

# CALVARY—THE WAY TO REVIVAL AND REFORMATION

By Paul Penno Jr.

January 8, 2011

Pikes Peak used to be the supreme test for cars (in the old days). It was a “difficult” climb, and only the strongest cars made it to the top. Well, the peak is still as steep as ever, but our modern SUV’s “flatten it out.” The point is that indeed the difficulties in following Jesus are all there, loads of them (especially in the light of Paul’s experience); but *agape* flattens out the difficulties!

Another name for this idea is “much more abounding grace.” It does not lessen obedience to the law; it makes it possible.

It seems that our “historic Adventists” are the ones who are uncomfortable with this *agape* idea, this abounding grace, this “constraint.” They are also uncomfortable with the idea of the “free gift” coming upon “all men unto justification of life.” And also uncomfortable (many of them) with the assurance that this much more abounding grace, this “constraint,” will work to bring revival and reformation and repentance within the organized SDA church.

A great world church is experiencing a “revival and reformation” in seeking a preparation of heart for the end of the world and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Sincere people are pressing their petitions upon God’s “throne of grace” (Heb. 4:16). It is increasingly being recognized that the last-days

developments are beginning to take place before our eyes.

For example, Revelation 13 is unraveling before us. The great two-horned beast of vs. 11-18 is progressing from its character of having “two horns like a lamb” to a new stance of “speaking as a dragon” (vs. 11).

Yes, it is time for those who cherish “the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” to awaken. It’s impossible for a world church to pray for “revival and reformation” without Heaven responding in some way. The insistent inroads of worldliness must be counteracted by an unprecedented infilling of the Holy Spirit, a “standard [being] lifted up against the enemy” (cf. Isa. 59:19).

Prophets and apostles of past ages longed to see our age when (a) the New Covenant will at last come into its own (Jer. 31:31-34), when (b) Joel’s prophecy of the Holy Spirit being “poured out” on youth will be realized (2:28-30), when (c) the “earth [will be] lightened with glory” in a final message of righteousness by faith, (d) a message that will “lift up Christ and Him crucified” in clarity and power never before so realized (John 12:31, 32; 1 Cor. 2:1, 2; Rev. 18:1-4).

And side by side will come the Enemy’s deceptively designed counterfeits of “revival and reformation” (Matt. 24:24; Rev. 13:13, 14). Let us walk softly before the Lord just now and not reject His “eyesalve” (3:18).

Does God have problems He has to solve? Are any of them difficult for Him, as problems are for

us? He has one huge one—the rebellion of sin in His universe. You may say, “He is infinite, omnipotent; He can just zap His enemies and His problems are solved!”

But wait a moment: He can’t do that unless He rules as a divine Autocrat, and in the process becomes “Satan” *redivivus*. For example, His people Israel were being cruelly enslaved in Egypt. How can He deliver them? Zap the Egyptians? No; He must go through a long, wearying process of sending ten plagues on Pharaoh; He must carry world opinion with Him. Most of all, God must make it clear to His own people Israel that He alone is their Savior, their Deliverer, or their hearts can never be truly reconciled to Him.

If they retain any sense of self-salvation, sin will still rule in their hearts. Even one percent of salvation by their own works will nullify the power of His gospel as surely as one percent of arsenic mixed into a good dinner will spoil it.

But that lethal “one percent” (or more!) got mixed in at Mount Sinai when the people themselves wanted to invent the Old Covenant: “All that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Ex. 19:8). We helped You deliver us from Egyptian slavery! Even if we didn’t, we *will* do our part in this “bargain,” this “deal,” this transaction of Your Covenant. We’ll sign on the dotted line! You can count on us, Lord!

All through Israel’s long history this Old Covenant mentality predominated. After each revival and reformation it finally drove them to reject and crucify their Savior.

Now, does God have a problem with His church? The prophecies of Daniel, of Revelation, of Jesus in Matthew 24, of Paul in Acts 20 and 2 Thessalonians 2, all tell us “Yes!” The great Enemy who misled ancient Israel is still active. “Take heed that no man deceive you,” says Jesus. “After my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock,” “there [shall] come a falling away, . . . and that man of sin be revealed, . . . who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God,” says Paul.

And again, the issue is self-righteousness. Theologians feel they must worm in that principle of salvation by works, in some way. They just can’t have a Savior doing *all* the saving! Can you?

Something significant is happening all across North America: thousands of church members are pondering the old covenant vs. the new covenant. Is God asking them to sign their names to a contract that contains a series of promises entitled “My Covenant,” promising that “I will study the Bible, pray daily, share with others, serve the Lord Jesus Christ and prepare for His soon coming”? All very good things to do! But could it be possible that God is asking us to believe His promises to us, His covenant with us, rather than our making promises to Him?

According to the Bible, the new covenant has always been God’s unilateral promise to His people (see Genesis 12:1-3); and the old covenant has been the people’s promise to God to do everything right (see Ex. 19:4-8). The question that is stirring thousands of minds is this: what is the correct,

effective way to realize all those four good things (studying the Bible “each day,” praying, sharing, serving the Lord faithfully)? Not just for a week or two while the emotional adrenalin is prompting us, but forever and ever? Even after we get back into the busyness of daily work and the pleasures of the coming summer? Will the old covenant effect a lasting “revival and reformation”?

