

MALAWI UNION CONFERENCE

**YOUTH WEEK OF PRAYER
2025**



**A COMMUNITY
TRANSFORMED**

GLOBAL YOUTH DAY

MARCH 15, 2025

**HOMEcomings sabbath
MARCH 22, 2025**



WELCOME

Created to Bring Change

Greetings from the MUC-AYM Family!

This year's Week of Prayer, held under the theme "A Community Transformed," promises to be a pivotal event. Our focus will be on becoming relevant to our communities and reaching people of different faith backgrounds.

As we reflect on the three Angels' Message in Revelation 14:6-12, we're reminded of our divine calling to share the everlasting gospel with everyone. Let's strive to reach all people groups within our communities!

I extend an invitation to everyone in Malawi to participate in this initiative. Let's recruit non-Adventist friends and celebrate our Homecoming Sabbath together, culminating in a mass baptism ceremony!

May the Lord bless us as we work together in preparation for the Youth Week of Prayer.

Together, let's transform our communities for Christ!

Pastor Horace Nyirenda
Malawi Union Conference
Adventist Youth Ministries Director



WRITERS:

Kleyton Feitosa

Khamsay Phetchareun

Cliff Shameerudeen

Jonathan Contero

Reinaldo Siqueira

Petras Nahadur

Brendan Pratt

Bledi Leno

About the writers:

Kleyton Feitosa

Kleyton, a native of Brazil, is passionate about cross-cultural ministry and has served in Brazil, the U.S., Egypt, and Sudan. Fluent in Portuguese, English, Spanish, and some Arabic, he enjoys ministering to diverse communities. His experience includes roles as a teacher, chaplain, youth pastor, associate pastor, senior pastor, Conference Executive Secretary, and Mission President. Kleyton holds a Bachelor's in Theology from the Latin American Theological Seminary and a Master's in Missions and a Doctorate in Evangelism and Church Growth from Andrews University. He currently serves as the director of the Global Mission Centers at the General Conference.

Khamsay Phetchareun

Dr. Khamsay Phetchareun is an ordained minister, administrator, and fundraiser, currently serving as the Global Mission Director of the Center for Adventist-Buddhist Relations (CABR) at the General Conference. His pastoral experience includes roles in Australia from 1987 to 1998, and he served as Associate Director of ADRA Myanmar (1998–2000). Dr. Phetchareun also taught Religion at Asia-Pacific International University (2001–2007, 2011–present) and served as Advisor for the Laos Attached Region until 2021. Appointed Global Mission Director in September 2022, he holds degrees from Avondale College and Andrews University, including a Doctor of Ministry (2005).

Cliff Shameerudeen

Dr. Cliff Shameerudeen is currently the director for the Center for South Asian Religions of the General Conference. He is a church planter, who spends his time empowering, coaching and supporting church planters globally.

Jonathan Contero

Hi, I'm Jonathan! I'm a passionate follower of Jesus, a husband, and a proud dad of two amazing kids. I've been involved in church planting in Madrid, working on a project designed to connect with secular audiences, and I'm now serving as a missionary in Geneva, Switzerland, exploring ways to reconnect a post-Christian society with God.

I'm also passionate about football, music, reading, spending time with people, and discovering new cultures and cuisines!

Reinaldo Siqueira

Reinaldo Siqueira has served as dean of the School of Theology at Brazil Adventist University since 2016, where he taught Old Testament languages, theology, and exegesis. Previously, he was dean of the Latin American Theological Seminary and director of Adventist-Jewish relations for the Brazilian Central Union. Siqueira holds a doctorate in Old Testament studies from Andrews University, as well as a master's and bachelor's in theology from Adventist University of France. He is fluent in Portuguese, Spanish, English, and French, with advanced knowledge of Hebrew. He has also been named the Seventh-day Adventist Church's chief liaison to the Jewish community.

Petras Bahadur

Dr. Petras Bahadur serves as the Director of the Global Center for Adventist-Muslim Relations at the Headquarters of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. He served 21 years as a Treasurer, lecturer and Head of the department of Business, and then served 21 years as a Missiologist in the area of Muslim ministry. He trains professionals on building bridges of understanding through the seven books he has authored on understanding the worldviews of people from Muslim background.

Brendan Pratt

Dr Brendan Pratt is the director of the Centre for Secular Post-Christian Mission. He lives in Melbourne Australia. Brendan is married to Amanda, an author, and is dad to Brad, Ben and James – along with a bunch of snakes, lizards, turtles and frogs. His PhD research explores how consumerism impacts faith. Brendan is passionate about what it looks like for the church to be a beautiful picture of God.

Bledi Leno

Bledi Leno is the Director of the Center for Urban Mission at the General Conference, with a passion for connecting people with God in urban settings. His ministry has taken him from Albania to England, Brazil, the U.S., and around the world, broadening his international perspective. Based in New York City, Bledi has focused on urban ministry, establishing centers of influence, and leading church planting and revitalization initiatives. He is committed to creative outreach and evangelism. Bledi is married to Gabriela, and they have two sons, Matthias and Arthur.

Welcome

Busi Khumalo

Created to Bring Change!

When a mosquito does what it does best, irritating and sucking our blood, we forget that it is a tiny little creature. Its impact on us is not measured by size but by what it can do. Only one mosquito can keep you awake at night.

The 2025 week of prayer theme is ACT: “A Community Transformed.” The focus is on reaching the challenging territories of this world, the 10/40 window, with the word of God. It is estimated that, out of the eight billion people in this world, Christianity has over three billion followers. The rest of the world subscribes to other religions.

Christian denominations must respond positively to the biblical mandate, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20, NIV).

Seventh-day Adventists have an urgent and solemn duty to share the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6-12 with the world. All people groups should hear this message and make their choice. That’s what you are called upon to ponder and respond to during this week of prayer.

God created and chose you to bring about change in your community. Prayerfully identify communities that have not heard the end-time gospel message. When we faithfully adhere to the call to share God’s Word with others, “Communities will be Transformed.” The book of ACTS must be relived in our time.

You are much bigger and more intelligent than a mosquito because you were created in God’s image.

Therefore, go out there and be an influencer for Jesus!

Table of Contents

<u><i>Sermon 1- Not Just Any Location Or A Random Decision</i></u>	8
<u><i>Sermon 2- The Unfinished Mission: Reaching Buddhists With The Gospel</i></u>	12
<u><i>Sermon 3- Crossing Cultural Barriers</i></u>	19
<u><i>Sermon 4- Your City, Your Mission</i></u>	24
<u><i>Sermon 5- Love Your Jewish Neighbor as Yourself</i></u>	28
<u><i>Sermon 6- God's Plan for Ishmael Before The End Of Time!</i></u>	31
<u><i>Sermon 7- A Community Transformed</i></u>	36
<u><i>Sermon 8- A Tale of Cities</i></u>	40

Sermon 1

Not Just Any Location or A Random Decision?

Kleyton Fietosa, D.Min.

Focus: Christian Mission

Main Text: Luke 19:10

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

Beyond Our Borders: The Global Call of Christian Mission

Today, I invite you to embark on a journey, not just through the Scriptures, but through our hearts and across the borders of our own limitations and fears. Here we are, in the comforting fields of Galilee, where Jesus began His ministry—a place not unlike our own familiar spiritual territories. Yet, the heart of our message today calls us to venture far beyond, into realms that are less comfortable, yet ripe with potential for harvest.

Jesus is INTENTIONAL:

In the gospel according to Mark 4:35, we find a stirring directive from Christ. He says to His disciples: “...*Let us go over to the other side.*” That is, the other side of the lake.

Jesus is making a very bold move to take His disciples across the Sea of Galilee to the “Other Side” into pagan territory. Into an area where they indulged in and participated into all kinds of sins. But for Jesus, He knew exactly where he was going. This was not just a random decision.

This isn’t merely a physical crossing from Galilee to Decapolis across the Sea of Galilee; it’s a spiritual summons to cross over into areas of life and spirit that are uncharted by us. The Decapolis, a network of ten cities, was notorious not only for its allegiance to Rome but for its deep-seated pagan practices—a land diametrically opposed to the Jewish moral and spiritual landscape. Here, on the other side, temples stood that celebrated wealth, violence, and hedonistic deities, presenting a profound challenge to the messages of humility, peace, and self-control preached by Jesus. Rabbinic tradition in Jesus’ day said that Decapolis is where the seven nations of Canaan settled down. They featured cults that promoted sexuality, violence, and wealth. It was everything that Israel was not.

Decapolis was also a center for Roman power, 6,000 soldiers were stationed at the “Other Side”. The symbol for the legion was a pig’s head—Decapolis was a place where pigs were worshipped. The Jews regarded the “Other Side” as the place where Satan lived—it was dark, it was evil, and it was demonic. It was the place where God is not. Nobody ever goes over to the “other side”, especially not a rabbi. Going to “the other side” was way out of their comfort zone. But they agreed to go.

And, Jesus knew exactly where He was going!

Venturing into the Unknown:

As they set sail, the disciples were not just navigating the waters—they were crossing the turbulent seas of their deepest fears and prejudices. Come with me for a moment, just imagine this sinful place, with no dietary restrictions and all their pagan practices. I would not blame the disciples one bit if they had turned the boat around and gone back home. When they arrived at the shores of Decapolis they were met not by the usual crowds, but instead by desolation and two demon-possessed men, marking a stark contrast to the multitudes that usually gathered around Jesus. The tangible absence of a welcoming party highlighted the spiritual desolation of the region, but this is no surprise because this is “the other side.”

Miracle and Rejection:

As they arrive, the picture is disturbing:

Mark 5:2-5 *“And when He had come out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no one could bind him, not even with chains, because he had often been bound with shackles and chains. And the chains had been pulled apart by him, and the shackles broken in pieces; neither could anyone tame him. And always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself with stones.”*

This is quite a scene, but in the presence of Jesus nothing stays the same.

Mark 5:6-14

“When he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped Him. And he cried out with a loud voice and said, “What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God that You do not torment me.”

For He said to him, “Come out of the man, unclean spirit!” Then He asked him, “What is your name?”

And he answered, saying, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” Also, he begged Him earnestly that He would not send them out of the country.

“Now a large herd of swine was feeding there near the mountains. So, all the demons begged Him, saying, “Send us to the swine, that we may enter them.” And at once Jesus gave them permission. Then the unclean spirits went out and entered the swine (there were about two thousand); and the herd ran violently down the steep place into the sea and drowned in the sea.

“So those who fed the swine fled, and they told it in the city and in the country. And they went out to see what it was that had happened.”

Fear and Rejection

The miracle was amazing. The man was immediately set free! The evil spirits were gone, and the man restored to his right mind. Interesting to note, however that very different from the healings in Galilee, upon healing the demon-possessed this time, instead of celebration, there was fear and rejection.

Mark 4:15-17

“Then they came to Jesus, and saw the one who had been demon-possessed and had the legion, sitting and clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. And those who saw it told them how it happened to him who had been demon-possessed, and about the swine. Then they began to plead with Him to depart from their region.”

The people of Decapolis were not happy. They did not celebrate this supernatural healing. Blinded by their entrenched worldviews and fears, they could not appreciate the miraculous work of Jesus. Instead of joy, they reacted with fear. They didn't exclaim, "Wow, this is a man with power; this is great." They didn't think, "I have a sick mother, a tormented child, a troubled friend—this man with power could help them." Instead, they begged Jesus to leave. He's got power, but he's from the other side. For the people living in Decapolis, somebody who is from the “other side” could hurt them. Somebody who is from the “other side” is going to have an agenda. Somebody who is from the other side is going to have an attitude of superiority or be judgmental or distant. They were afraid of somebody from the “other side”.

