

Spiritual Exercises for Adventists

“AS THE SON OF MAN, HE PRAYED TO THE FATHER, SHOWING THAT HUMAN NATURE REQUIRES ALL THE DIVINE SUPPORT WHICH MAN CAN OBTAIN THAT HE MAY BE BRACED FOR DUTY AND PREPARED FOR TRIAL.”

Testimonies for the Church,

Vol. 4, page 528.

Chapter 1

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I NEED this book. I looked for it, but couldn't find it anywhere. I've wondered about it for several years; I've wondered if anyone else needs it.

A few months back our pastor pointed out that, according to some survey, Adventists no longer read the Bible daily; they no longer spend substantial time with God like our Adventist pioneers. Life is now so full and the pressure of modern society leaves us with no time for God. So, our pastor challenged us to read a chapter of the Gospels each day; he even published and gave each of us a schedule to follow.

The majority of our congregation is now following the schedule, and it appears to have been instrumental in changing us; at least we're spending some time each day "in the Word."

I wonder when our Adventist culture drifted into complacency? I remember some older people who memorized scripture, and I admired them. My memory has never been very good. Yes, as a child I had weekly memory verses that I would work on and recite on Sabbath. Some in my class would repeat each of them in sequence at the end of each quarter, but I was never that good. My mind was clever, and I could evaluate and think clearly, but to memorize and recite was never much of a possi-

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bility.

A retired pastor told me of an experience when he was invited by a parishioner, who was an Elder in the church, to accompany him on a Bible study. He was meeting with a man who had many questions, and maybe a pastor could be more convincing and persuasive as to the truths held in scripture.

They met in the man's home, and after the introductions were made they began talking about the Bible and the importance of truth, and the conversation became more serious. As he asked his questions, the pastor responded to each one by suggesting that they read this or that verse in the Bible for the answer. The man turned in his Bible to each suggested verse and read aloud. As he read each verse, the local Elder whispered the exact words from memory.

The meeting was productive and the man accepted the truth of scripture, and didn't seem to notice the Elder's whispering, but many years later the retired pastor was still impressed with the amazing memory of that local Elder.

Somehow my generation has lost the ability to memorize scripture. Maybe it's because no one thinks it's that important. Yes, there are some gifted people out there; people who can recite poetry; people who are special and who can dazzle me with their intellectual gifts; people who I respect and admire greatly.

During the reformation the Vaudois in Northern Italy resisted the Inquisition, and trained pastors to work in teams. Each team had an older and younger member, and the training for the position of pastor required each one to memorize the "Gospels of Matthew, John, the general epistles, and a part of

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those of St. Paul. Their young men were instructed, moreover, during two or three successive winters, and trained to speak in Latin, in the Romance language, and in Italian. After this they spent some years in retirement, and then were set apart to the holy ministry by the administration of the Lord's Supper, and by imposition of hands." ⁽¹⁾

In my lifetime I've never met anyone who could meet these criteria. It's difficult for me to imagine someone with these qualifications. I admire them, and wish I could be more like them. Maybe they were more motivated because of the danger involved in their worship, as they were persecuted by the authorities for their beliefs.

So, here we are; none of us are geniuses, but the challenge remains.

We all desire to be more spiritual—and yet we struggle to find a way to do it.

I'm reminded of that famous quote by Ellen White about contemplating the life of Christ for one hour each day. I remember when I was still a teenager and was asked to teach an adult class in a church where I was attending, but was not a member. I was reluctant to imply that a whole hour was required for such a task because I didn't want to appear to be a radical, so I purposely said that Ellen White tells us to meditate on the life of Christ for ½ hour each day, and one of the saints corrected me and told me without hesitation that a full hour was required. I was delighted that someone actually knew the difference.

The fact remains—Ellen White did say it, and she meant an hour, but I don't know anyone who has ever done it on a consistent basis.

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Let's face it; if we don't invest time in our relationship with God, then everything else is a waste of time. If we don't spend time with Him then all of our efforts to become more spiritual and to have eternal life is for nothing. Jesus said, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" He is describing those Christians who were very active in their church, and had all the appearance of spirituality. But, inside they were empty; they never took the time to be with Jesus; they never partook of the divine nature; they aimed too low!

We all feel guilty; we feel depressed; we know what we should do, but we don't know how to go about it.