History says, No. King Hezekiah in Jerusalem led the nation in a powerful old covenant “revival and reformation,” doing everything just exactly right according to the law (2 Kings 18 to 20). Wonderful! But it all fell apart in the succeeding reign of his son, Manasseh (ch. 21). Then Hezekiah’s grandson Josiah came to the throne (ch. 22-23:30). Again, another old covenant revival and reformation, wonderful. But it all fell apart with the death of King Josiah, and from then on it was downhill all the way to national ruin (2 Chron. 36). The caveat “by God’s grace and enabling power” doesn’t change the nature of old covenant promises which produce spiritual bondage (Gal. 4:24); it’s still a faith-and-works experience instead of a faith-which-works experience (see Gal. 5:6).

What’s the real problem? We can’t keep our promises! And when we break them, then discouragement sets in. You might read “Your promises and resolutions are like ropes of sand. . . . The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you. . . .” *Steps to Christ*, p. 47. Let’s believe, dwell upon, cherish, remember, God’s

promises to us in His new covenant! Then “*agape* never fails” (1 Cor. 13:8).

As we continue deeper into the 2000s, appeals to fear are becoming heightened. It is true that natural and man-made disasters are becoming more frequent; wickedness in high places is more publicized and morality in general is discredited; the “signs” are unmistakable—“get ready,” the end is near! And it is near; and yes, the signs are clear. But can fear and egocentric concern produce the revival and reformation that are needed?

Shortly after World War II a very wise and respected church leader expressed his hope that the disasters in Europe would lead to a spiritual revival and reformation in the church in Europe. Sadly he confessed that it didn’t happen as he hoped. In fact, all through sacred history we read how fear never produced lasting revivals.

What does work? The answer: the gospel. The reason? It reaches human hearts; it motivates as fear can never do. A wise writer said long ago that when Christ approaches, He walks on a path of velvet lest His footsteps awaken fears when only the message of His love can motivate truly.

We are at present in a little “tarrying time” when each of us is being tested to see how deep and thorough is our heart-appreciation of that much more abounding grace of Christ. Nothing short of that will enable any of us to endure the trials that all of us know will surely come before the end.

In the time of the great cosmic Day of Atonement, God’s people must have a far clearer understanding of the gospel than any previous generation have

ever been able to comprehend. This does not mean that God has withheld from previous generations that clearer understanding—He has never withheld it from anyone. The truth is simply that no previous generation were ever able to comprehend it. You don't withhold from a flower girl at the wedding the privilege of being a bride; she is just not ready for it. But the time must come when she grows up. Ephesians 4:14-16 tells us that the growing up process is "speaking the truth in love" [*agape*], turning aside from "every [false] wind of doctrine." The good news is that the heavenly High Priest is more than ready to "shed abroad in our hearts" that precious gift of *agape* (Rom. 5:5). And the *agape* will cast out fear (1 Jn. 4:18).

What's the difference between a revival and reformation in the church that is Old Covenant in nature and one that is New Covenant? The great reformation under King Josiah in 2 Chronicles was Old Covenant; why?

Should we not be able to tell the difference today? Suppose the world church today experiences a grand revival and reformation that is Old Covenant, would that hasten the coming of Jesus, or further delay Him?

What are the differences?

(a) An Old Covenant reformation is decidedly temporary. In the case of Josiah's, the moment he was dead, his sons began leading the people back to rebellion against the Lord and the people willingly, mindlessly followed like sheep going astray. No root, no foundation. From then on it was disaster all the way down to total national ruin. They

had learned no long-lasting gospel truth under King Josiah. That wasn't the poor man's fault: he had simply inherited the Old Covenant yoke which the nation of Israel had fastened upon themselves at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:8; Heb. 9:1).

The apostle Paul was probably the first Israelite to discern clearly the significance of their Old Covenant history when he said, "The law was our schoolmaster [slavedriver?] to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (as Abraham was, under the New Covenant; see Gal. 3:16-25).

(b) Numerous Old Covenant revivals and reformations have come and gone in the world church for the past 150 years; King Josiah all over again.

(c) They have often been inspired by and imported from the popular ecumenical movements, the Keswick Movement in the 19th century and popular revivalism in this century. We will probably face a massive Old Covenant revival sweeping the churches in the new millennium.

(d) An Old Covenant revival and reformation is motivated by a desire to receive God's blessings; a New Covenant revival and reformation is motivated by heart-thankfulness and appreciation for God's blessings already realized and received.

(e) An Old Covenant revival is therefore egocentric in nature; and whatever is egocentric in motivation has to be legalistic in its origin. In contrast, a New Covenant revival and reformation is based on an experience of identity with Christ that transcends fear of being lost or hope of reward (1 Jn. 4:16-18).