This reaction mirrors the resistance we often encounter when presenting the Gospel to people who are unfamiliar with or hostile to the message of Christ. The fear of the unknown, the fear of transformative power that challenges existing norms and powers, can often lead to rejection.

As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Picture this scene in your mind: The man prostrates himself before Jesus and pleads: I've been living here in all this darkness all my life, and it's destroyed me. Let me leave here. I just want to be with you. I'll leave everything—everyone I know, everything I have, which isn't much—but I just want to follow you." He doesn't merely make this request; he begs, he cries, he is

desperate. And yet, Jesus lovingly says no. Mark 4:19 Jesus did not let him, but said, *“Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”*

Imagine that man’s feelings as the boat rows away and he is not on board.

The Power of Testimony:

Yet, in this narrative, there is a beacon of hope. The man who was healed did not journey back with Jesus but was instead commissioned to stay and testify among his own people. This man, once shackled by demons, now freed by Christ, became the first missionary to the region of Decapolis, the ungodly region on the other side of the lake. He followed Jesus’ instructions and begun to witness. Now we have a missionary—with first-hand knowledge of God’s miracle-working power and whose personal testimony began to soften the hard soils of his homeland. Also read Luke 8:38, 39).

Several months pass, and one day Jesus decides to go again to the other side. This time however, the atmosphere had shifted dramatically—what was once hostile territory now celebrated His presence.

Mathew 15:29-31

“Jesus departed from there, skirted the Sea of Galilee, and went up on the mountain and sat down there. Then great multitudes came to Him, having with them the lame, blind, mute, maimed, and many others; and they laid them down at Jesus’ feet, and He healed them. So, the multitude marveled when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed made whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel.”

They praised the God of Israel! The first time Jesus went to the “other side”, nobody was home except one demon-tormented man. And everybody begged him to leave. The second time he comes, he has one of the most dramatic responses to his arrival in all of the gospels. What happened? Well, one man told his story. Mark 5:20 tells us that one man traveled from one town to another, from one neighborhood to another, and said, “Let me tell you about this man Jesus and what he did for me.” His testimony transformed entire cities. There was a way that this man could reach people on the “other side” that initially, not even Jesus’ disciples, nor Jesus himself, could.

This transformation showcases the power of personal witness—a testimony that can often penetrate and reach where traditional methods cannot.

Call to Modern Disciples:

What, then, is the 'other side' for us today? It may not be a demonic land but could be a foreign country, a different community, or even opposing ideological territories. Our calling is akin to that of the first disciples—to bravely step out of our comfort zones and engage with those who are radically different, carrying the light of Christ into dark corners of misunderstanding and prejudice. Just like the demon-possessed man was changed forever, there are many who are eagerly waiting for us to share the Good News with them. They are waiting for hope. Longing for love. They are waiting for you, they are waiting for me to reach out to them.

Conclusion:

As we ponder on where our 'other side' might be, let us remember that Christ calls us not to comfort but to courage. The global mission field is vast, and it requires us to transcend not only geographical but cultural, linguistic, and ideological borders. Like the disciples and the healed man of Decapolis, we are equipped with the most powerful tool—our testimony and the transformative love of Christ. Let us pray and ask God for the courage and strength to go forth, bearing this light, and watch as the once-impenetrable walls of fear and rejection turn into gates of welcome and acceptance.

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank you for all you do us. Thank you for convicting us to be here today. Thank you for your commission to go to ALL the world and teach others about you. Give us courage and strength, give us the boldness you gave the early apostles to share your world. Let us not be discouraged. We thank you for all things.

Amen

Discussion Questions:

1. What does Jesus' intentional decision to cross over to the "other side" teach us about stepping out of our comfort zones? How can we apply this lesson in our own lives when faced with engaging with people or communities that are different from us, whether culturally, ideologically, or spiritually?
2. How does the reaction of the people in Decapolis—fear and rejection of Jesus' miraculous power—mirror the challenges Christians face today when sharing the Gospel in unfamiliar or hostile environments? In what ways can we prepare ourselves for similar rejection, and how should we respond when our message is not initially welcomed?
3. The healed man was commissioned to testify about Jesus to his own people, and his testimony transformed a region. What role does personal testimony play in evangelism, and why is it often more effective than traditional methods of outreach? How can we use our own personal stories of transformation to reach others in our community or beyond?

Sermon 2

The Unfinished Mission: Reaching Buddhists with the Gospel

Dr. Khamsay Phetchareun

Focus: Buddhist Population

Main Text : Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.” Amen.

Have you ever wondered how many Buddhists are still waiting to hear the gospel and encounter Jesus in a personal way?

According to wikipedia.org Buddhism is “the [world's fourth-largest religion](#), with over 520 million followers, known as **Buddhists**, who comprise seven percent of the global population. It arose in the eastern [Gangetic plain](#) as a *śramana* movement in the 5th century BCE, and gradually spread throughout much of Asia. Buddhism has subsequently played a major role in Asian culture and spirituality, eventually spreading to [the West](#) in the 20th century.” With the vast majority living in the region of the world that spans Asia, Africa and Europe (referred to as 10/40 Window)—where many people are not exposed to the gospel. The most conservative Buddhists reside in Southeast Asia, in countries like Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam. In this region, less than 1% of Buddhists have been reached or have accepted Jesus. You may find it encouraging that around 1.2% of Thailand's population identifies as Christian, but would that truly satisfy you? Out of that 1.2%, only a mere 0.01% come from a Buddhist background. The remainder are from animistic traditions. This represents a minuscule fraction of the overall Buddhist population. Even fewer former Buddhists in Cambodia and Laos have embraced the gospel. Yet, we sometimes convince ourselves that these countries have been sufficiently reached for Christ. This perception is a form of self-deception, allowing us to justify our inaction in going to these nations for the sake of the gospel.

Buddhism is divided into three major branches: Hinayana (or Theravada), Mahayana, and Vajrayana. Theravada, the more conservative branch, is prevalent in Southeast Asia. Mahayana, the more liberal branch, is found in countries like China, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Much like their Theravada counterparts, very few Mahayana Buddhists have come to know Jesus as their Savior. This means the work of sharing the gospel with Buddhists remains vast and largely undone. Vajrayana, often referred to as Tibetan Buddhism, is the third branch. This mystical form of Buddhism is found in restricted nations such as Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, Mongolia, and parts of Russia, where evangelism is often illegal, making it even more challenging to reach these Buddhists with the gospel.

When we consider all three branches of Buddhism, the scope of the challenge becomes clear: the Buddhist world remains largely unreached. In fact, there are more Christians converting to Buddhism than there are Buddhists converting to Christianity. Even in countries traditionally associated with Christianity, like Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Buddhism is one of the fastest-growing religions.

This reality calls us to action. We cannot ignore the spiritual needs of the Buddhist world any longer. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

Jesus' Command:

“So you must go to people in every country of the world. Teach them how to become my disciples. Baptize them by the authority of God the Father, His Son, and the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19, EASY)

This includes the many Buddhists who have yet to hear the gospel in a meaningful way. **The Lord need young adults, like you,** to share His love with them.

When Jesus said, "You must go," He wasn't calling us to travel for leisure, but for the mission of spreading the gospel. Thailand, one of the most visited countries in Asia, welcomed 39 million tourists in 2019, and it's expected to see around 35 million in 2024. Many are drawn to these Buddhist nations because of the people's friendliness and hospitality. So, what is holding you back from sharing God's love in these countries? If you come to these nations with a heart for mission, you will undoubtedly be blessed.

Practical Do's and Don'ts:

Do's:

1. **Be a Friend First:** Buddhists are friendly people. Start by building relationships through acts of kindness, like sharing a meal or offering small gifts.

2. **Pray for Them:** Offer to pray for their needs. Many Buddhists are open to prayer, and when they see God answering their prayers, their hearts become open to the gospel.

3. Teach English:

In countries like Thailand and Cambodia, many young people want to learn English. You can help by offering free classes, which creates opportunities to build relationships and share your faith.

4. Serve in Simple Ways:

Evangelism doesn't have to be complicated. Help meet basic needs, and people will listen when you share your faith.

Don'ts:

1. Don't Criticize Their Beliefs:

Avoid debating or attacking Buddhist teachings. Instead, focus on sharing the love of Jesus and your personal testimony.

2. Don't Expect Immediate Results:

Conversion can take time, especially in cultures with strong religious roots. Be patient and trust that God is working through you.

3. Don't Go Alone:

Build a support network of fellow believers and a local church community for spiritual and emotional support. Read Mark 6:7

Preaching the Gospel is Simple:

After John the Baptist was imprisoned, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the Good News of God: *"The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"* (Mark 1:14-15, NIV)

John the Baptist was the first to preach a message of repentance, and when he was imprisoned, Jesus took up that mantle, proclaiming the Good News of God's Kingdom. Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He gave His disciples a clear directive: continue spreading the gospel throughout the earth.

"Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'" (Matthew 28:18-20, NIV)

Even in the final days of his ministry, John, the last of the disciples to remain alive, emphasized the same message, reminding us to carry out Jesus' command.

"Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language, and people." (Revelation 14:6, NIV)

As Seventh-day Adventists, we believe that God has entrusted us, as His Remnant Church, with the sacred mission of proclaiming the everlasting gospel to every nation, tribe, language, and people, calling all to worship the Creator God. The mandate is clear, and the call is urgent. Let us go forth and fulfill this great commission.

How Can the Lord Return When Only 0.01% of Buddhists Have Been Reached? Do you feel the urgency to respond to Jesus' command and go to Southeast Asia to preach the gospel to Buddhists? **Is Matthew 28:18-20 a call for someone else, or is it meant for you? Should you wait, or is it time to act?**

Don't Repeat the Mistakes of the Past

In the past, your ancestors delayed building the house of the Lord, believing it wasn't the right time. Are we now making the same mistake by saying it's not the right time to build the Kingdom of God among Buddhists?

"This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: The people are saying, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.'" (Haggai 1:2, NLT)

Misplaced Priorities:

It's easy to understand why the Israelites delayed. They were returning refugees from Babylon, and for seventy years, they had lived in exile. Most of them were not the generation that had left Judah; they were their grandparents. They had no memory of their homeland and had to rebuild their lives from scratch, starting with their own homes. In human terms, this seems reasonable—but not in God's eyes. For God's people, putting Him first should always be the priority.

Jesus Himself taught us to seek God's Kingdom first. Yet, like the Israelites, we often say, "The time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord," which is another way of saying, "Let me build my own house first, and God's house can wait."

What About Us?

What are we focused on today? Many of us are busy building our lives. This focus on education, careers, marriage, and family seems natural. We work to secure a future for ourselves and our children. But are we placing these things above God's Kingdom? **While there is nothing wrong with education, marriage, or building a family, they become wrong when they take priority over the work of God.**

Shouldn't God understand? Yes, He knows these things are important, but He calls us to put His Kingdom first. When we do, everything else will fall into place. Let us not repeat the mistake of prioritizing our own lives over God's mission. **The time to build the Kingdom is now.**

What Went Wrong with the Israelites?

