIFEST MYSELF TO HIM....IF A MAN LOVE
ME, HE WILL KEEP MY WORDS: AND MY FA-
THER WILL LOVE HIM, AND WE WILL COME UN-
TO HIM, AND MAKE OUR ABODE WITH HIM.”**

John 14:21-23

Chapter 8

MEDITATION

“Be ye holy, for I am holy.” 1 Peter 1:16

THE previous chapter demonstrated how Prayer is the first component of Spiritual Exercise. For many Christians it is the only component, and I’m sure you will find the material in this chapter to be new and exciting.

For the purpose of discussion I use the words ‘meditation’ and ‘contemplation’ interchangeably.

This is a critical piece of the Spiritual Exercise experience and Mrs. White emphasized this point when she wrote: “It is by contemplating Christ, by exercising faith in him, by experiencing for ourselves his saving grace, that we are qualified to present him to the world.”⁽¹⁾ That means that if we don’t do this, then we aren’t qualified to witness! Did you ever know that?

Even if you were educated in the Adventist system you probably never had much instruction, if any, on how to meditate or contemplate. I don’t remember any teachers talking about the subject. It wasn’t mentioned, and it wasn’t practiced. It even wasn’t preached!

Of course it’s not possible to have a group contemplation;

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well, maybe it's possible, but not easy to do. Imagine a group of people sitting in a room with no one talking. Everyone has their eyes closed while contemplating the glory of God, or how bright Heaven is. With no ability to check for compliance, there's no telling if it's really happening. But that doesn't matter because this part of the Spiritual Exercise is meant to be private—at least it works better that way.

I admit there are no written rules, but I know I'm more comfortable being alone during this activity.

Contemplation can be performed with the eyes open; it can even be done while driving the car, or doing work. All that's needed is the ability to think about a topic.

The Jesuit priests who are members of the Society of Jesus include this in their Spiritual Exercises, and I was quite surprised to learn that Ellen White mentions Spiritual Exercises numerous times. Let's examine nine of them:

The first one emphasizes the need for both prayer and meditation, and how Satan encourages a society that is high-pressure and full of so many things that we are tempted—almost forced to forget these two things.

“Satan leads many to believe that prayer to God is useless and but a form. He well knows how needful are meditation and prayer to keep Christ's followers aroused to resist his cunning and deception. By his devices he would divert the mind from these important exercises, that the soul may not lean for help upon the Mighty One and obtain strength from Him to resist his attacks.”⁽²⁾

Do you have a burden for souls? If not then don't get discouraged because after a month or two of Spiritual Exercises it

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will develop. This next quote involves a church who has done nothing to help some of its members. Many of our churches have a steady stream of people going out the back door, and this is part of the solution to this ongoing problem.

“We found that we could do nothing for the scattered sheep near us until we had first corrected the wrongs in many of the members of the church. They had let these poor souls wander. They felt no burden for them. In fact, they seemed shut up to themselves, and were dying a spiritual death for want of spiritual exercise...there was but little apparent interest for any only their own families. With so narrow a religion they were dying a spiritual death.”⁽³⁾

Does this previous quote speak to you or your church? If we were to spend more time together it would help. If all church members attended Prayer Meeting and if there was a Social Meeting (Praise Service) then this framework would allow the members to spend enough time together that it would be easier to bond together and be more responsive to each other's needs.

The third quote refers to those who seem to be spiritual but who bear no fruit. I'm not too concerned with this group, because as they spend time with God and the saints in the church they will begin to desire to bear fruit, and it will begin maybe slowly at first, but the Holy Spirit will prompt them and it will happen.

There are people “who are in the habit of praying, and who delight in religious exercises; yet there is a lack...their prayers are not answered...The difficulty is with the people. While professing godliness, they do not bear fruit to the glory of God; their works are not what they should be.”⁽⁴⁾

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We know that as we come closer to God our thoughts become His thoughts and our actions become His actions. In this way we become sanctified.

“This world is not the Christian’s heaven, but merely the workshop of God, where we are to be fitted up to unite with sinless angels in a holy heaven. We should be constantly training the mind to noble, unselfish thoughts. This education is necessary to so bring into exercise the powers which God has given us that His name shall best be glorified upon the earth.” ⁽⁵⁾

The fifth quote is a beautiful one because it points out the process where we learn to enjoy new things. Spiritual Exercises change our value system. We learn to delight in new things as we begin living like our pattern—Jesus Christ who was a man of prayer and meditation.

“Professed Christians, worldly Christians, are unacquainted with heavenly things. They will never be brought to the gates of the New Jerusalem to engage in exercises which have not hitherto specially interested them. They have not trained their minds to delight in devotion and in meditation upon things of God and heaven.” ⁽⁶⁾

This quote below opens the door to an important topic. It points out that those saints living during the 2nd Coming need to meet certain qualifications in order to withstand the glory of God. They may be saved, but they also need to meet this requirement.

“Those who have trained the mind to delight in spiritual exercises are the ones who can be translated and not be overwhelmed with the purity and transcendent glory of heav-

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en.”⁽⁷⁾

The seventh quote surprised me. I wasn't expecting it. I had no idea there was a link between Spiritual Exercise and happiness. But this reminds me of my father who spent little time as an Adventist pastor providing psychological counseling. He always said, just study your Bible, and things will work out and you will find happiness. I don't know if he ever knew about this quote, but it seems to answer that question.

I'm sure you are aware that a high percentage of Americans take anti-depression medications each and every day. Well, if these same people performed Spiritual Exercise on a daily basis, their needs would change and the pills might not be necessary as they discover a happiness that is eternal.

“Disciplining the mind by religious exercises to love devotion and heavenly things, will bring the greatest amount of happiness.”⁽⁸⁾

So, if you're unhappy in your marriage, or unhappy with your children, or unhappy with your career, then Spiritual Exercises can help.