Recently I learned that the Society of Jesus, commonly referred to as Jesuits, have a rigid system of daily Spiritual Exercises that were developed by Ignatius Loyola. Ignatius realized that he needed to change his life, and wanted to dedicate it to God, but he found it difficult to let go of his previous habits and his worldly desires. So he developed a series of exercises to force his mind to spiritual things, and invest time each day to change his private culture, and improve his behavior.

Unfortunately he went so far that he ended up with a system that included a significant amount of repetitive sayings that prevent the believer from learning more about God during the experience. But his idea of a daily Spiritual Exercise has very real merit.

Ellen White agrees with the concept.

She said, "Satan leads many to believe that prayer to God is

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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)

Notice how she used the "key" word; she describes the need for *exercises* for the soul to lean upon the Mighty One and obtain strength from Him to resist the attacks of Satan. Now, I need that.

I never thought of daily worship as a spiritual exercise, but I like the phrase. I like the idea of a daily "spring training" for my soul—a structure for that part of my life. If the Jesuits can have "spiritual exercises" then why can't the Adventists? We might do it a little differently, but if it's good enough for Ellen White and her generation, then I reckon its good enough for me and mine.

We live in a culture where we are pressed for time. When I go to the bank I notice that at lunch time the head teller is eating a sandwich while working. My wife, who is a nurse, tells me that most of her co-workers never have time for a break, and many eat lunch while working.

Our lives are full to the brim; every minute of the day is overloaded, and when we finally get home we are mentally exhausted.

If you have children and pets, the stress factor and time limitations are even more severe.

We all want more time with God, but life is full. We all know what we should do, but we don't know how to make it happen.

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How can we structure our life to give God the priority He deserves? Let's face it—this is a life and death matter. This is about eternal life.

When a person discovers God for the first time, like the thief on the cross, salvation is instant. It's a beautiful concept. It's wonderful to see the joy of salvation when a person becomes a saint in Christ.

But, there's more. It doesn't stop there. Now, I know that today many Christians think that all they need to do is believe in Jesus, and they are saved and will spend eternity with God. These people are convinced that they are okay with God. They can ignore Him six days a week, pray a little here and a little there and all is well.

For those people, I have some bad news.

Christianity is a full-time job with a full-time commitment. It requires a complete, yes I said complete commitment. We can still have a life, but it needs to be a different life than everyone else has. It needs to be different than what we've been doing.

All those New Testament texts that refer to calling on the name of Jesus, and just believing in Him and we are saved is about the beginning. We're like the fellow I once worked with who was in love with "falling in love." He moved from one relationship to the next. He would fall in love with a girl, and their love would grow to the point they would live together as man and wife, and after a year or so, he would long for the excitement of "falling in love" again. So he would look for another suitable candidate, and when she was found, he would end his relationship with the current woman and move on to the next.

So it is with us sometimes. We like the excitement and the

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thought of a simple decision with eternal consequences and there are some New Testament texts that seem to support that idea. But there are other New Testament texts that point out the fact that there are additional steps following that initial one. There is a maturing process as we grow in Christ.

For instance, let's look at James who said, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

If we parse these words we discover that this isn't a small thing. Our life needs to be one of constant service. We can't rely on the government to take care of people in need. Yes, I agree that the government safety net is important, but there are still many families who need help: people who make poor choices with their money and their time, people who are between the categories who don't qualify for assistance but who still need help.

As if that isn't enough, James also says that I need to keep myself from being polluted by the world. Think about this statement—I might be tempted to say that I'm not polluted by the world. But, then as I look at my finances and see where I spend my money, I'm forced to conclude that I'm pretty selfish. Materialism has entrapped me. Do we really need to spend so much on ourselves? How much do you spend on Cable Television? Internet? Vacation? Golf? Eating at restaurants? New clothes? Cell phones?

You get the idea. We're all guilty. We're all polluted by the world of materialism. We're generally non-compliant with the counsel of James who also said, "faith without works is dead."

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Let's chew on that for a few minutes. I might think that I have sufficient faith. No, I can't move mountains or convert water to wine, but my faith is strong, I say. My faith is as good as the next person's. But what about this link to works? Does it have to be that way? I look back at how I spent my time last week, and I'm forced to admit that I didn't spend much time "working" for God. Oh boy, this isn't so easy. I mean, this will take time and energy.

Then, how about the counsel of Peter who said, "you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood..." When was the last time you thought of yourself as a priest? Priests wear a uniform and are respected for who they are. You and I might not wear the uniform, but we are expected by Saint Peter to have all the other attributes, and that's a tall order.