In Haggai 1, we see that the Israelites weren't just building homes out of necessity—they were seeking prosperity. This is why God became upset. He had blessed them, but instead of honoring Him, they focused on their own comfort and success. As a result, God "turned off the blessing tap," and the consequences were clear.

"Why are you living in luxurious houses while my house lies in ruins?" God asked them. And then He described the outcome of their misplaced priorities:

You have planted much but harvest little.

You eat but are not satisfied.

You drink but are still thirsty.

You put on clothes but cannot keep warm.

Your wages disappear as though you were putting them in pockets filled with holes.

God was showing them that despite all their efforts, they could not prosper because they had neglected Him.

The Right Priority:

God then called them to action:

"This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: Look at what's happening to you!"

God's instruction was simple but urgent:

"Go up into the hills, bring down timber, and rebuild my house. Then I will take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. "You hoped for rich harvests, but they were poor. And when you brought your harvest home, I blew it away. Why? Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you are busy building your own fine houses. It's because of you that the heavens withhold the dew and the earth produces no crops. I have called for a drought to ruin everything you have worked so hard to get."

The people's misplaced priorities had brought a drought, both physical and spiritual. God withheld His blessing because they were focused on their own prosperity rather than His kingdom.

A Turnaround

But there was hope. God's message through Haggai stirred the hearts of the people:

- Haggai, the LORD's messenger, brought a word of encouragement: *"I am with you, says the LORD!"*
- God sparked the enthusiasm of Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and Jeshua, the high priest, as well as the enthusiasm of the whole remnant of God's people.

They began rebuilding the house of God on September 21, in the second year of King Darius's reign. (Note: the 21st day of the seventh month in the Hebrew calendar typically falls between late September and October, though it doesn't align exactly with September 21st each year.)

This marked a turning point. When the people shifted their focus back to God's priorities, He renewed His blessing. It was a reminder that true prosperity comes only when God is placed first.

Working on the House of God

God often compares His church to His family or His house:

"But if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." (1 Timothy 3:15)

He desires His church to be holy and without blemish:

"That He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish." (Ephesians 5:27)

Building God's house means engaging in mission work. Jesus called fishermen to become fishers of men:

"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." (Matthew 4:19, NRSV)

What Does This Mean for Us?

Fishing requires preparation. Here are some lessons we can learn from it:

1. **Fish never come to us.**

They don't jump into our boats or cooking pots—we have to go to where they are. Likewise, Buddhists won't come to us; we must go to them.

2. **Catching different fish requires different tools and approaches.**

Just as each type of fish requires specific bait, reaching different people requires different methods. If you go to a hospital, you'll find the sick—health evangelism will resonate with them. If you go to rural areas, you'll find farmers and the poor—living among them and helping improve their lives opens doors for meaningful witness. If you go to schools, you'll find children and young people—if you are young yourself, you can connect with them more easily.

This is an urgent need. Many of our churches in the 10/40 Window, where the majority

of Buddhists live, are shrinking. We have won very few Buddhists, and most of the

members in our churches in these regions are elderly. Our church needs **young people to lead** in Southeast Asia. Old people cannot attract young people, nor can they produce biological growth.

We need **young missionaries**. While God used Moses, who was elderly, to lead His people, **Jesus called young people to be His disciples** and send them out to preach the gospel. He asked us to pray for more laborers to go into the fields. In Asia, where 99% of Buddhists live, the need is desperate. Only 1% of people in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are Christians, and less than 0.1% of Buddhists have embraced Christianity. In Thailand, there are 17,000 Adventists, but over 90% come from animistic backgrounds. Less than 1,000 are from Buddhist backgrounds. The numbers are similarly low in Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

Do the 520 million Buddhists (including Chinese Buddhists) deserve to hear the gospel message before Jesus returns?

The Urgency of the Mission:

If you feel called to act, know that this work is urgent. Jesus illustrated this urgency in His parable of the workers in the vineyard, where He sought laborers even at the eleventh hour. The same applies to the harvest of souls. When rice is ready for harvest, it must be gathered within 3-5 days or the grains will fall to the ground. The same is true for reaching Buddhists—they are ripe for harvest now.

Currently, there is no church-sponsored mission in Northeastern Thailand, where 23 million Buddhists live. Can we continue to ignore the call to reach these people? Is it because we believe it's too difficult to share the love of God with Buddhists?

Is the Lord Calling You?

The harvest needs young workers. Just as the elderly may struggle physically to harvest rice, older generations are not able to reach young Buddhists as effectively. **God need young, vibrant missionaries to go to Asia and bring in His harvest.**

Are you willing to go?

Will You Be Like Isaiah or Jonah?

Isaiah heard God's call and responded, *"Here am I. Send me!"* (Isaiah 6:8). Jonah, on the other hand, ran away from his mission. He eventually went, but unwillingly. Wouldn't it be better to go voluntarily?

The question remains: Will you answer God's call to preach to Buddhists in Southeast Asia? Is now the time, or will you delay, as others have, saying, *"It is not the right time to rebuild the house of the Lord?"*

How to Preach to Buddhists:

Many feel uneasy about reaching Buddhists, given the challenge of converting less than 1%. But God only asks you to **go**—He will use **you**.

1. Acts of Kindness Ministry:

Buddhists are friendly and value relationships. By visiting their homes, offering small gifts, and building friendships, trust grows. When they ask why you are so kind, you will have the chance to share your faith.

2. Prayer Ministry:

Be open about your faith and offer to pray for their needs. Buddhists don't mind praying to another God, but when they experience answers to prayer, they may give their hearts to Jesus. We have seen sick people healed and alcoholics delivered through prayer, leading many to baptism.

3. Reaching Buddhists through Food:

Sharing meals is a powerful way to connect. Jesus said, "*You give them something to eat*" (Mark 6:37). Offering food to those in need opens doors for evangelism. In one case, a woman's cooking skills helped plant a church in a Buddhist village.

4. Teaching English to Children:

English is in high demand, and teaching it provides an easy way to build relationships with both children and parents, many of whom have joined the church after their children did.

5. Radio Ministry:

Radio may seem outdated, but in our region, it's still effective. We've baptized many listeners who first heard the gospel through the airwaves.

These simple methods are working in Northeast Thailand, where the population is 100% Buddhist. All you need is a willingness to come and help.

Conclusion:

The need for missionaries in Buddhist countries has never been greater. Jesus is

coming soon and He is counting on you to reach and share the Good News with those who do not yet know Him. You don't need to be a great preacher or be highly educated—just have a willing heart and an open mind. God will equip you for the work.

Will you say, "*Here am I. Send me!*"

Prayer:

Dear Lord,

We come to You with hearts open, ready to serve and share Your love. Guide us as we step out in faith to reach those who have not yet heard the good news. Give us courage and wisdom to follow Your call. May our words and actions reflect Your love and grace. We ask for open hearts among our Buddhist friends, and for Your Spirit to lead them to a relationship with You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some reasons why many of us hesitate to answer the call to spread the gospel to Buddhist nations, and how can we overcome these barriers?

2. In what ways can we be more intentional in building relationships with Buddhists to create opportunities for sharing the gospel, both in our communities and globally?
3. How can we as a church mobilize young adults to engage in missions, especially in areas like Southeast Asia where the need is urgent?

Sermon 3

Crossing Cultural Barriers

Dr. Cliff Shameerudeen

Focus: Hindu Population

Main Text: 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)

“But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

Introduction – Hinduism

When we think of South Asians (India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka etc), what comes to mind? You may say: culture, festivals, tea, or spicy food. Well, you guessed right. Just type “Indian restaurant” into your map search. You might be surprised to find more than one South Asian restaurant in your area. Today, we will learn more about one of the people groups from this area commonly referred to as Hindus.

Most South Asians are Hindus and have roots in the Indian Subcontinent. The word “Hindu” is a relatively recent term coined by the British Empire in the 19th century. It is a general term used to describe the majority religious practices of India. According to wikipedia.org there are about 1.2 billion Hindus worldwide, which makes up about 15% of the world's population.

Hinduism is best defined as a “family of religion” made up of many schools of thought. It is best understood in two categories: philosophical and popular traditions. According to Bharti, the best understanding of Hinduism is by “Understanding Hindus themselves.”

Another way of understanding Hinduism is that it is a way of life, a civilisation, a social order, and more than a religion; it includes the moral, spiritual, and social spheres of life.

A brief Comparison between Adventism and Hinduism-

Family Values

Adventists and Hindus have many family values in common, though just calling oneself a Christian or Hindu does not guarantee that one has strong family values. Often, Hindus exhibit better family values than Christians. Nevertheless, it is agreed that whether you are a Hindu or an Adventist, family values are lived out by intentional effort and lifestyle practices. Hindu teachings hold that a good family is one that practices sacrifice, love, service to humanity, and religious observance. Similar to Adventists, Hindus understand and respect the importance of family worship. According to Hindu teachings, the head of the family is the father, who plays a vital role in leading the family by performing the yagna, which is the ritual of securing the blessings of the deities annually. In addition, Hindus expect women and men to adhere to a strict code of conduct in society. These are similar to the teachings of the Bible, in which God expects the head of the family to be the father, and the father is to lead the family in worship and model Jesus Christ to their families.

Another similarity between Hindus and Adventists is their respect for humanity and their teachings on honoring parents and elders. Hindus honor the contributions of humans in different ways. For example, Hindus use special days of worship to publicly show how much they value the contributions of their foreparents.

Spiritual Life

Mistakenly, many Christians perceive Hindus solely as idol worshippers who practice pagan rituals. This is not an accurate assessment of all Hindus. While the majority of Hindus would be classified as people who worship idols, there are those who do not worship any idols or who worship only one deity. Also, while it is true that Hindus have many rituals that are foreign and probably difficult for Christians to understand, the same can be said of Christian rituals and

practices from a Hindu perspective. Hindus in the diaspora seldom interact with Christians on a deep level due to differences in religion, culture, and language. These factors contribute to Hindus' lack of understanding of the worship style, culture, and spirituality of Adventism. In fact, many Hindus have the misconception that the Catholic Church is the entire Christian church and that the Pope is its head. When interacting with Hindus, it would be helpful to explain to them the spiritual journey of Adventism.

Many Hindus are willing to talk about spiritual subjects such as who God is, how one becomes holy, how to overcome bad habits, and what it takes to become a good person. The Hindu view of God is different from the Adventist one, and Hindus are usually surprised to learn that the Bible teaches that God is love, He is powerful, and He cares about the affairs of humanity. Taking time to share your experience of God's love for you is a good place to start when sharing your faith with a Hindu. Hindus are intrigued by the spiritual lifestyle of Adventists, especially the Adventist teachings and practices on forgiveness and living a life of peace, contentment, and happiness in God. The truth is that both Adventists and Hindus strongly desire to have a spiritual walk with God and regard devotion as being integral to their faith.

Salvation

The goal of a Hindu is to achieve moksha or salvation. The basic qualifications for moksha, either in this life or in another reincarnation, is the individual's responsibility. In Adventism, salvation culminates in living together with a personal God, while in Hinduism, moksha or salvation is when one ceases to exist by becoming one with Eternal Reality. Hindus believe this will happen by following Hinduism's prescribed rituals and teachings. However, Hindus generally struggle with the assurance of moksha.

In comparison, the Bible teaches that Christians may have the assurance of salvation by accepting it as a free gift given by God. The difference between the two systems is that in Hinduism moksha is earned by human effort, while in Christianity, salvation cannot be earned through works. One's actions then demonstrate acceptance of the gift of salvation through submission to God.