The following quote is super-important because you and I have been fighting a battle with self for many years, with little or no success. We discover below how pointless it is to try it on our own. Only when my desires become God's desires will I be able to change.

And if I want my brother or sister to change, then this applies to them also. They can do it only when they engage with God through Spiritual Exercises and begin thinking His

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thoughts and having His desires.

“If we make God our trust, we have it in our power to control the mind...Through continued exercise it will become strong to battle with internal foes and to subdue self. . .then. . .when we engage in labor for souls, a power will attend our efforts.”⁽⁹⁾

This above quote also explains why our evangelism is so ineffective as we have no power. We must get close to God and qualify for evangelistic work. Otherwise it doesn't succeed.

This final quote impressed me with its last statement:

“With strictly temperate habits, and with mental and physical labor combined, they could accomplish a far greater amount of labor and preserve clearness of mind. If they would pursue such a course, their thoughts and words would flow more freely, their religious exercises would be more energized, and the impressions made upon their hearers would be more marked.”⁽¹⁰⁾

When I witness I want to make an impression. I want my words to make a difference. So many times have I had no credibility, and this is the reason. This explains how our church is failing in the evangelistic department.

These nine quotes help us understand why meditation is so very important. It's an integral part of the daily Spiritual Exercise and can't be ignored. This is non-negotiable.

The Jesuit contemplation is very similar to ours. Here's what Ignatius Loyola wrote:

“I am to picture to myself, as if I saw with the eye of the imagination, the synagogues, villages and towns which Christ

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Our Lord passes through and in which he preaches. . .”

“One should see with the eye of the imagination the road leading from Nazareth to Bethlehem; its length and breadth are to be considered as well as the circumstance whether the road is flat or whether it leads through valleys and over heights.”

“The Last Supper is to be pictured as vividly as if the person were himself sitting at the table, seeing the actions of Christ and hearing the speech of those present.”

“The person must taste the loaves and fishes with which Jesus feeds the multitude; he must smell the Magdalene’s ointment, and with her must anoint the Savior’s feet, wipe them and kiss them.”

Even in the meditation of the night in the Garden of Gethsemane, a precise representation is prescribed: “Here the road from Mount Sion to the Valley of Jehoshaphat must be contemplated, and likewise the Garden, whether it is broad or long, whether of one style or of another.”

Ignatius wanted his disciples to see, hear, feel, taste and smell the setting. He instructed them to spend time and let the imagination run with the scenes. He told them to read one of the scenes in the Gospels and then let their mind take them there and become a part of the crowd watching Jesus, listening to His voice, experiencing the event as if they were there.

For example, imagine a hot summer day:

“It’s lunch time, and Jesus and a group of twelve men are walking on the dirt road through the countryside. They are headed toward Sidon. Jesus is the only one who knows why they are going there, but no one complains. The trip is forty miles each way, and no one went ahead to make arrangements. It’s a

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long way, and if there are many miracles along the way the trip could take more than a week. No plans have been made for provisions or places to sleep. If storms come in off the ocean, it could get pretty ugly. But for now, the sky is clear; there is a slight breeze coming from the west. The temperature is in the 90's and everyone is sweating; no one is talking. Fortunately the breeze keeps the insects away from sweaty faces. Everyone is thirsty and everyone could use a bath.

The road is narrow and covered with pebbles and stones making it difficult to walk without looking at the ground. With only sandals it's too easy to stub a toe on a rock or twist an ankle, so the effort is slow and tedious.

All the fields are covered with different types of grain; it seems that every space is either cultivated or contains groves of trees. No land is wasted.

There's a small village ahead, maybe ten or fifteen houses alongside the road. Maybe some food can be purchased there. Maybe not.

Judas has the money.”

There, you get the idea?

This is how to contemplate the life and work of Jesus. Just let your mind take you there as described by the Bible, and no scene is out of reach.

Many Christians today meditate by emptying the mind and opening the door to a mystical experience that is nothing but spiritualism. We need to be careful to always be in control of our thoughts. Always lifting our mind to Heaven, and glorifying God. Ours is to better know Christ of the New Testament and the Lord of the Old Testament, and we can use these stories to

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help us achieve these goals.

Lest I give the impression that the Bible doesn't support this part of Spiritual Exercises, let me quote from Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

Mrs. White said, "The mind should be elevated to dwell upon eternal scenes, heaven, its treasures, its glories, and should take sweet and holy satisfaction in the truths of the Bible."⁽¹¹⁾

She also described how, when reading the Bible we: "should take one verse, and concentrate the mind on the task of ascertaining the thought which God has put in that verse for us. We should dwell on the thought till it becomes our own, and we know 'what saith the Lord.'"⁽¹²⁾

So, she is telling us that to contemplate these scenes is actually "elevating" the mind. This is a healthy and beneficial exercise.

I love the words "sweet and holy satisfaction" because it reinforces the beauty of the experience. This dwelling upon the scenes binds me to the people involved. I can see the Samaritan woman talking to Jesus and suggesting that the dogs can eat the crumbs off the floor. I can see the wonderful expression on the face of Jesus when He recognizes her faith. He is thrilled to find one with great faith; one who appreciates. It made His day!

Notice that the purpose of this exercise is all about the truths of the Bible. We don't enter into this with the intention of creating something that isn't there.

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We are reminded and let me repeat that "Satan leads many to believe that prayer to God is useless and but a form. He well knows how needful are meditation and prayer to keep Christ's followers aroused to resist his cunning and deception. By his devices he would divert the mind from these important exercises, that the soul may not lean for help upon the Mighty One and obtain strength from Him to resist his attacks."⁽¹³⁾

For many Christians prayer is indeed but an empty form. Just a process to meet an established goal of so many of this and so many of that. But notice how we are guided to understand the importance of both meditation and prayer. Notice the word 'exercises' and maybe like me, you never noticed how it is included in the *Testimonies for the Church*.

If you think that this process is reserved for adults, then read this: "The future abode of the righteous and their everlasting reward are high and ennobling themes for the young to contemplate."⁽¹⁴⁾

Do you get it?