Yes, if we read the New Testament carefully, we will find dozens of texts telling us how much more is required AFTER our initial spiritual re-birth. The Christian will grow in Christ on a daily basis, and that growth can happen only by "spiritual exercise." Just like a baby needs exercise to strengthen and develop control over the muscles, the new Christian needs daily exercise.

I do have another need, however. A need that I have always been reluctant to express, a need that is human. I want to have an emotive experience.

When I perform my spiritual exercise I want to have an emotional experience. I want to 'feel' something with God. If it's just an intellectual experience, then it doesn't meet my needs, and I feel unfulfilled. It's easy to become emotional when meditating on the cross, and on the sacrifice of Jesus. But I want to feel emotion *from* God after I pray and meditate. Is that asking too

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much?

The Jesuit system requires young men to resist the natural tendency for attraction to the opposite sex, and it also requires them to take a vow of personal poverty. Even with these severe restrictions, for over 400 hundred years they have attracted some of the most talented young men into their Society. How can they do this? Why are young men willing to give up so much to become Jesuits?

Pope Francis tells the story of how he attended a wedding as a young priest and during the reception he met a young woman, and they spent time together and had a wonderful conversation. If my memory is correct, he then stated that for two weeks afterward he couldn't even pray as his only thoughts were of the woman and their brief time together. And yet, he returned to his role as a celibate priest.

I think the answer to their success lies in the emotive benefits derived from their Spiritual Exercises. They are trained from the start to follow the prescribed sequence of prayers and contemplations. They spend hours and hours praying and meditating and contemplating. For example, their literature states that "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." They are encouraged to smell it, touch it, feel it, know it in their imagination.

After such contemplation, they repeat prepared sayings and prayers over and over until they are overwhelmed with emotion resulting in a mystical experience. An experience that makes it

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worth the cost; an experience that is looked forward to each and every day. The Jesuit gives up his wealth, women, family and career and replaces these things with the benefits derived from his Spiritual Exercises.

Now when it comes to contemplation, I'm not suggesting we go that far. We are firmly warned that this is not on God's ground. We are never to cross that line. We are to always be careful to control our thoughts, and be always responsible lest the enemy take control of our minds.

But, there is a point here. A point that is deserving of our attention—a point that is beneficial.

St. Paul talks of his “dying daily,” and I like that. If I can meditate on that issue and really die to self out of contrition, then it makes my day. If I come to the cross and in my mind's eye see my Saviour crucified on my behalf, then I can experience emotion.

I also want to come to the place where I love the Lord my God with all my heart, and this will involve emotion. It also involves intensity. My spiritual experience should and can be intense! Psalm 119:2 says “Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart.”

Perhaps that's why we are told, “Christ has given us no assurance that to attain to perfection of character is an easy matter. It is a conflict, a battle and a march, day by day. It is through much tribulation that we enter the kingdom of heaven. In order to share with Christ in his glory we must share in his suffering.”⁽³⁾

For years I prayed to God and confessed my sins, but then I began to wonder if I was really experiencing genuine contrition.

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Was I taking advantage of God? Was I a little too reliant on His willingness to forgive? Was I really, therefore, making any attempt to listen to the Holy Spirit encouraging me to improvement?

So, to die daily requires an investment of time and energy to better realize how corrupt I really am. Even on good days, my internal weaknesses are there; even on good days when I'm not challenged, I know my corruption remains, and my occasional errant behavior just reveals what's inside. You might not know my issues, but I certainly do, and as I get closer to God, He reveals them to me more strongly, which allows me to get emotional about them, and then my experience of "dying daily" is more fulfilling—more meaningful as I more fully realize how wonderful is the gift of salvation and forgiveness.

My sin isn't necessarily how I act. No, my sin is what's inside—those weaknesses in my character that remain intact; that shrink as I follow the advice of St. Peter and "partake of the divine nature." (2 Peter 1:4) They shrink, and as I grow closer and closer to God, they eventually disappear.

Speaking of divine—Doesn't that sound just a little presumptuous? I mean, should I dare to use the term? Or should I think that I qualify to make an attempt? It seems to me that our hesitation stems from the fact that we aim too low, and we have counsel to prove it from the *Review and Herald*, July 12, 1892: "There are many who think that it is impossible to escape from the power of sin, but the promise is that we may be filled with all the fullness of God. We aim too low. The mark is much higher." Now add this statement from the *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 3, page 193: "Christ has made ample provision to impart new vigor and divine strength at every advance step in the divine life."