When you engage with Hindus, it is helpful to share that Christians have the assurance of salvation and will receive salvation and eternal life. However, you should avoid comparing and contrasting processes of salvation because Hindus have many different processes and methods of obtaining moksha. It is better to state that God longs to reunite with us.

Devotional Life

Both Christianity and Hinduism advocate total devotion to God. The differences between the two religions can be described as the purpose of devotion, the channel to becoming a devotee, the benefits of devotion, and lastly, the believed outcomes of devotion. For example, in Hinduism, devotees are expected to participate in daily spiritual exercises to gain moksha or salvation. The *Bhagavad Gita*, the Hindu scriptures, states that even the most evil person can be saved by calling on the name of god and acknowledging his or her mistakes (Sarma 2003, 44). Thus, Christianity and Hinduism differ regarding the criteria for salvation. In Christianity, salvation is a free gift, and humans are given the power to choose God. On the other hand, in Hinduism, the emphasis is placed on one's ability to meet basic religious requirements and practices.

Worship is a part of devotion and plays a very significant role in all areas of Hindu life. Hindus compare worship to the air humans breathe; one cannot survive without it. Hindus have regular home worship—some worship only in the morning, while others worship both morning and evening. The worship area in the home is sacred—it could be any designated area, an entire room, or a portion of the living room. Hindu home worships vary from tradition to tradition, but all Hindus believe that by worshipping, they seek the deities' help. Worshippers expect blessings and make petitions through daily rituals. Hindu worship rituals include offering flowers and/or food on the family altar.

Building a Bridge

God's relationship and, ultimately His mission to the "nations" rested on His sovereignty over them regardless of whether the "nations" recognized Him as such or not. The fact is that all the "nations" of the entire earth were nothing more than "a drop in a bucket" to God (Isaiah 40:15). (Tompkins pg. 6) The world's religions, and especially Hinduism, are comparable with the "nations" found in the Old Testament. In order to make this clear, it must be understood what is meant by Hinduism, keeping in mind that this is not an in-depth study of Hinduism. (Tompkins, 12). But like the nations of old there is more to it than just recognition that God is Sovereign. God wanted to bless the nations (Genesis 12:3), and He wants to bless Hindus today. God's call to Abraham is still being fulfilled and will continue to be as long as people are on this earth. (Tompkins, 12). We are called to build a bridge for the Hindus of the world.

Where do we start?

Every people group has its way of showing hospitality and its methods of teaching its adherents. This is also true for South Asians. Hospitality is very important in their culture and is taught at a very young age. Adults must practice it and pass down these values to the next generation. According to Hindu scholars, hospitality is both a religious and social obligation. For Hindus, entertaining visitors or strangers is non-negotiable. It is taught that by showing hospitality to strangers or visitors, one will receive blessings.

In South Asian culture, friendship is formed when food is involved. As Seventh-day Adventists, misreading our Hindu friends' culture can lead to not trusting our relationships with them. For example, if your Hindu friends invite you to their home and you are offered food or something to drink but refuse, your refusal can be viewed as rejecting their friendship. Thus, it is wise to be mindful of South Asian customs. Building trust among Hindus takes time and patience. Once you have built trust with your Hindu friends, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ will be easier.

Understanding the Hindus people

The Hindu worldview prevents Hindus from mingling with Christians, as this may lead to dialogue on spiritual matters that challenge their worldview. Therefore, disciple-makers must become known among Hindu communities as a blessing, not a threat. The model given to the Adventist Church by Ellen White paves the way for connecting with Hindus non-threateningly. "Christ's method," as succinctly described in the *Ministry of Healing* (1905, p. 143), is a tested and proven method among Hindus. As Hindus mingle with Adventists, their worldview is disturbed. Hiebert notes that exposure to another worldview is one means of worldview transformation. He writes that when a person steps into another worldview, they are able to see its strengths and weaknesses (Hiebert 2008, 321).

Belonging before Becoming

Becoming a disciple is truly a journey. "Belonging before becoming" refers to the stage before Hindus accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. Many models of discipleship assume the person who is being discipled has already accepted Jesus, which may be correct because discipleship comes from the word disciple. However, most Hindus do not have a Christian frame of reference for the God of the Bible, nor an understanding of Christian culture. In some ways, the Hindu culture and worldview are entirely out of sync with Christian doctrines. Therefore, it is necessary to consider that discipleship begins before a person's acceptance of Jesus through baptism. This approach recommends that Hindus be welcomed into the Adventist community without the formal commitment of baptism—his will allow them to taste and see that God is good. When Hindu families experience the love and grace of Jesus Christ, the transition and discipleship process become more effective.

Do's and Don't

In Adventism, there are many terms used to present and describe evangelism among unreached people groups. Many of these terms have been adopted from other Christian denominations. Unfortunately, a number of these terms have become loaded with prejudices, colonial nuances, superiority, and cruelty in the name of Jesus Christ. Below are a few significant, commonly used terms to be aware of in your interaction with Hindus.

The meaning of **conversion** in Christianity differs substantially from the Hindu interpretation of the term. To Hindus, conversion means abandoning one's culture, family, and society to join something strange and foreign. In some Hindu contexts, conversion has even become a political issue. Presenting the Christian idea of conversion to Hindus often becomes an unnecessary stumbling block that prevents them from accepting Jesus. It is better to allow conversion to be an experience rather than an event or a loosely used catchphrase when sharing your faith with Hindus.

Hindus are very open to learning about Jesus Christ. However, a challenge arises when they are encouraged to **get baptized** without fully understanding the purpose or meaning of baptism. Many Hindus have inherited an incorrect understanding of **baptism**. This misunderstanding is derived from past experiences with Christians in India. Historically, baptism has been celebrated as an event that marked victory over Hinduism. As a result, an Indian national movement arose that viewed baptism as a political tool that Westerners used as a way of suppressing their people. Today, little has changed concerning this view of baptism.

Baptism should never be forced on anyone and should be treated as simply one aspect of an individual's journey with Christ. It should be something that Hindus celebrate with their children and spouse rather than a means of dividing a family or community. It is best to allow the conversion of Hindus to happen only through the working of the Holy Spirit,

not coercion. Then, over time, they may accept and desire the public expression of baptism and continue as witnesses in their communities.

Hindus have many distorted views of Christianity. One of them is the misunderstanding that Christianity is a religion of the Dalits or Harijans. This misunderstanding stems from how Christianity entered Hindu communities in India. Christianity was first associated only with a certain caste in India; however, while many changes have taken place in recent times, this perception still exists. On a very positive note, many Hindus confess that they desire to have the Christ-like peace that exists among Christians. Spending quality time with Hindus in a non-threatening environment allows them to be exposed to Jesus Christ without hearing a sermon. Instead, they can witness a sermon of practical living. This quality time is fundamental to establishing trust with Hindus. In practice, such a connection could be created in many ways, such as through a center of influence in the community; a prayer ministry that focuses on healing—preferably in the homes of Hindus or at the church, as the Holy Spirit leads; or a friendship ministry through invitations to one's house or invitations to special functions. Whatever the method, the goal is to connect with Hindus in ways that lead them to know Jesus.

Witnessing opportunities

This question is already answered in the Bible. Jesus Christ gave His life for all humanity, including Hindus. Therefore, it is imperative that everyone experience His love. However, the responsibility to witness is not one that makes Adventists better than Hindus. The main principle to remember when sharing your faith with Hindus is that God is and has been at work in the lives of Hindus long before any Adventists came into contact with them. The commonalities noted above indicate that Hindus hold many beliefs that are similar to the teachings of the Bible. Hindus believe in the existence of evil and of evil spirits. What they need is guidance in their spiritual journey with God, an approach that requires humility, patience, and love for your Hindu friends.

Hindus are not familiar with the Christian worldview. For example, they most likely do not know the story of Moses or Adam or understand Christian terms such as sanctification or justification. Therefore, it is best to avoid the proof-text approach when having Bible studies with Hindus. Instead, tell them a story and explain the meaning and teachings of that story. Hindus are familiar with this format of learning. The life of Christ and end-time events are usually appealing to Hindus. The stories of Ruth and the book of John are also good examples of where to start when having a Bible study with Hindus. However, keep in mind that Hindus are confused about the concept of Jesus' death. Many believe that God cannot die. Using simple language will be most helpful.

Sharing your faith:

Head of the Family

In a group-oriented context, the focus should be on the *karta* (head) of the family and community. The *karta* is the most influential person in the family. Usually, a male and head of the household, the *karta* is both loved and feared. He is a father figure who could be a father or grandfather or father-in-law or uncle, or in modern times, a respected female (Sinha 1995). When the head of the family accepts the teachings of Jesus, it is much easier for the rest of the family to embrace the newfound faith. The Bible records a story of a family structure similar to that of the Indian family system. Joshua, a leader among his people stated, "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Josh 24:15).

Person of Peace

Additionally, Jesus suggested a person of peace model in Luke 10:5-12. According to this Bible passage, Adventists should look for a person of peace in the Hindu community. The person of peace is a resident in the community, someone who is respected and who can influence others on their journeys to Christ. Other examples of a person of peace in the Bible include the centurion (Luke 7:1-10), the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-30), Cornelius (Acts 10:9-11:1), Lydia (Acts 16:13-15), and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:22-38). All these people influenced others to accept Jesus.

Center of influence:

According to Gary Krause (2019), Life Hope Centers are centers of influence that model Jesus' holistic method of ministry. He noted that Ellen G. White envisioned these centers as featuring a wide variety of activities, such as lifestyle education, treatment rooms, restaurants, and small groups (Krause 2019).

These centers can help facilitate contact with the non-Christian world through “social relations” (White 1905, 480). This model is not a bait-and-switch approach but rather an organic approach that begins and ends with meeting the needs of people, regardless of their backgrounds or choices in life.

Power of Prayer:

Praying for Hindus generally opens doors for dialogue and opportunities for long-lasting relationships. Testimonies from Hindus indicate that when their loved ones were in life-threatening situations, such as during a major illness or when afflicted by evil spirits, they sought out Christian spiritual leaders for help. Hindus have testified that, in most cases, they accepted Jesus Christ as a result of His answers to their prayers. For a Hindu, it is important to follow God when He answers prayers. The Bible teaches that followers of Jesus are called to minister to Hindus regardless of their decision whether or not to follow Him.

This means that personal prayers for Hindu coworkers, neighbors, or friends must be genuine. Intercessory prayer for Hindus is also encouraged. Many Hindus are in bondage to Satan. If they have a sick family member, offer to pray with them or invite your pastor, with their permission, to pray in their homes. Please note that if you are invited to pray for a Hindu in their home it is highly recommended that you remove your shoes before prayer, or even before entering the home. Another way to witness to Hindus is through praying for their deliverance from evil spirits, as this opens the door to dialogue with them concerning the power of God, a power that is not found in Hinduism. Hindus are attracted by this simple and powerful way to remove evil spirits.

Hindus believe that dreams are a significant means to understanding one's fate, future, current problems, the mysteries of life, and interference by evil spirits. Hindus have many ways of deciphering dreams, depending on the various Hindu traditions. However, all Hindus seek out religious leaders for guidance regarding their dreams, and they generally pray that God will give them dreams.