This is not reserved for the elderly. This is a process we should be teaching to our youth. This was never done for me. I was never encouraged to do this. My Spiritual Exercises were dwarfed from the beginning; I never went more than half way!

Here's a quote we've all heard: "It would be well for us to spend a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation of the life of Christ from the manger to Calvary. We should take it point by point and let the imagination vividly grasp each scene, especially the closing ones of His earthly life. By thus contemplating His teachings and sufferings, and the infinite sacrifice made by Him for the redemption of the race, we may strengthen our faith, quicken our love, and become more deeply imbued with

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the spirit which sustained our savior. If we would be saved at last we must all learn the lesson of penitence and faith at the foot of the cross, . . . Everything noble and generous in man will respond to the contemplation of Christ upon the cross.”⁽¹⁵⁾

I’ll talk more about this quote later.

We are also reminded again that “This world is not the Christian’s heaven, but merely the workshop of God, where we are to be fitted up to unite with sinless angels in a holy heaven. We should be constantly training the mind to noble, unselfish thoughts. This education is necessary to so bring into exercise the powers which God has given us that His name shall best be glorified upon the earth.”⁽¹⁶⁾

Notice the key word ‘exercise’ in the above paragraph? It is used to glorify His name. We have powers to be developed and shaped to His glory. As we invest time in prayer, meditation and service, our characters change, our whole being changes. We grow into a new person who is reborn daily and who reflects the character of God. The saints become like honey attracting bees, and people who see them desire to know more of what they have.

We try to evangelize while we are empty sepulchres In order to be a light to the world, we must have light! Our minds must be trained—a transformation must take place.

To be more precise, “The contemplation of the matchless depths of a Saviour’s love should fill the mind, touch and melt the soul, refine and elevate the affections, and completely transform the whole character.”⁽¹⁷⁾

This part of the Spiritual Exercise is an antidote for addictions such as illicit drugs, or reading novels, or even TV enter-

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tainment.

Once the character is transformed then “God would do great things for His people if they would come out from the world, and be separate. If they would submit to be led by Him, He would make them a praise in all the earth.” ⁽¹⁸⁾

This is the natural outcome of character development. When Spiritual Exercises are followed and the character is transformed, the believer is viewed differently by other people who are observing. Imagine this...people who listen to the Holy Spirit and who feel something is missing in their lives, will come and inquire, “What do you have?”

What a difference!

Instead of working to persuade people to attend an evangelistic meeting, they will request it. This is opposite of what we are accustomed to. This is revolutionary. This is the plan that the Lord desires for His church.

Wouldn't you think that our church papers would be saying more about this? Wouldn't you think that our Pastors would be talking about this all the time? Wouldn't you think that the culture of our church would be molded in this direction?

Why is there so much silence about this?

And, there's more: “If all were devoted to God, a precious light would shine forth from them, which would have a direct influence upon all who are brought in contact with them.” ⁽¹⁹⁾

Is there any question about this?

All for want of Spiritual Exercise.

If you think that Spiritual Exercises are optional, then read this again: “Those who have trained the mind to delight in spir-

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itual exercises are the ones who can be translated and not be overwhelmed with the purity and transcendent glory of heaven.” (20)

When Jesus told the apostles that He and the Father are One, and that He wants us to be one with Him and with each other, He wasn't kidding. We read those verses in the gospel of John, and move on without taking them seriously.

Only if we follow the Spiritual Exercises will we become close enough to God to be blessed by the glory of heaven. We know the wicked will be destroyed by God's glory at the 2nd coming. We know that the wrath of God is not anger, but a revelation of glory that is deadly for the sinners.

Just imagine being so close to God so that you know that you are partaking of His divine nature. The apostle Peter said in 2 Peter 1:4 “Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

So many Christians are lukewarm and fail to grasp the significance of this text. It's so easy to taste God once a week in a praise service, and never approach the requirements for this promise.

It's my understanding that Adventists read the Bible less than other Christians.

Imagine that?

How could we have drifted this far?

This means we are totally unfit for the job we have to do. What good are the three angel's messages if we are so delin-

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quent?

We are totally unqualified for the mission of the church, while in this condition. We are fooling ourselves.

But what is good about this, is a small group of believers can catch the fire, and conform to the requirements, and God's blessings will flow. The Holy Spirit can then more effectively do His work.

We don't have to wait until the entire world church is on fire for God. No, we can start a small group and work together to elevate our characters to get closer to God through Spiritual Exercises.

Show this to your pastor: "Ministers should have clear conceptions of eternal things....then they can impress others and excite in them a love for contemplating heavenly things." (21)

Pastors will get enthused if their members will get on board. They are influenced by the congregation and it's hard for a hot ember to remain hot when it sits alone. Our pastors are people too, and if we make a commitment about these Spiritual Exercises, it won't take long for him or her to see a difference and the church will grow in more ways than one.

But there is a prerequisite: "The power of evil is so identified with human nature that no man can overcome except by union with Christ....The reason why many find the Christian life so deplorably hard...is they try to attach themselves to Christ without first detaching themselves from these cherished idols." (22)

As I've said before, we need to cast aside those cherished idols. We need to make a real, valid, honest commitment.

If you think that Jesus had an advantage, then read this: "His

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humanity made prayer a necessity and privilege. He required all the stronger divine support and comfort which His Father was ready to impart to Him..." (23)

This is why He went out to pray and meditate early in the morning when He could be alone. He needed divine help. He couldn't have done it without prayer. Have you ever known that?

It makes me feel better to know that Jesus needed prayer just like I do. It helps me to identify with Him. If He did it, and needed it, then why do I think I can live without it?