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So, we are to aim higher, and we are to advance forward in the divine life. This reconstructs my entire concept of life! On page 215 Mrs. White also states, “Those who love to engage in discussion generally lose their spirituality.” She is referring to people who like to debate the truth, and she is pointing out that the proper Christian witness is more passive-verbally, and more active-spiritually. I like that, don’t you?

We find ourselves trudging along, following our daily routine, and struggling to be good, and do good. We view ourselves as basically good Christians as we move along in a zombie-like fashion. And when I compare my normal existence to the possibilities of partaking in the divine nature of God, I see how low a mark I’ve set for myself. I now see how much higher I need to aim. Not that this is a game, or a project; no—this is redefining my life; redefining who I want to be. It’s not that I want to be God—no, it’s that I want to be *like* Him and it’s going to be a different journey, but the experience will be much more fulfilling.

Personal Benefits

There are also benefits that you might not be aware of; benefits that God provides (not surprising; this is so much like Him), and you might never have read or noticed these two statements:

“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.”⁽⁴⁾

The first sentence is easy for most of us. We’re so busy that we don’t have many connections with the world. We’re already separate. In fact most of us have felt guilty because we don’t have many friends outside of the church, and this counsel goes beyond

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who our friends are—it also refers to our attachment to worldly things. Regarding the last sentence the “praise” might not be talking about material possessions like cars, houses or money, but it could be good health, or extra charisma. But let’s read on--

“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.” ⁽⁵⁾

The next one is my favorite: “From every member of the church a steady light may shine forth before the world, so that they shall not be led to inquire, what do these people more than others?” ⁽⁶⁾

Don’t let the negative question confuse you. She is saying with a question, that the righteous person will be noticeable. People who are unrighteous will notice, and if they are following the Holy Spirit’s pleadings, they will be drawn to the righteous person. This is big; this is really HUGE!

Imagine a city with a church full of righteous people who have this steady light shining forth. Imagine how different evangelism would be for that church. Instead of advertising, and trying to convince people to come to meetings, the strangers would ask; they would come and visit the church; they would be drawn to the light and communicate their desire for the secret. Imagine a church like this; a church with ‘magnetic’ appeal where the Holy Spirit lives and orchestrates the evangelism; a church that attracts new seekers; a church that awakens a desire in souls; a church full of people with light! Imagine beginning your journey in this direction.

Jesus said to us “ye are the light of the world,” and now I know more fully what He meant. It isn’t just the message, but

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the Holy Spirit working through us as an attraction; drawing people to Him.

This light is explained further: “It is piety, goodness, truth, mercy, love; it is the revealing of the truth in the character and life. The gospel is dependent on the personal piety of its believers for its aggressive power, and God has made provision through the death of his beloved Son, that every soul may be thoroughly furnished unto every good work.” (7)

Minimum Requirements

We make every attempt to avoid legalism. In the past our church culture swung in this direction and the results were tragic. As a result we tend to avoid using words that are very directive. But when it comes to the basics it is appropriate to specify the minimum requirements for the Christian saint.

For instance, let me suggest that it is impossible for the Christian to be saved if he/she doesn't perform daily Spiritual Exercises. If I don't spend time with God, while on the same day I read books or watch TV, then I'm not meeting the minimum requirements. This is mandatory! This is non-negotiable! The need is absolute! Something you *must* do.

If I fail in this regard, then all of my attempts at improvement are for nothing. If I just give God ten minutes each day, then I'm going to be pretty angry at Him when I'm left behind on that great day at His 2nd coming. (see quote on back cover)

I'm not attempting to specify how many minutes each day we need to spend with God; no, I'm just trying to demonstrate the importance of this issue. This is the minimum.

It seems to me that all of the thousands of words in the Spirit

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of Prophecy and Bible are written for our edification, but are pointless if we don't first meet the minimum requirements.

These minimums are spelled out for us, but the number of column inches are few as compared to everything else written about spiritual things. I guess that's because it's assumed that we are already meeting the minimums, but we know that's no longer the case in the Adventist community.

Now, I invite you to join me as we explore the important topic of "Spiritual Exercise," beginning with the first component—prayer.

REFERENCES

- 1 *Cross to Crown*, page 24.
- 2 *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1, page 295.
- 3 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 5, 1910.
- 4 *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 2, page 125.
- 5 *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 2, page 127.
- 6 *I Selected Messages*, pages 123-124.
- 7 *The Review and Herald*, December 26, 1912.