Appeal

I am so glad that Jesus loves the 1.2 billion Hindus in the world. God is calling our young people to share His love with the Hindu people. The mandate given to the Adventist Church is to share the "good news" to all the world including the Hindus. Ellen White in her writings has challenged us to cross cultural barriers, and language to reach those who are hungry for "truth". We can begin by prayer. We invite you to sign up on the Global Mission Center for South Asian Religions website (gmcsar.org) to get a copy of the annual prayer guide. Next, building trust through friendship. Showing sympathy, helping them with their needs are good next steps. Through the social and spiritual connection, the door can be open to Adventist young people to share their faith with the 1.2 Billion Hindus in the world.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father,

We thank You for the rich culture and traditions of our Hindu brothers and sisters, and for the opportunity to share Your love with them. Guide us to approach them with humility, respect, and genuine compassion. May our words and actions reflect Your grace, and may Your Holy Spirit prepare their hearts to receive the hope we have in Jesus Christ. Help us to build bridges of understanding and trust, so that Your love may reach every corner of the world.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can we share our faith with Hindus in a way that reflects gentleness and respect, as taught in 1 Peter 3:15?
2. How can building trust and relationships with Hindus create opportunities for sharing the gospel?
3. What common values between Adventism and Hinduism can help us share the hope of salvation with Hindus?

Sermon 4

Your City, Your Mission

Jonathan Contero

Focus: Consumerism

Main Text: 1 Corinthians 3:16

"Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"

A missionary in Europe pens this life experience he had at the age of 16. He says, "Although I was born into an almost Adventist family (my father got baptized when I was 9, but he always respected that my mother took us to church), I had a somewhat disoriented adolescence. The desire to explore new things and the inherent rebellion of youth led me to stray a bit from God and the church. I remember a day from my teenage years when I spent the night at a friend's house with another friend. While there we found some hidden bottles that his grandfather kept at home, not knowing what to do with them since they had been given to him by clients. Likely, we didn't make the best use of them. We lost control, and without going into details, I ended up spending the night at the police station. After a few hours, they asked me to call my parents because I was under 18. What scared me the most was not the police, but how my parents would react. My mother isn't particularly harsh, but she's a woman of her time, born in Spain in 1949 when things were only explained once. If you didn't understand, you were in trouble. I was terrified of making that call. In that very call, you could feel the humiliation and shame on one side of the phone, and the shock and disbelief on the other. Yes, at 16 years old, I was calling my parents at 5 a.m. for them to pick me up from the police station. Three people came to get me: my older brother (who I looked up to in almost everything...without discrediting my two other older brothers), who looked at me in disbelief. My father, with the same reaction as my brother. And my mother, with an indecipherable expression. I won't lie, I closed my eyes, expecting the biggest slap of my life; I tensed my body and held my breath, ready to take the hit."

His story makes me reflect on a few things. What is our perception of God? What image of God do secular people in the city have? Is the church still today that agent of God that makes His love felt in society? Are we embracing those who need restoration? Do only those who share your faith have the right to God's embrace?

Join me on a journey through the Bible, where we will discover the purpose of the church for the city.

1. What is the nature and purpose of the temple in the Bible?

- A. Exodus 25:8, "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.": The sanctuary was a replica of the model shown to Moses. It served pedagogically so that God's followers could understand the plan designed to end suffering and injustice and create a world where humans could live in a state of lasting happiness. However, the most important purpose given by God was that HE WANTED TO DWELL WITH HIS. God wanted to move in with His people. Isn't that amazing? Basically, God was moving into the neighborhood. The Shekinah (God's presence) dwelt in the Tabernacle.
- B. Matthew 1:23, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us.": One of the most used texts during the Christmas season. But pay closer attention to the name's literal meaning: "God with us". The birth of Jesus, the arrival of the WORD, God made man, receives a title that aligns with the purpose of the Old Testament: God wants to be with us (John 1:14).
- C. John 2:19-2, "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' Then the Jews said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?'" But He was speaking of the temple of His body.": You have probably heard this verse many times. Think for a few moments about the line we're following. What was the temple in the Old Testament? What was the temple when Jesus lived among us? Is any building that can contain God's presence better than Jesus of Nazareth? (Colossians 2:9)

- D. 1 Corinthians 3:16, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you?” and 1 Corinthians 6:19, “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?”: Paul speaks after Jesus' ascension. This leaves us a bit confused. Where is the temple, where does God's presence dwell? It no longer made sense to return to the Old Testament system. Jesus could no longer be the temple since He is now in heaven. Yes, dear friend, today, the temple is you. With your flaws and virtues, weaknesses and strengths, God wants to live in your heart, and for that reason, our whole life must be worthy of that.

Some lessons to take away:

1. God always takes the initiative.
2. God always draws near to humanity: the Tabernacle, Jesus among us, and now our bodies. There is no place closer where God can come to be by your side. That is why Paul reminds us in Acts 17:27 that He is not far from us.
3. "Temples" cannot contain God (Acts 17:24). Stones cannot enclose God. His presence is not in our church buildings but in the church—the people who make it up.
4. God is dynamic, always seeking to rescue the lost sheep, the coin, and the son.
5. God is always present, by human's side

****For reflection:****

1. We know that starting with Jesus, buildings have a specific utility, but the true temple is us (Matthew 18:20). What church should I continue building to fulfill God's purpose?
2. How can I embrace the people of the city today, at university, in the same way that God embraces me?
3. Do you know how the story ends? Jesus becomes the Temple again. The infinite presence of God eternally dwelling among us (Revelation 21:22).

1. What is the nature and purpose of the church in the Bible?

"The church is God's appointed means for the salvation of men. It was organized to serve, and its mission is to proclaim the Gospel to the world." – Acts of the Apostles, p.9.

What implications does this quote have for you? What is the role of the church? The Greek term for "church" generally implies "a community of outward-focused people."

Often, when we think of the church, we do so abstractly. Sometimes we think of the local church, the building, the organization, etc. Secular people see all these images of the church but from a negative point of view: they see hierarchy, oppression, abuse of power, injustice, and coldness. Others think we don't need religion or a church since we can survive individually. What can we do as a church to give them a different vision? A vision of salvation, service, Good News.

Let's follow a process of analysis of the church. I propose the following outline:

What is the church? Aspect/Essence

How is the church? Method

Why the church? Purpose

What is the church? Although we have just discussed this, if you ask each member of our church what the church is, you'll be surprised by how many different answers you will find. These are some of the examples I have encountered:

- The physical building, with its sacred and less sacred parts - The denomination (the doctrinal body)
- The institution (as an organization: association, union, division, etc.)
- The individual: each one develops their own way of relating to God You may have more examples.

In Europe for example, thinking of the church as a building presents certain problems. Thousands of church buildings are being abandoned, sold, and repurposed for other uses, or even demolished. If we think of buildings, there are fewer churches now than before. In a building the people may change, but the church remains. Isn't that strange? Imagine a church without a building; what foundation would it be built on? Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying we should demolish buildings. They are very useful and necessary. What I am trying to say is that the church goes beyond all that has been mentioned. The COVID-19 Pandemic taught us that the church is people. The church is you. The church is me. During the pandemic each person was in their home, but the church fought, and in some cases, is still trying to stay united despite the obstacles. Yes, during that time we proved that the church was the people—us, not the buildings. Therefore:

- The church is the people, not the buildings.
- The church is about disciples, not programs.
- The church is not an abstract entity; it is a living body, a community of people.

Before starting any venture, the first question we must ask is, "Why should the church exist?"

Take the Bible and let us begin another journey to find the purpose of God's people: - The importance of being created in His image:

- A. Exodus 7:1: What was the role Moses played before Pharaoh? And Aaron? Biblically, we have an example of God's people as the image for those who do not know Him.
- B. 2 Corinthians 3:2-3: We are God's letters of introduction to society. We are the Bible that secular people will read. Our actions will be the pages they see before they begin to discover Jesus. This aligns with what we discussed yesterday: that they see Jesus in me.
- C. 1 Peter 2:9: You are very familiar with this text and its implications. All of us, regardless of our condition, are priests.
- D. Exodus 19:6: Maybe you weren't as familiar with this text. Analyze both and notice what they have in common. We are comparing the Old Testament with the New Testament. And yet, God does not change.

****For reflection:****

1. In both the Old and New Testament, God's people are a "nation" of priests. In our time, the High Priest is Jesus, to whom everything is pointed. - The priest is the mediator between God and humanity. - His role is not to represent humanity but rather divinity.
2. The people are a reflection of God. We are an example of what it means to be a human restored to God's image.
3. We are a united and living body (1 Corinthians 12). Let's return to the quote: "The church is God's appointed means for the salvation of men. It was organized to serve, and its mission is to proclaim the Gospel to the world." (AA 9)
4. So the church is:

- a. a means of salvation, as it leads people to Jesus.
- b. a purpose of service
- c. on a mission to proclaim the Good News. Jesus offers you more than you can imagine! What is God's church, then? I leave that answer to you in prayer, that God may enlighten you. The Gospel must be relevant to every generation because the Good News is eternal.
- d. A group of people who bring the transformative presence of God wherever they go.

Remember the story of my mother? As she was approaching I was expecting the worst. However, what I felt was an embrace. The embrace of that 4-foot-11 woman who saw me born and who could have easily knocked me down. A strong and long embrace, accompanied by tears and suffering. But above all, with an infinite dose of love. Dear friend, I can tell you I felt my mother's hug. But in my state, far from this God who loves me so much, I felt it was God's embrace. In that hug, I also felt God telling me: everything would be fine. You are forgiven.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father,
Thank You for Your love and the reminder that You desire to dwell with us. Help us to be living temples of Your Spirit, reflecting Your grace and extending Your love to those around us.

May we serve, love, and share Your Good News, bringing Your presence wherever we go. Thank You for forgiving us and calling us to be part of Your mission.

In Jesus' name, we pray.
Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the essential and universal elements of the biblical church, and why?
2. How can we align our churches even more for this purpose?
3. Do you think secular people are developing secular forms of "church"?

Sermon 5

Love Your Jewish Neighbor as Yourself!

Reinaldo W. Siqueira, Ph.D.

Focus: Jewish Population

Main Text: Ephesians 2:24

"For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation."

Introduction

According to the Bible, "love" is the foundational principle of this world created by God. The apostle John clearly states: "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love." (1 John 4:8)

The apostle Paul adds:

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ² And though I have *the gift of* prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body ^[a] to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

He concludes by saying, "And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love." (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Loving God above all and our neighbor as ourselves is the greatest commandment in the Bible, upon which everything else is based (Matthew 22:37-40).

As Seventh-day Adventists, we are called, and commanded by God to love everyone around us as God the Father loves them, and as Jesus loves them, remembering that "...God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16). This love extends to everyone: good and bad, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, pleasant and unpleasant. Jesus also commands: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another." (John 13:34).

This commandment to love others as Jesus loved us becomes particularly relevant when considering the Jewish people and their historical experiences with Christianity. Often, when Christians think of the Jewish people, they harbor negative attitudes, which can manifest as antipathy, indifference, disgust, and even hatred, leading to aggression and violence. This has been the case since the Middle Ages, through the expulsion and killing of Jews in European Christian cities, the tribunals of the Inquisition, and up to the Holocaust during the Second World War, where six million Jews were exterminated by the Nazi regime. Alarming, similar hatred toward Jewish people is resurging globally, with attacks and murders happening simply because someone is Jewish.