One of the reasons this process works is that "If Christ be the theme of contemplation, the thoughts will be widely separated from every subject which will lead to impure acts. The mind will strengthen by dwelling upon elevating subjects." (24)

But wait! There's more: "If the mind were educated to contemplate elevating subjects, the imagination trained to reflect upon pure and holy things, it would be fortified." (25)

So this is how it works! As I perform my Spiritual Exercises, I will find it easier to put away my lusts and overcome my other weaknesses. This is an automatic process. Instead of working hard to quit sinning and to improve my character, I should just do this, and then my desires will change and strengthen with even better results. I love this quote, don't you?

Here's how Ellen White summarized it: "If we make God our trust, we have it in our power to control the mind... Through continued exercise it will become strong to battle with internal foes and to subdue self...then...when we engage in labor for souls, a power will attend our efforts." (26)

Yes, my desires will change, and if I'm uncomfortable at first,

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then with time I will begin to enjoy the process: “The mind should be elevated to dwell upon eternal scenes, heaven, its treasures, its glories, and should take sweet and holy satisfaction in the truths of the Bible.” (27)

Did you notice the word ‘satisfaction’ in the preceding quote? This is assurance that we will be affected by these exercises. There is a positive outcome, and I like that.

Now that we are more aware of the need for meditation there remains for us to understand how it can be done. How does meditation work?

Let’s pick a story and perform an exercise together.

Pool of Bethesda

“After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent fold, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years. When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole? The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me. Jesus

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saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the Sabbath.”

Ellen White gives us a little more insight in the book *Desire of Ages* but there is plenty here for us to contemplate.

When reading the Gospels, it's easy to read information that was provided without considering it's purpose. St. John opens this story by reminding us that Jerusalem is at a higher elevation. The journey by foot is exhausting and uphill. It's not an easy trip to make on foot. So, in my mind's eye, I imagine walking with Jesus and others on this journey step-by-step, hour by hour trudging constantly upward toward the city on the hill. From a distance we can see the walls of the city and we can see the temple at the top of the mount. The day is hot and sweat comes easy. Sweat that makes garments smell; sweat that sours; sweat that cools the body but creates unpleasant odors. With no change of clothes, the washing and drying time for these garments will be very time consuming.

Jesus attended the feast, and we know not where He lodged, but maybe we can presume He stayed with Lazarus just outside the city.

One day he happened to be walking in the poor part of town near the “sheep gate” where the animals were corralled. This part of town was not a good place to live because animals were constantly being brought in, and maybe even slaughtered there for food to be sold. At any rate, there was a pool nearby that had been taken over by people who were disabled.

Imagine with me this scene, this part of town, the uneven pavement, the buildings built close together, the bleating of sheep, the rats in dark places, the cart wheels on the stones, the

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men talking, the children shouting to each other as they play in the street.

We walk down this street and see the pool. We look and see maybe over fifty people sitting or lying on mats. The rim of the pool is crowded. The strong people have muscled their way to the water's edge where they can have an advantage. These people are aggressive and some have taken their position by force. They are angry with God, and they are angry with themselves for what they have turned out to be.

Every person around this pool believes that they are there because of some sin they have committed. Some are well aware of what these sins are, while others are confused. Yet others are convinced it's because of sins of their parents; sins they had no control over—but God is angry with their parents and is taking it out on them.

No one in that group of people is happy. None are content with life and all are suffering.

We watch Jesus stop in the street. He looks over the people. It takes several seconds for Him to examine each person while He remains unmoved. He takes His time and looks from right to left, and then His gaze returns to someone near the center of the back.

He looks down and guides His feet up the dirty stairs, following a narrow pathway between the people. Some women are grouped together for safety, while in other places there are older men; and yet other places have teenagers. All are watching this stranger move among them. Conversations are interrupted and those in slumber are awakened by the silence.

Jesus walks up to a man and stops.

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The man was not expecting visitors at this time of day. Perhaps he was fortunate and had a brother who carried him to his spot each morning and picked him up each evening. There were others who stayed on their mats without ever leaving except for when they used the latrine nearby, reminding me that the smell of the whole area was very unpleasant.

The man sees Jesus stop in front of him, but he doesn't look up until he hears Jesus' voice.

No one has ever visited him before. He wasn't expecting to be visited. But in surprise he lifts his eyes. His eyes meet the eyes of his creator as Jesus looks down upon him.

"Will you be made whole?" are the words he hears Jesus speak.

The man thinks this is a dumb question because it's very clear and obvious that he is in no position to outmaneuver those who are in front of him. There are too many people who are stronger and who are positioned closer to the water.

But the man is softened by the look of Jesus' eyes. The countenance of His face seems soft and tender. The inflections of the voice reflect a kindness undeserving of sarcasm, so he responds with an explanation.

We hear him respond to Jesus, "Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool; but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me."

He referred to Jesus as "sir" so we realize he did recognize in Jesus someone deserving of respect and it was a sincere question deserving of an equally sincere answer. It reveals to us something about this man.

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Jesus lowered His voice and said, “Rise take up thy bed and walk.”

It was a simple sentence. The words were uncomplicated. They were short and to the point.

The man made a small effort to move his legs, and they began to respond to the signals from his brain. One movement led to another, and within a few seconds he was standing upright and delighted.

The man looked down at his legs. He bent over and felt them, he articulated his toes and his knees. He jumped up and down, he swayed back and forth; he bent down and back up.

Then he remembered he was told to pick up his mat, so he bent over and rolled it up and tucked it under his left arm.

Only then did he wonder about the man who had healed him, and he turned to talk to him, but he was gone. The man looked carefully at the entire pool area to find Jesus, but he had left.

The man didn't think to say good-bye to anyone and his first thought certainly wasn't to brag about his miraculous recovery, so without talking to anyone else, for the man also had no friends, he followed the path between the people and left the pool, heading home to drop of his mat before going straight to the temple to worship and thank God.

One of the things we noticed was how all the people watched this stranger come into their place and saw Him walk past all the people on one side of the pool, and stop and talk to a man. Hundreds of eyes watched this man who had been there longer than anyone else suddenly stand up and start jumping

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with excitement.