Some justify this hatred by claiming, "they killed Jesus," not recognizing that no Jew today participated in the crucifixion of Jesus, an event that occurred more than two thousand years ago. Moreover, those who use this justification forget that Jesus, the victim of this heinous act, forgave his perpetrators: "...Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.'" (Luke 23:34). If Jesus forgave, who are we to accuse and seek vengeance against today's Jews, who were not involved and had no part in the killing of Jesus?

Some cite the claim "His blood is on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25) to biblically justify hatred against Jews, asserting that God rejected the Jewish people and subjected them to divine wrath. However, did God truly react this way?

The apostle Paul addresses this in his letter to the Romans, affirming:

"I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew..." (Romans 11:1-2).

" Concerning the gospel *they [the Jews] are* enemies for your sake, but concerning the election *they are* beloved for the sake of the fathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God *are* irrevocable. (Romans 11:28-29)

As Seventh-day Adventists and believers in the Bible, we recognize that all humanity is guilty of Jesus' death, for He died on the cross for the sins of all, including ours. He bore our guilt so we—that is, you, me, and everyone else—may be forgiven (Isaiah 53).

Ellen G. White, in her book *The Acts of the Apostles* (Chapter 35: "Salvation to the Jews"), had this to say:

“Even though Israel rejected His Son, God did not reject them. Listen to Paul as he continues the argument: ‘I say then, Hath God cast away His people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God hath not cast away His people which He foreknew...” (AA, p. 375)

“Notwithstanding the awful doom pronounced upon the Jews as a nation at the time of their rejection of Jesus of Nazareth, there have lived from age to age many noble, God-fearing Jewish men and women who have suffered in silence. God has comforted their hearts in affliction and has beheld with pity their terrible situation. He has heard the agonizing prayers of those who have sought Him with all the heart for a right understanding of His word...” (AA, p. 379)

Looking towards the future, she declares:

“In the closing proclamation of the gospel, when special work is to be done for classes of people hitherto neglected, God expects His messengers to take particular interest in the Jewish people whom they find in all parts of the earth. As the Old Testament Scriptures are blended with the New in an explanation of Jehovah's eternal purpose, this will be to many of the Jews as the dawn of a new creation, the resurrection of the soul...” (AA, p. 381)

“When this gospel shall be presented in its fullness to the Jews, many will accept Christ as the Messiah. Among Christian ministers there are only a few who feel called upon to labor for the Jewish people; but to those who have been often passed by, as well as to all others, the message of mercy and hope in Christ is to come.” (AA, 380).

To fulfill God's expectations for His Church toward the Jewish people today, start by befriending them with a loving and sincere attitude, so they may see in you the true love of God and of Jesus for every human being.

Identify yourself as a Seventh-day Adventist, not merely as a Christian. Many Jewish people have a limited understanding of Christianity and even less familiarity with Seventh-day Adventists. When they hear that you are a Christian, they might assume you are Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox, without a clear grasp of what being a Seventh-day Adventist entails. This common misconception can open the way to conversations on the beliefs and practices we share with Judaism, such as observing the Sabbath, adhering to a biblical diet, and valuing the teachings of the Hebrew Bible, all of which contribute to a healthier and longer life. You can also highlight that some densely populated Adventist regions are recognized as 'Blue Zones'—areas where people live significantly longer and healthier lives than most of their global counterparts, often reaching 100 years of age and beyond with a high quality of life. One such zone, Loma Linda, is featured in a *Netflix* series about the Blue Zones.

Finally, let your words be a source of life and blessing to your Jewish friend or neighbor. Avoid accusations or harsh jokes based on prejudice and stereotypes. Be a channel for the Words of Life from God and Jesus, helping them find peace and love from God's throne, fulfilling the promise of a full life by the Messiah of Israel: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

Thus, let us truly "love our Jewish neighbor as ourselves!"

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank You for Your love that knows no boundaries. Help us to love our Jewish neighbors as You have commanded, showing respect, kindness, and understanding. May we be ambassadors of Your love, bringing healing where there is

division and extending grace where there is misunderstanding. Guide us to reflect Christ's love in all we do, fostering relationships built on compassion and peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does it mean for Christ to "break down the middle wall of separation" in our relationships with others, particularly those of different faiths or cultures? How can we actively embody this principle in our daily lives?
2. Considering the historical and present challenges in Christian-Jewish relationships, how can we, as Seventh-day Adventists, effectively demonstrate Christ's love and build bridges of understanding and respect?
3. How does the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" challenge us to reassess our attitudes, words, and actions toward those who may have been historically marginalized or misunderstood, including the Jewish community?

Sermon 6

God's Plan for Ishmael before the End of Time

Dr. Petras Bahadur

Focus: Muslim Population

Main Text: Isaiah 60: 6-7

The multitude of camels shall cover your land, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and incense, and they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall ascend with acceptance on My altar, and I will glorify the house of My glory.

Today, I want to share with you a beautiful prophecy in the Bible that the Church of Prophecy may have missed. This prophecy is found in Chapter 60 of Isaiah where it talks about God's mission to all the world. We already know this chapter which begins with this statement: "Arise shine for your light has come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you... the Gentiles shall come to your light..." We usually stop at verse 5 but the next two verses speak of God's plan for the Children of the East. That is what I want to share with you today.

Isaiah 60:6, 7

Verse 6: The multitude of camels shall cover your *land*, The dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba shall come; They shall bring gold and incense, And they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord.

Verse 7: All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together to you, The rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; They shall ascend with acceptance on My altar, And I will glorify the house of My glory.

The question arises: why have we not grasped the meaning of these two verses? The five names in these two verses are vital to understanding the two verses. Verse 6 has three names: Midian, Ephah, and Sheba. Verse 7 has two names: Kedar and Nebaioth. The question is, who are these five people?

In order to answer the question of who these people are, we need to ask two other questions. The first is, "How many wives did Abraham have?" Now in your mind you are already thinking of the answer. Two! What were the wives' names: Sarah and Hagar, right?

Second question is, "How many sons did Abraham have?" I know you are already thinking of the answer. Two! What were their names? From Sarah, Isaac. From Hagar, Ishmael. To understand better, let us go into Genesis 25 for the answer to these questions and the five names in Isaiah 60.

Who were Midian, Ephah and Sheba? Genesis 25:2 states, "And she bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah."

This is referring to the very sons of Abraham by Keturah. Abraham had three wives and Abraham had eight sons. Midian was Abraham's son and Jokshan is also another son.

Let us find out who was Sheba and who was Ephah, mentioned in Isaiah 60? In Gen. 25:3-4 we read the following.

25:3 Jokshan begot Sheba and Dedan...

25:4 And the sons of Midian were Ephah, Ephher, Hanoch, Abidah, and Eldaah.

Midian, Ephah, Sheba, mentioned in Isaiah 60:6 are the children of Keturah? When was the last time you heard a sermon on the third wife of Abraham, Keturah?

Now what about Kedar and Nebaioth in Isaiah 60:7? It says,

60:7 “All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together to you, The rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you...”

Let us look at Genesis 25:13,

25:13 And these *were* the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, according to their generations: The firstborn of Ishmael, Nebajoth; then Kedar...

Nebaioth and Kedar are the grandsons of Abraham through Ishmael. These are the descendants of Hagar. When was the last time you heard a sermon about Hagar in your Church?

Are you surprised at what is going on here? Isaac was Abraham's son of promise. But these are Abraham's descendants through Hagar and Keturah.

Here is another question? Was Hagar a wife of Abraham?

"And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife" Gen. 16:3 clearly states that Hagar was given to Abraham not as a "wife" in a full legal sense but as a concubine to bear a son, an action that showed Sara's lack of faith in God's promise.

God had promised a special blessing to Abraham found in Gen. 12:3:

“ I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Though Isaac was the promised son of Abraham who was to fulfil God's universal plan and everlasting covenant, yet the other sons of Abraham were also going to receive blessings of God. God was planning to bless all the families of the earth and surely, he would bless Abraham's own descendants too.

Abraham had sent the children of Hagar and Keturah into the East. We see this in Genesis 25:6 (Read). This is why, in the Bible, they are called the People of the East. We also know the story of how Sarah and Abraham expelled Hagar and her son Ishmael, but 1,300 years later, Isaiah 60 verse 6 tells us that Keturah's children (Midian, Ephah, Sheba) are coming. And Isaiah 60:7 is telling us that Hagar's descendants (Kedar and Nebaioth) are also coming. So, though they were sent out from Abraham's home and presence, they were never sent out of the presence of God. God is prophesying that one day, the children of Keturah and Hagar will be coming back to the land of Israel and the House of God.

Jesus also shared God's plan in Matthew:

24:14 " And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.”

God's greatest desire is that the message, as it says in Revelation 14:6, should reach every kindred, tongue, and people. That plan also includes the descendants of Abraham, especially those who are not the descendants of Isaac.

In the Old Testament, after Abraham's death, we notice that Sarah's descendants were called Children of Israel, and Hagar and Keturah's children, since they were sent to the East, were called “People of the East” or

“Children of the East”. Though God had a cosmic, universal plan of salvation to be fulfilled (and realized) through Isaac and his descendants, God had a plan for the “People of the East” as well.

We know that Isaac’s descendants were known for their twelve tribes. How many tribes were there for Ishmael? This is what we read in Genesis 25:13-16:

25:13 And these *were* the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, according to their generations: The firstborn of Ishmael, Nebajoth; then Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam,

25:14 Mishma, Dumah, Massa,

25:15 Hadar, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah.

25:16 These *were* the sons of Ishmael and these *were* their names...

So, you must be saying that this is good, but how come the children of Ishmael (or better known as the children of the East) were to co-operate with the children of Isaac in God's great plan?

In the line of Isaac, Jacob had a son called Joseph, whom his brothers did not like and planned to kill. We read in Genesis 37:24-28 the following:

Then they took him and cast him into a pit. And the pit *was* empty; *there was* no water in it. And they sat down to eat a meal. Then they lifted their eyes and looked, and there was a company of Ishmaelites, coming from Gilead with their camels, bearing spices, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry *them* down to Egypt. So Judah said to his brothers, “What profit *is there* if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he *is* our brother *and* our flesh.” And his brothers listened. Then Midianite traders passed by; so *the brothers* pulled Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty *shekels* of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Ishmaelites and Midianites saved the life of Joseph by cooperating in the plan of God to preserve the life of Israelites for the future.

Later another descendant of Isaac by the name of Moses, had to run away from the Pharaoh in Egypt. Moses had killed an Egyptian, about which Pharaoh heard, and he wanted to kill Moses. We read in Exodus:

2:15 When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well.

Moses fled to Midian. Midian was a son of Abraham, whose descendants now saved the life of Moses. They cooperated in the great plan of God to preserve the life of a future greatest leader of the children of Israel and to make possible the greatest and most dramatic exodus that has ever taken place on the face of this earth.

Moses stayed in the house of the priest of Midian, who also happened to be his father-in-law, Jethro. Moses also learnt about a story of God’s friendship with Job. It says in Job 1:

1:1 There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name *was* Job; and that man was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil.

1:3 Also, his possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys, and a very large household, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East.

Job was from the “People of the East”.

Later Jethro, from the “People of the East”, taught the great lesson of Management in Exodus 18

18:19 " Listen now to my voice; I will give you ^[a]counsel, and God will be with you...”

18:21 " Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place *such* over them *to be* rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens."

This is the story that we see in the Old Testament of the Children of Israel on one side. They were descendants of Isaac. We also see the stories in the Old Testament of the "Children of the East". They were descendants of Ishmael and Midian.