We watch as Jesus continues His walk around pool and makes His way back to the dirty street. And not one person looks up to Him and asks, “Me too?” Not one person has sufficient faith to reach out and touch His garment. Not one person has enough faith to even make contact with Him in any way.

We watch as Jesus leaves; we watch as these people lose their only chance for healing in this lifetime. We watch despair and anger settle in as they reject Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Am I like one of those people? Is Jesus walking past me today? Do I have the faith to look up to Him and speak the words, “me too?” Do I have the faith to reach out and touch His garment?

This is how I imagine the scene just described. I smell the place, I see it, I hear it and I try to feel it. Sometimes I imagine it’s on a hot day, while sometimes it might be chilly, or maybe during winter when it could be very cold and rainy.

Elisha

One of the most interesting men in scripture was Elisha. Remember how he asked for a blessing from Elijah? And now shortly after Elijah was taken to heaven in that chariot of fire, Elisha was doing his best to further the work of the Lord by guiding the schools of the prophets. Two new schools had been founded by Elijah; one in Bethel and the other in Jericho. These schools taught the young how to read and write, and also to become leaders in Israel as they were instructed regarding the his-

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tory of their nation and how the Lord was still their leader.

Elisha was committed to religious education for the youth of Israel. He loved kids and he was respected for his work.

I imagine it was another hot day and Elisha was headed to Mt. Carmel. He had just left the city of Jericho where he had helped solve a public health issue. Their water was contaminated, so he prayed to the Lord, who provided a miracle, and the problem was solved. The people were overjoyed because without clean water, the entire city would have to move to another place, and that would be very difficult.

Elisha remained humble while all eyes were upon him and as he represented the power of God to the chosen people.

As he walked through the small town of Bethel people came out to greet him. His walk through their town turned into a parade.

We watch with our imagination as he moves down the dusty street and is met by men and women. He's a celebrity and is already famous, even though Elijah has been gone for just a short time. These are the people who lived through the famine that lasted three years. Imagine having no rain, not even one drop, for three years? These are the people, many of them, who were unfaithful and followed Ahab and Jezebel in worshipping the pagan idols. They gave up on God; they abandoned Him and decided to try different gods in an effort to get rain.

These people remembered how a group of men went and searched for the body of Elijah, and now everyone was convince that the story about the chariot of fire coming to take him to Heaven was true.

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Some people saw Elisha take the old robe of Elijah and smite the waters of the Jordan River; the river parted and he walked across the dry river bed. And now Elisha was in their town and it was exciting.

As he leaves the town many of the children follow him further, and as they separate from the adults in the village, their attitude changes, and they become unruly. Some of the older children begin to mock him. They want to see a miracle. Like so many of the hypocrites of Jesus' day, they are thrill-seekers, and nothing more.

I would like to see a miracle, wouldn't you? It would be exciting to see a miracle, but miracles are given by God for specific reasons, and they aren't for our entertainment.

These boys are not spiritually minded, and just want to see something exciting happen. They turn away from God and embrace the urgings of Satan and begin to taunt Elisha. They begin chanting to him, "Go up, bald man, go up!" Over and over they taunt. "Go up, bald man, go up!" The chants grow louder and louder as the younger and more timid children join the fray, until finally Elisha is embarrassed that young men of this holy nation would act in such a manner. He's embarrassed to think that the Lord is witnessing this shameful behavior.

Elisha is walking with a few of the young men from one of the schools and they ask Elisha if there is anything they could do, and Elisha answers that only the Lord can intervene.

He then stops walking and turns to face the chanting crowd. He curses them in the name of the Lord. No one had ever seen him do this before, and the boys are not deterred as Elisha continues his journey on foot—one slow step at a time.

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But a few moments later the students with Elisha hear screams behind them, and they turn to see what's happening. They see two bears running after the crowd of children who are headed back to Bethel, running as fast as they can, while the bears overtake them and maul them. Oh, it's a horrible sight!

Elisha doesn't slow down, but his assistants walk backward for several minutes as the scene unfolds in front of them. And when they finally return to walk with Elisha, they notice the tears on his face. He is weeping for those boys who were so unfaithful.

You see, Elisha believes in proper education, and those boys had just failed a test with eternal consequences. He loves them even though they mocked him.

Salvation is a serious business, and the Lord sometimes uses harsh measures to get our attention. And we, today, can still benefit from the study of men and women, even children of past ages.

Peter and John

“Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour. And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms of them that entered into the temple; Who seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple asked an alms. And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us. And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something of them. Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I

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thee in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk. And he took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God.”

Picture this scene in your imagination and watch Peter and John head up the hill, and reach the gates to the temple. There was a steady stream of people going up for the prayers. Those who lived in Jerusalem and those visiting. People who could take the time out of their busy schedules to pray at the ninth hour were there.

The door to the temple was a lucrative place to beg for alms. It provided the man with sufficient funds for his relatives to purchase food for his support. He was there every day, but had never seen Jesus. I don't know how this happened; maybe Jesus used this entrance on days when the man wasn't feeling well enough to beg.

Picture the beautiful temple. The temple that Josephus described as having golden doors that gleamed in the morning sunlight. Wait, let me insert his very words: “Now the outward face of the temple in its front wanted nothing that was likely to surprise either men's minds or their eyes; for it was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun's own rays. But this temple appeared to strangers, when they were coming to it at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow; for as to those parts of it that were not gilt, they were exceeding white. On its top it had spikes with sharp points, to prevent any pollution of

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it by birds sitting upon it. Of its stones, some of them were forty-five cubits in length, five in height, and six in breadth. Before this temple stood the altar, fifteen cubits high, and equal both in length and breadth; each of which dimensions was fifty cubits. The figure it was built in was a square, and it had corners like horns; and the passage up to it was by an insensible acclivity. It was formed without any iron tool, nor did any such iron tool so much as touch it at any time. There was also a wall of partition, about a cubit in height, made of fine stones, and so as to be grateful to the sight; this encompassed the holy house and the altar, and kept the people that were on the outside off from the priests. Moreover, those that had the gonorrhoea and the leprosy were excluded out of the city entirely; women also, when their courses were upon them, were shut out of the temple; nor when they were free from that impurity, were they allowed to go beyond the limit before-mentioned; men also, that were not thoroughly pure, were prohibited to come into the inner [court of the] temple; nay, the priests themselves that were not pure were prohibited to come into it also.” (28)

Following this description you can readily understand how this was the source of much pride throughout all of the Jewish world.

And there were Jewish communities in the major cities of all thirty-five Roman Provinces, and those Jews wanted to come see the splendor of the temple. They wanted to worship where they believed the presence of the Lord resided. Poor people, of course, couldn't afford to make the trip, so there were many wealthy visitors passing through this gate, and it was a busy and lucrative place. It was a good place to observe the different colored robes and fine jewelry worn by these men and women. It

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was also a good place to smell their perfumes as they walked past the beggar on their way in and out.

It is believed that Peter was a short man, and probably thin, so in my mind's eye I see him walking with John up the street paved with uneven stones. John was careful to point out more than once how he ran faster than Peter on Resurrection morning, so he and Peter had an emotional attachment that was personal. But on this day they were thinking more about Jesus, and about the Holy Spirit that now resided within them. They were thinking about how they were going to preach in the courtyards of the temple and tell the visitors about Jesus Christ. They were going to read the prophecy of Daniel, and Isaiah, and describe how the Messiah had been foretold, and how the new kingdom was a spiritual one.

This wasn't the first time for Peter and John; no, this was a routine they had just begun, and one that was fruitful. People were responding to their message, and the power of the Holy Spirit was working on people's hearts, and they were anticipating another day of joy in the Lord.

They approached the beggar, and having passed him by on previous occasions John didn't even look at him as they headed for the open doors. Peter, on the other hand, also was paying no attention to the beggar, until suddenly he stopped, walked over to him and engaged him in conversation.

Peter told him how they had no money, and then we hear him tell the man to rise up and walk.

We can see John stop walking and watch as Peter talks to the man.

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We can also see John smile as the man responds to Peter's touch, as Peter takes his hand and lifts. John's smile turns into a grin as the man stands for the first time in his entire life. His muscles that were atrophied suddenly become visible and strong. His legs respond to his every desire and he jumps; he leaps; he runs back and forth praising God.

Doesn't it warm your heart as you think about this scene? Imagine this man joining Peter and John as they enter the courtyard and begin preaching. The local worshippers who are there recognize this man as he praises Jesus; he repeats again and again what happened.

A great commotion arose, and the temple police responded and came over in an attempt to restore dignity to the occasion. The leaders of the temple came in time to hear Peter and John preaching about Jesus and linking the miracle with Jesus of Nazareth. Peter was preaching and repeating the events of forty plus days ago when Jesus was crucified, and how He arose from the tomb, providing salvation to all sinners. He told how Jesus was the eternal sacrifice, how the temple curtain was torn from the top to the bottom, how the earthquake had struck at the same time Jesus gave His life for our sins.

Oh, they had a lot to say, and it was convincing. So convincing that the temple police grabbed Peter and John and whisked them off to the side and into a room where they could be interrogated and disciplined if necessary.

But the man could not be stilled. I can still see him talking excitedly, praising God for his delivery from bondage. He could now walk and work, he could earn a living in a productive way, he could praise his thanksgiving to God with all his might.

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The Lord's Prayer

“Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be they name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.”

This comes to us from the 6th chapter of the Matthew gospel, and these are the words spoken by Jesus.

Ellen White wrote: “In the Lord’s prayer, we have an example of a perfect petition. How simple, yet how comprehensive it is! This prayer should be taught to the children. Let all study carefully the principles contained in it.”⁽²⁹⁾ She also said: “In the Lord’s prayer, solidity, strength, and earnestness are united with meekness and reverence. It is an expression of the divine character of its Author.”⁽³⁰⁾

As I meditate, I frequently repeat this prayer, just like I do when I’m praying. There are two ways to do this; one way is to just say the words as if it’s a chant, and another is to pause along the way and think about the meaning of each phrase or even just a word.

I might pause after the first two words, and contemplate this characteristic of God the Father; how He is as loving as Jesus, and how He was responsive to the needs of Jesus. Without His help Jesus could not have saved us. Without His help Jesus would have sinned! And we have full access to the same help that Jesus had. In fact, I believe that we have access to *more* help

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than Jesus had. We fail to teach our children how important our individual mission is. We don't do as good a job as the parents of Jesus did. So we fail along the way, but as we meditate upon this prayer, we sinners can be encouraged to renew our understanding of the true characteristics of the Father.

He is in heaven. Heaven is a real place, the control center of the universe. As our telescopes in space reveal new galaxies each and every month, the universe to us is expanding. Each of these galaxies should increase our opinion of the greatness of God and His power. It should impress upon us how powerful He is, and it should renew our sense of awe as we contrast His power with His eagerness for us to partake of His divine nature, and to be one with the trinity.

His kingdom will come to earth. We read in Revelation that the Holy City will reside on earth. But more important, Jesus is coming soon and His kingdom is already established here in the hearts of His own, and we are invited to be citizens of that precious kingdom.

As we follow the pleadings and counsel of the Holy Spirit daily, the will of the Father is played out in our lives. We don't need to expend much energy trying to figure out what His will is for He will impress it upon us. As we partake of the divine nature our thoughts come into conformity to His thoughts. Our desires become His desires, and His will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Isn't that beautiful?

The prayer next turns to us, our daily needs, and our relationship to other people. Are we, or am I, a forgiving person? Am I stingy? Am I too attached to my worldly possessions?