When we come to the New Testament, this is what we read in Matthew:

2:1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

2:2 saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

Who came at the birth of Jesus? The *Children of the East*. Did the Children of Israel come? No. The Angels had to tell the Shepherds to go. The Children of Israel had hundreds of prophecies of the Messiah's coming in the Old Testament but they never came to the birth of Jesus, but the *Children of the East* did.

This was in fulfillment of a prophecy in Isaiah;

60:6 The multitude of camels shall cover your *land*, The dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba shall come; They shall bring gold and incense, And they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord.

This prophecy was fulfilled at the first coming of Jesus. The multitude of camels came from Midian, Ephah and Sheba, in the East. They brought gold with them. They brought incense with them. And they proclaimed the praises of the Lord. Every word of this prophecy was fulfilled at the first coming of Jesus.

But another part of the prophecy has still not been fulfilled, yet.

60:7 All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together to you, The rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; They shall ascend with acceptance on My altar, And I will glorify the house of My glory.

Who is Kedar and Nebaioth? These are the sons of Ishmael? The text clearly states that the Children of Ishmael will come with their gifts on the altar of God. They will bring their gifts in the House of God. This prophecy has not been fulfilled. When will it be fulfilled? It will be fulfilled before the Second Coming of Jesus. We have a role to play.

Where is the house of God? In Jerusalem? Or is it the Sabbath-keeping church of God. We have a role to play for them to come in.

God is happy to see all saved in His Kingdom. Are we ready to let them in? Are we going to make this vision and dream of God a reality? We have seen that the *Children of the East* were willing to cooperate in God's universal plan. Are you and I willing to cooperate with God in reaching out to the people whom God loves?

Let us go forward in the zeal of God to make this dream a reality. John 3:16 "For God so loved the world..." He loved the world, not just Jewish people, nor just Christians to be saved... but anyone who hears the gospel and believes in Jesus as the Savior.

My friends, in the final universal climax towards the end of this world and before the coming of our Lord himself, the verses in Isaiah give us a glimpse of the glory of God's temple. Of course, God's temple means the Church of God. God has a vision for a final worship before the coming of Jesus.

Who are the Children of Ishmael today?

Isaiah 60:7 “All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together to you, The rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; They shall ascend with acceptance on My altar, And I will glorify the house of My glory”

It is clear that when the *Children of Ishmael* will come in the House of God, then God will glorify His Church. When the Church begins to do this ministry to the descendants of Ishmael, God will be happy, and He will bless His church and His work will be finished.

Will you play an essential part in this ministry to the people of Ishmael?

Amen!

Prayer:

Our dear loving God, We are thankful that you are a loving God. We are thankful that you love people from the East and the West. We are thankful that you love the whole world. In this prophecy in Isaiah 60:7 we can clearly see that Children of Ishmael will come. Since they did not yet come in big numbers, we believe this verse will be fulfilled in the future but before the Second Coming of Jesus. As we can see that the world is coming to a final climax, we are not far from this being fulfilled. Help us to be willing to usher them in your house, and may you bless your house and may your work be accomplished. In Your Name we pray, Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the prophecy in Isaiah 60:6-7 highlight God's inclusive plan of salvation for all people, including the descendants of Ishmael? Reflect on the significance of the "Children of the East" in God's universal mission and how this impacts our outreach efforts today.
2. What lessons can we learn from the cooperation of the Ishmaelites and Midianites in preserving God's plan, as seen in the stories of Joseph and Moses? How can these examples inspire modern-day unity among different groups in fulfilling God's mission?
3. In what practical ways can the church today reach out to the descendants of Ishmael (or Muslim populations) to fulfill this prophecy? What barriers need to be overcome, and what role does understanding and respect play in this mission?

A Community Transformed

Dr. Brendan Prattt

Focus: Secular Population

Main Text: Romans 12:1-2

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Introduction

What are you chasing? What would a ‘successful’ life look like for you?

In secular consumer culture, the goal is happiness. A more meaningful life is just a purchase away. You would be so much happier if you had the updated model. Consumerism is an endless quest for more. “I will be happy when...”

In this reading we are going to explore some of the challenges of secular consumer culture. More importantly, we will see how counter-cultural biblical community is the answer to the individualized, superficial lives consumer culture is trying to sell us.

The Culture we Live In

Paul writes in Romans that we are not to ‘conformed to the pattern of this world.’ In secular culture that pattern is shaped around consumerism.

If you have access to the internet, have a smartphone, or have a television, then each day, you will see over 3,000 advertisements that say you need more of what you already have or you need something different.

Secular Consumer culture tells us what to desire, love and have hope in. Consumerism is not so much about how much we have but more about where we put our hopes and desires. Consumerism shapes our sense of identity and personality.

Consumerism Destroys Community

Where a culture scores high on consumer measurements, it also scores high on loneliness and dysfunction. Relationships with God, family, neighbors, and friends takes time, and in consumer culture, where time equals money, relationships are sacrificed to the illusion of ‘happiness.’

Secular consumer culture is based on the worship of the individual; it focuses on meeting the ‘needs’ of the individual and undermines the ‘one another’ of scripture and relational community. We can even start treating God and the church as products to be consumed. Church becomes a service I watch rather than a community to be involved in. The main measurement becomes “Did I like it or not?” The Bible becomes a book of consumable suggestions rather than a big story of God’s love for humanity. God becomes a cosmic prosperity vending machine to provide our wants.

In our secular consumer culture, consumerism takes worship away from God and puts it on products, celebrities, and ourselves. In consumerism, Christianity becomes just another consumer choice, another lifestyle option.

In Romans 12, Paul wasn't writing about secular consumerism, but he was talking about how the dominant values of the empire have a way of molding who we are. Consumerism is just a modern institutionalized expression of the same selfishness that has always been the problem. As Christians, we are called to live with different hopes and desires and remember that we are shaped for a greater purpose. We are called to be 'living sacrifices' who focus on worshipping, serving, sharing, connecting, and growing as disciples over focusing on ourselves.

Jesus spoke often about the challenge of consumerism. Sure, there weren't all the advertisements, brands, cosmetics and fashion magazines but He did explain in Luke 12 how things have a way of taking hold of our hearts and becoming our master. He did talk about how we can so easily give our heart to the wrong grid, define ourselves by our 'treasure' and end up serving money.

Transformed versus Conformed

Paul reminds us in Romans 12 that instead of being 'conformed' we should be 'transformed' by the renewing of our minds. What does it look like to be transformed over conformed. Conformed is about a different way of being community.

Most responses that seek to address consumerism include a focus on education, reducing consumption, caring for the environment and serving. While these responses are excellent, addressing the heart of consumerism needs to go beyond education and product choices. The more significant response is being the 'living sacrifice'.

The word translated transformed in Romans 12:2 is defined as changed, transfigured, transformed. It is like watching a caterpillar transform into a butterfly. That beautiful butterfly does not look like the caterpillar it once was. The transformation is complete and dramatic. Being transformed is about focusing on Jesus. It requires complete obedience to God. It is then applying those teachings in counter-consumer communities that give a better hope, desire, freedom, and identity.

The Sabbath and Transformed Community

Is there a message of Hope and transformation we can take to these communities? Do we already hope for a solution to a culture of consumerism? People in cultures that are always "on the go" might benefit from slowing down. Maybe a whole day each week to connect with God and each other. Or even a whole day each week to take a break from shopping and the usual jobs?

The celebration of a relational God, and the resistance to consumerism can be embodied in the Sabbath. The Sabbath stands as a mark against consumerism. Sabbath is a reminder that time does not equal money. Instead, we can recalibrate around the larger purposes of growing, serving, connecting, sharing, and worshipping. On Sabbath, we take a break from the consumeristic messages of advertising and shopping, and, instead, we celebrate relational community.

Imagine the joy of stillness this would bring to a person who is constantly doing. The Sabbath goes against a culture of instant gratification, against a culture of endless production. The Sabbath is all about relational community. On the Sabbath, we disengage from the world to engage in something deeper.

Intergenerational Connections, Death and Community

Another factor that reduces consumerism is growing intergenerational connections. When children see and interact with elderly people, they become less inclined towards consumer-driven thinking.

Death also challenges consumerism. Death is a reminder of what you have given your life to. Death clarifies life... and strips away the superficial allure of consumerism. As Seventh-day Adventists, the resurrection is all about community forever. We don't go to heaven one by one – but at the resurrection as part of a big community.

So, where would you find a Sabbath celebrating, community where young and old can be together?

What if there were a group of people that had the ingredients to form a countercultural community, one that helps individuals grow beyond consumerism?

Daniel in Babylon

The biblical story of Daniel highlights how we can live, and even thrive, in Babylon – an empire that symbolizes false worship. Daniel purposed in his heart that he belonged to a more significant empire. He prayed with and sought support from friends with similar values. He re-calibrated around God's purpose for him often (at least formally three times a day). He remembered that everything, including his intellect and ability to interpret dreams, was from God and only God was worthy of ultimate glory.

When we start with knowing we exist for God's glory we see life and the world differently.

Transformed Community is the Answer

A spiritual community is the opposite of consumerism because consumerism is individualized. Even though brands try to create community, real loving relationships are not easily turned into products.

A genuine relational community is the opposite of Consumerism.

In Romans 12, Paul describes life as being about:

Worshipping [verses 1-3],

Serving [verses 3-8],

Connecting [verses 9-10],

Growing [verses 11-12], and

Sharing [verses 14-21].

Worshipping, serving, connecting, growing, and sharing is the reasons the church is on the planet. These factors all help shape a community that is counter-cultural while challenging the consumer constructs in culture.

This vision can become a reality within a church community, which is the opposite of consumerism. "Relational community is the answer."

Tips for Living Beyond Consumer Culture:

- Think about what advertising tells you and why you might choose a particular product.
- Lift your focus on people. Intentionally slow down to spend time with family, church community, and neighbors.
- Lift your capacity to serve in your home, church, and world.
- Be generous with your time, talents, and treasure. Generosity breaks the hold of consumerism. Tithing 10% of your income is a great way to guard against the greed of consumerism and be reminded that your bank account is for God's glory.
- Celebrate Sabbath. The Sabbath stands as a mark against consumerism. Sabbath reminds me time doesn't equal money. Sabbath reminds me I exist for a bigger purpose of growing, serving, connecting, sharing and

worshipping. On Sabbath I take a break from the consumeristic messages of advertising and shopping and, instead, celebrate life at its best.

- Spend time with older people who know the stories but are often overlooked.
- Spend time in nature. People who spend time in nature are often less consumer-driven and more likely to value creation.
- Take some time to recalibrate around what really matters. Make a plan to be transformed by the renewing of your mind rather than being conformed (Romans 12:6). Put in place some heart-building habits that connect you with God.

Conclusion

Consumerism is so deeply rooted in our culture that it has become part of the air we breathe. The journey from a consumeristic community to a disciple-making community is not easy or obvious, but it is vitally important.

As Christians, we are called to give our life to a different story. Rather than conforming, we are to be transformed (Romans 12:1-3). We will consume but with different glasses on. We will find our hope, desire and identity in Jesus and ironically find our life by giving it away – shifting from our agenda to serving God's. We will value people and take time to grow, serve, share, and worship in ways that resist commodification. We will live to God's glory in a world that instead focuses on self. Let us remember that transformation comes through following Christ and resisting the world. This is the starting point of a significant life that matters for now and eternity.

Ministry leaders are then about shaping counter-cultural communities that connect with consumers and grow them beyond to find identity and locate hope and desire within the relational richness of God.

What are you chasing? Conformed or Transformed?

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father,

We come before You, seeking to set our hearts and minds on Your will. Help us to place our hope and desires not in the fleeting promises of consumerism, but in the eternal purpose You have for our lives. Strengthen us as we share Your message in a world shaped by secular values and materialism. When we find ourselves caught in the ways of this world, may we lean on You for guidance and on the community of believers for support. Draw us closer to You and lead us into a life of transformation that reflects Your love and grace.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. What practical steps can you take to resist consumerism and focus on eternal values?
2. How can observing the Sabbath help you disconnect from consumer culture and reconnect with God and others?
3. How can being a "living sacrifice" shape your role in building a counter-cultural, Christ-centered community?

Sermon 8

A Tale of Cities

Bledi Leno

Focus: The Cities

Main Text: Revelation 21:2-3

"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'"

It comes as a surprise to all of us: the Bible is actually an urban book! It is hard for us to appreciate that the world of Moses, David, Daniel, and Jesus was an urban world. But it was—their world was probably more urban than any civilization before it or any after it for the next fifteen hundred years.

The world in which the Bible was written was dominated by cities. By 2000 B.C.E., Abraham's city of Ur numbered 250,000. According to Jonah 3:3, ancient Nineveh was so large that it took three days to cross it on foot.

At the time of Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon was an amazing city with eleven miles of walls and a water and irrigation system (perhaps even including flush toilets) that was not equaled again until the end of the nineteenth century.

In New Testament times, Ephesus had street lighting along its famed Arcadius Street, of which Ammianus wrote, "The brilliancy of the lamps at night often equaled the light of day."

Antioch had sixteen miles of colonnaded streets.

The Rome of the Apostle Paul's day numbered more than one million people—the first city in human history to exceed that number. Its streets were so crowded that wheeled traffic had to be banned from its center during the day. The rich lived in large, private mansions, and the middle class in sophisticated apartment buildings. But the poor—the great mass of the residents of Rome—lived in 46,000 tenement houses, many eight to ten stories high. The first high-rise apartment buildings were built not in Chicago but in ancient Rome nearly two thousand years ago!

We can begin to understand the sheer immensity of the city when we consider Lanciana's list of public works between C.E. 312 and 315:

"... 1,790 palaces, 926 baths, 8 commons, 30 parks and gardens, 700 public pools and 500 fountains fed by 130 reservoirs, 254 bakehouses, 290 warehouses, 37 gates, 36 marble arches, 2 circuses, 2 amphitheaters, 3 theaters, 28 libraries, 4 gladiatorial schools, 5 nautical spectacles for sea fights, 6 obelisks, 8 bridges, 19 "water channels," 3,785 bronze statues and 10,000 carved figure.

The biblical people of God were themselves urban people.

- David was king of Jerusalem
- Isaiah and Jeremiah were both prophets committed to Jerusalem.
- Daniel was appointed mayor of the city of Babylon
- Nehemiah was a city planner, a community organizer, and governor of Jerusalem.
- Paul was Christianity's premier evangelist to the major cities of the Roman Empire.

- John envisioned God's ultimate intentions for humanity as an indescribable city.
- Jesus' redemptive act of crucifixion could only happen in a city where the political power of Rome and the religious influence of the Jewish priesthood acted in concert to kill the Son of God.
- Most of Paul's letters were written to city churches as primers on how the church can effectively carry on ministry in a city.

If the Bible is such an urban book, why do we not see it that way? It is simply because we approach the Bible from an essentially rural theological perspective. When we read the Bible, we think of "country/ village" instead of "city." We see what we read through "rural glasses."

It was not until the twelfth century that European cities began to grow significantly. Even then, they were small in comparison to biblical cities—Paris, France, at 100,000; Florence, Italy, at 45,000; Venice, Italy, at 90,000.²⁰ After Rome's decline, it would take Europe nearly thirteen hundred years to produce its next city of a million people. That would be London in 1820.

The Bible was written in an urban Middle East, but the main theological formulations of the faith of the church developed in rural Europe. Consider the formative theologians of the early, medieval, and Reformation churches: St. Paul, John of Damascus, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin.

HOW DOES SCRIPTURE VIEW MY CITY?

The city is the locus of a great and continuing battle between the God of Israel and the church and the god of the world.

Babylon Versus Jerusalem

Babylon is used throughout Scripture as a symbol of a city entirely given over to Satan.

The city is first introduced in Genesis 11 when humanity decides to build a Tower of Babel (the Plain of Shinar, mentioned in the text as the city of the ziggurat, was later the location of Babylon). God confused their languages because the people declared, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves..." (Genesis 11:4).

Babylon is painted in Scripture as a bureaucratic, self-serving, and dehumanizing social system with economics geared to benefit its privileged and exploit its poor, with politics of oppression, and with a religion that ignores covenant with God and deifies power and wealth (Isa. 14:5-21; Jer. 50:2-17; 51:6-10; Dan. 3:1-7; Rev. 17:1-6; 18:2-19, 24). Much of what is dark and evil in Babylon is replicated in cities (even Jerusalem) throughout the biblical story.

Jerusalem, by contrast, is seen in its idealized form as the city of God. It, too, is introduced in Genesis 14:17-24 in the figure of Melchizedek, king of Salem (Salem is a former name of Jerusalem).

Jerusalem is celebrated as city as it was meant to be—a city belonging to God. As a social system, it is called to witness to God's shalom, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem..." Psalm 122:6-9, "The Lord builds up Jerusalem; He gathers together the outcasts of Israel." Psalm 147:2. As an economic entity, it is meant to practice equitable stewardship and a communal and just existence in its politics.

Finally, Jerusalem is portrayed as the spiritual center of the world, a model city living in trust and faith under the lordship of God (Isa. 8:18; Mic. 4:1; Deut. 17:14-20).

Every city has both Babylon and Jerusalem in it, for every city is the battleground between the god of Babylon (Baal, Satan) and the God of Jerusalem (Yahweh, the Lord) for domination and control.

Babylon in Jerusalem

Etymology of the word Jerusalem. Biblical scholars such as Millar Burrows have pointed out that the name actually means "foundation of Shalem."

In the very name Jerusalem is expressed the tension of every city. It is Je-rusalem—the city of Yahweh, of God. It is Jerusalem—the city of Baal (or Satan). Jerusalem is the city of Yahweh. Jerusalem is the city of Baal. It is a city that contains the power and influence of both forces within its walls. The very name of Israel's primary (and idealized) city expresses the foundational urban message of the Bible. Jerusalem—and every city—is the battleground between God and Satan for domination of its people and their structures.

Jerusalem the Bride

Ezekiel 16:1-14

The most moving glimpse into God's deep love for the city. God, Ezekiel is telling us, fell in love with Jerusalem!

Isaiah 60:1-2, 14-21,

“Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. ²For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, And deep darkness the people; But the Lord will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you.” (Isaiah 60:1-2).

“Also the sons of those who afflicted you shall come bowing to you, And all those who despised you shall fall prostrate at the soles of your feet; And they shall call you The City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel. ¹⁵“Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, So that no one went through you, I will make you an eternal excellence, A joy of many generations.” (Isaiah 60 14-15).

God created, loved, preserved, and redeemed the city so that it could be transformed into the city God intends it to be. As that transformed community, the city becomes a lighthouse to the world, the manifestation of God's handiwork to the nation and the world.

Jonah 3:2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.”

“But the Lord said, “You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which [\[a\]](#)came up in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?” Jonah 4:10-11

Here is God as concerned for a wicked, pagan city as he is for His city, Jerusalem?

Cities mattered to God....but do they matter to you?

Evil: Individual or Corporate?

Evangelical Protestantism tends to center its theology on God's work of salvation. Particularly in its more popular, non-reflective forms, the evangel has historically been proclaimed in terms of individual salvation—the calling of the sinner to Christ.

The danger with such an approach is that those who stress exclusively the individual dimensions of salvation can neither understand the full extent of evil nor appreciate Christ's full salvific work.

As we look we see that Scripture presents salvation as both individual and corporate. The biblical writers understood evil this way. Note the broad use of corporate images to describe the saved condition—covenant people, the nation Israel, the people of God, the remnant, the Kingdom of God, the church, the New Jerusalem.

The Systems of a City

It is widely suggested that the systems that order the life of a city are economic, political, and religious.

In his final speech, Moses reminded Israel that he had dreamed a great dream about a new nation, a kingdom living under God. That new society had been carefully constructed and practiced in the desert. But now, Moses told the people in

Deuteronomy 6, you are to go into a new land to possess it. It will be a land of pagans who will not accept or even appreciate your way of life; instead, they will oppose it. The new land will be filled with cities of great wealth, which you will appropriate; that wealth may erode your way of life. That new land will bring you much prosperity so that you will think you have made yourself strong rather than perceiving all as a gift from God; that power will undermine your dependence on God. This is what you will face in the new land—people who will oppose, wealth that will erode, power that will undermine your way of life.

A Religion of Relationship

According to the Bible, Moses in Deuteronomy 6:4-6 proclaims, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. “And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.” The foundation for the building of a nation or of a city, the author of Deuteronomy tells us, is a relationship with God.

A Politics of Justice

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Deut. 6:6-9).

When we read the commandments and regulations that follow Moses’ speech in Deuteronomy, we are amazed to discover that they deal mostly with issues of justice. They deal with such concerns as the redistribution of wealth to the poor, protection of the widow, liberation of the enslaved, limitations on the power of rulers, justice in warfare, safeguarding the welfare of wives and unmarried women in adjudication and cases of homicide, and protection of the divorcée, the orphan, the stranger, the sick, the visitor, and the enfeebled. To fulfill the kingdom of God successfully in a pagan city, according to Moses, Israel was to develop and maintain a politics of justice.

An Economics of Stewardship

When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (Deut. 6:10-12).

Prayer:

Heavenly Father,

You are the God of cities and nations, Lord over all creation. As we reflect on Your Word, open our hearts to see the potential for transformation in the places we live. Help us to be instruments of Your justice, stewards of Your resources, and lights in the darkness. May we embody Your love, bringing glimpses of the New Jerusalem into our communities. Guide us to build cities where Your name is honored, and Your peace reigns. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you see elements of both Babylon and Jerusalem in the city you live in today?
2. In what ways can Christians engage with cities to reflect God’s shalom and justice?
3. How does the concept of salvation as both individual and corporate challenge your understanding of faith and community?
4. What practical steps can you take to contribute to a politics of justice or an economics of stewardship in your local context?

References

Meir Ben-Dov, Historical Atlas of Jerusalem, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002.

Binz, Stephen J. (2005). Jerusalem, the Holy City. Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications.

Wallace, Edwin Sherman (August 1977). Jerusalem the Holy. New York: Arno Press.

Smith, George Adam (1907). Jerusalem: The Topography, Economics and History from the Earliest Times to A.D. 70. Hodder and Stoughton.

Ginzberg, Louis (1909). The Legends of the Jews Volume I: The Akedah (Translated by Henrietta Szold) Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

Jacques Ellul, Meaning of the City

Robert Linthicum, City of God

Millar Burrows, Jesus in the first three Gospels 1977

Ginzberg, Louis The Legends of the Jews Volume I: The Akedah