Next comes the appeal to God for divine help to resist the devil to hold temptation at bay and not let it near me, for I am

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weak and unable to resist. I need help and I know He will provide it. If I wait too long, I'm so in love with sin, I have not the power to ask deliverance until it's too late. But if I ask early, then all the assistance I need to resist and avoid sin is available.

The ending brings us back to His glory and to his power and magnificence. It also reminds us that He will be there forever; there is an eternal component to salvation.

What a wonderful gift has been given to us in this prayer. I say this prayer many times each day. Even while I'm praying another—private—prayer, I will, as I've said before, insert this one when I am between thoughts. When I want to clean my prayer palette, when I'm can't think of the next thing, this prayer will clear my mind and allow me to remember what else I need to talk to God about.

The Second Coming

The second advent of Christ is a subject that should be one of the most attractive for us to meditate upon. Unfortunately it will be preceded by the horrible time-of-trouble. This time will be difficult for all humanity as famines, etc. strike earth. We tend to think that famines will never happen to us because of our technology. We know when we are running low, and we have the ability to move food from here to there with heavy equipment, so we think we are immune to this horrible condition. We also think that we need three meals a day to survive, and if we were forced to cut down to one meal a day we would probably suffer nervous breakdowns out of fear. And this is why Jesus told us to not worry about this very issue. The saints may not have fancy

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food, but they will be kept alive. Even if we face death by starvation, we are assured of eternal life, so there should be no emotional depression.

One of the more interesting things that I have learned in recent studies is that the process of sanctification of the saints who are living in the time of trouble is not only related to salvation, but also to the ability to withstand the stress of this time of trouble. But before I go any further I need to make sure you know what sanctification is. Mrs. White defines it as: “habitual communion with God.”⁽³¹⁾ She also defined it as “the culture and training of every capability for the Lord’s service.”⁽³²⁾

For instance, notice this quote: “You must have an experience for yourselves, which shall be founded in God. Then can you stand amid the perils of the last days and be purified and not consumed by the fire of affliction through which all the saints must pass in order to have the impurities removed from their character preparatory to receiving the finishing touch of immortality.”⁽³³⁾

So often we read about the need for character development and perfection, and we confuse it with salvation. The Christian is already saved as long as spiritual growth continues. But different rules apply for those who are living at the time of the end, those who will be translated without seeing death. Apparently the ‘death’ experience accomplishes this same transformation of the character. At any rate, we have counsel about the need for sanctification, which is also referred to as the work of a lifetime. But if I’m living at the time of the second coming, then I will need to be already sanctified.

This time-of-trouble will finish the process for me. It will be necessary for me to undergo this difficult time when all of my

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trust will be placed unto God. It will be a time when the saints will become more faithful than under any other conditions of life. It will finish the work.

Here's another similar quote of interest that I'll share for the third time because of its significance: "Those who have trained the mind to delight in *spiritual exercises* are the ones who can be translated and not be overwhelmed with the purity and transcendent glory of heaven." ⁽³⁴⁾

I have heard quite a few discussions in Adventist circles where people argue over the need for sanctification, and they almost always misunderstand its relationship with salvation. You can see by these two statements that it is an indirect relationship to salvation. It has nothing to do with the cross, but everything to do with how close I am to God and the ability to withstand His glory.

If I die with my sanctification incomplete, then the death and resurrection experience will complete the task. The thief on the cross had no fruit of his relationship with God other than his testimony. He had not much sanctification until the final moments of his life. The 'Greeks' who are a law unto themselves, meaning that those who have lived with no direct knowledge of God, but who have studied nature and believe in a higher power, have become sanctified through the death experience and can be resurrected and have eternal life with God. So we can view the need for sanctification as it relates to our belief in the soon return of our Lord. That means if I believe the second coming is beyond my lifetime, then I can take the risk of being lazy and not becoming sanctified! But that would be foolish. That would be disingenuous and would negate the sanctification process. That would make my entire life a sham, a waste.

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Mrs. White once wrote a letter to a mother that contained the line, “your children are worthless,” and that is what my life would be if I did that, and I could not be resurrected with the saints.

The living saints who are alive when the Cloud of Glory appears in the sky are those who “Keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus.” Revelation 12:17. This is one of the most important texts in the New Testament because it bypasses all other issues of a theological nature. It doesn’t matter what you have believed in the past. It redefines what it is to be a saint for this special moment in the history of this planet. It states in simple terms the qualifications of these people. And when I talk to Christians of other faiths, I just ask a simple question, “Do you believe this is the time of the end?” And if they say “yes” then I turn to this text. It erases all previous understandings of what truth is or what it is not. It erases all church tradition; it provides a new era of understanding and it brings God’s people back to the Sabbath.

So, God’s people are divorced from the mainline culture of the world. They have no employment, they have no income, they have no assets, they are unable to buy and sell. They are estranged from the world, but they are bonded with God.

Perhaps many will lose their faith and return to the world. Perhaps some will turn against the righteous and become a torment to them.

We do know that those who are faithful will be rewarded by hearing a horrible storm with thunder, and suddenly the thunder turns into a deep, loud and articulate voice—the voice of the Father announcing the date and time of the Second Coming.

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Just imagine groups of saints hovering together. Saints who know that their death warrants have been written by men. The law has been passed that mandates a conformance with Sunday worship. A law as an attempt to pacify God who is allowing all of the horrible conditions on earth. A God who must be angry with humanity and who is demanding conformity to the church of God as defined by man.

The saints are waiting and their faith has not waned. They are concerned that they have brought these difficult times unto themselves, and maybe they should have been more discrete. Maybe they should have been less confrontive. Maybe they should have maintained a lower profile.

But they wait, and then they hear the voice of God and they know. They are assured of His love and protection. Their sanctification process moves forward another step. They know they have eternal life. The apostle Paul said in Ephesians 2:6, “And hath raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus.” This means that we are already in heaven! The saints will feel this assurance when they hear and understand the words spoken by the Father. Imagine how they will feel! Just imagine the joy in their hearts.

Within a few days, I don’t know exactly how long, the small dark cloud appears on the horizon. The saints will look at it, and I imagine they won’t take their eyes off it once they have seen it. Well maybe they will as they hug each other and praise God.

Are you with me? Can you imagine this scene?

The black cloud grows in size as it approaches earth.

I imagine that the governments of earth are frightened of this cloud. Their radar probably interprets it as a threat. Maybe

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missiles of destruction are sent to intercept it. But the saints only know that this is the long-awaited Cloud of Glory.

Closer and closer it comes, larger and larger it grows, brighter and brighter it glows.

Shouts of glory grow louder as the saints follow its approach. Tears of joy flow without hindrance. Gratitude beyond measure is expressed.

These people are special. They have withstood the test. They will have a special distinction throughout eternity as those who were living and never tasted death.

These people have a special bond with Jesus.

The cloud grows brighter!

Jesus can't yet be seen through all the light.

As the cloud draws closer still, the form of Jesus begins to emerge through all the light, and new and louder praises of glory escape the lips of the saints.

Whispers of glory at first, then as the cloud draws closer still, the whispers become louder and grow as they discern the Glory of Christ, until they are shouts of joy.

Can you see it? Can you hear it?

The saints then see in their peripheral vision as the dead in Christ are resurrected and begin rising toward the Cloud of Glory. You see in your imagination thousands of forms rising to meet their Redeemer.

And after a few minutes the saints begin to rise, higher and higher toward that cloud, toward their Saviour. Oh, what a day of rejoicing that will be!

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Now I relax, and let these precious moments—this meditation--sink in. Let it overwhelm my emotions, let it bathe my soul.

The Journey

We don't have much knowledge about the journey to heaven. But I can imagine how it must be. For instance, do you think the saints will take their eyes off Jesus very often? We will be like 'groupies' as we watch every move He makes, as we follow His form and gaze upon His face and listen to His words. We might be interested in knowing if our relatives or friends and family are with us, but the overriding concern will always be with Jesus. He even reassured us that "where I am, there you may be also." I find this phrase to be very comforting.

You know we may be a little lower than the angels, but we will always be closer to God.

When I first considered this concept, I rejected it until I studied the parable of Jesus where He spoke of forgiveness, and He cited three men who were forgiven their debts. Each of the three men had different levels of debt, and Christ asked the question that if all were forgiven their debts, which would be more thankful, and which would love the benefactor more. And the answer, of course, was he who was forgiven the most.

Ellen White describes the scene when the wicked are finally consumed in God's glory, and Jesus is surrounded by three rings of people. The inner circle are those who were His enemies, and who were converted; people like the apostle Paul.

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And the next outer circle are those who were martyrs, and the most outer circle are the remainder of the saints. I like that scene, but I digress.

The trip to heaven will be a glorious one, and will be educational as we learn the language of heaven and get to know each other.

Oh, what a glorious time that will be.

And it's good for us to contemplate: "Professed Christians, worldly Christians, are unacquainted with heavenly things. They will never be brought to the gates of the New Jerusalem to engage in exercises which have not hitherto specially interested them. They have not trained their minds to delight in devotion and in meditation upon things of God and heaven." ⁽³⁵⁾

There is a book called *Home at Last* by Walton J. Brown that everyone should have and should read because it has so much good material from the Spirit of Prophecy to help us visualize and imagine heaven. We know that "The mind should be elevated to dwell upon eternal scenes, heaven, its treasures, its glories, and should take sweet and holy satisfaction in the truths of the Bible." ⁽³⁶⁾ And when we do this it feeds our soul, and increases our zeal for the work before us.

It also benefits others. We are told that a man who "meditates on the law of God day and night...is one of the Lord's evergreen-trees; and he carries fragrance with him wherever he goes. A wholesome atmosphere surrounds his soul. The beauty of his well-ordered life and godly conversation inspires faith and hope and courage in others." ⁽³⁷⁾

This is a process that we should encourage our young people to embrace: "The future abode of the righteous and their ever-

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lasting reward are high and ennobling themes for the young to contemplate.”⁽³⁸⁾

Of course we can only meditate on what we have studied, and we have some counsel regarding our reading material: “The practice of story reading is one of the means employed by Satan to destroy souls. It produces a false, unhealthy excitement, fevers the imagination, unfits the mind for usefulness, and disqualifies it for any spiritual exercise. It weans the soul from prayer and from the love of spiritual things.”⁽³⁹⁾ It seems to me that this advice applies also to video games and programs we watch on TV, to say nothing about many novels.

There is one other element related to prayer and meditation, and it’s very scriptural. Some people call it ‘works’ but I prefer to use the word ‘fruit’ because it’s more descriptive of the outcome and intent.

We all know how easy it is to try to work our way to Heaven, and we know how pointless it is. But the Bible is very specific about good works. Jesus Himself told us to make sure they can be seen. They should not be done in private. This is the evidence of humility. When a person who has been blessed gets their hands dirty helping those in need, then those who are observing come to the correct conclusion about those who are sacrificing their comforts to benefit others.

These fruits are a key component to the Christian life.

Read this again, paying close attention to the last sentence:

There are people “who are in the habit of praying, and who delight in religious exercises; yet there is a lack...their prayers are not answered...The difficulty is with the people. While professing godliness, they do not bear fruit to the glory of God; their

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works are not what they should be.”⁽⁴⁰⁾

Our works are referred to as fruit because there needs to be a balance; meditation leads to fruit and they should both be evident in the Christian life. Note this counsel regarding an extreme position that has been adopted by monasteries over the centuries: “Should we give our lives up to prayerful meditation, our lights would grow dim. For light is given to us that we may impart it to others, and the more we impart light, the brighter our own light will become.”⁽⁴¹⁾

As we spend time meditating upon scriptural events, it presupposes that we spend time in the Word, so let’s take a look at what it means to “study” the Bible.

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