The story of good King Hezekiah, son of bad King Ahaz is an example. Ahaz closed Solomon's Temple and turned the people of God to obscene pagan worship. When he was 25, Hezekiah cleaned up the Temple inside and out, opened its closed doors, and re-instituted the worship of the God of heaven. He even revived the joyous celebration of the Passover, did his best to lead the confused descendants of Abraham back to obedience to God. And God honored him: two of Hezekiah's desperate prayers were miraculously answered: (a) God turned away Sennacherib and the Assyrian army, saved Jerusalem from conquest and destruction; and (b) Hezekiah prayed for healing at the age of 39 from a fatal disease. God had told him clearly that his time had come: "set thine house in order: for thou shalt die and not live." But God listened as "he turned his face to the wall and . . . wept sore," "remember" all the good things I have done and "have walked before Thee with a perfect heart, and have done that which is right in Thy sight" (Isa. 38:1-3). It's not fair for me to die at thirty-nine! More convulsed weeping. So God sent Isaiah to tell him, "I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears," you will have 15 years more (vs. 5). At thirty-nine, fifteen years more seems like eternity; Hezekiah was happy. He thanked God publicly.

But there was a problem. The king had been mistaken about that "truth" and his "perfect heart." He didn't know it! Buried therein was *unknown* sin. If he had humbly submitted to God and died at thirty-nine, he would have exited his "Oval Office" with a glorious place in history, and his labors at

revival and reformation could well have been successful and permanent. He could have "sat" with Abraham, Moses, and David, for his reign would have saved the cause of God from ruin. But he sang the song "I Love Life" too exuberantly, being overconfident of his own righteousness. His pride in the divine healing led to the eventual conquest of his kingdom by Babylon; and in those fifteen extra years he sired the worst king ever to sit on David's throne—Manasseh (he shed rivers of innocent blood). Jeremiah was later forced to say that the unspeakable horror that overtook the kingdom, the throne, and the people, was "because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah king of Judah" (15:4). Sometimes it's better to die than to live.

And then you have "good" King Asa described as having a "perfect heart". And, yet, how could he lose his temper, throw God's true prophet into jail, oppress His people, and end up rebelling against God in his old age? Kind of scary for anyone who thinks he/she is okay (story is in 2 Chron. 15, 16).

But the Bible makes the problem clear. There were two main words for "perfect" in Hebrew as our Bibles translate them. King Asa's heart was SHALEM (the root related to "Jerusalem," city of peace). The idea in the word is to be at peace, no inner conflict, live in good conscience, not going contrary to your own sense of duty. Asa's "perfect heart" was totally dedicated to Old Covenant ideas inherited from Mt. Sinai.

The other Hebrew word for "perfect" is TAWMIM, meaning absolutely complete, right (related to TAWMID, "continual, "perpetual," "daily"). Thus

TAWMIM meant morally perfect, not just living up to all the light you have or according to your own conscience (which can be enlightened or not). It really means perfect. Abraham's faith vs. Mt. Sinai.

King Asa's heart was not TAWMIM, but SHALEM. He did all the Old Covenant good he could think of. He did not violate his conscience. He followed his own inner sense of duty. Thus he could reason that God blesses the kingdom if they obey His laws perfectly. Therefore, you people, line up, promise to obey, toe the mark; anyone who doesn't join our "revival and reformation" gets killed (2 Chron. 15:13). And yes, the Lord blessed. Yes, He rewards you if you pay tithe; but what's your motivation—Old or New Covenant?

Asa's "perfect heart" meant that he lived up to Israel's Old Covenant ideas right to the letter. A wise writer says the Old Covenant was "obey and live." The New Covenant is "believe and live." How many more decades must we be confused about the two?

It's a perplexing mystery, and in fact a discouraging suggestion: we read that good King Jehoshaphat *apparently* understood and believed the New Covenant truth of the gospel and still he fell into tragic sin. Further, his wonderful revival and reformation unraveled when he died, and under his son Jehoram the kingdom of Judah returned to the Baal worship of King Ahab of the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Chron. 21:1-6). How could wonderful King Jehoshaphat's good works fail so in the end?

Here's the problem: in 2 Chron. 17:6 we read that "his heart was lifted up in the ways of the Lord,"

which is commonly understood to mean that he was euphoric in his heart-devotion to the gospel. This suggests that his "obedience" to God was not the egocentric compliance with God's rules and regulations that is Old Covenant legalism, but genuine heart-love-devotion. The discouraging thing is that *apparently* all this genuine heart-love for the gospel is powerless to hold the good king from later sin, and powerless to save the national revival and reformation from collapsing. We wonder about ourselves!

Something interesting comes to light when we look at the Hebrew word for his heart being "lifted up." It's GABAH; its inherent meaning is "haughty," "arrogant," puffed-up rather than "lifted up" in a good sense. For example, in Ezek. 28:2, 5, 17 that precise word is used three times to describe Lucifer's "heart lifted up"—the genesis of sin. In Prov. 17:19 it means arrogance. In Obadiah 4 it is haughtiness. In Isa. 3:16 it's wicked women strutting in sinful pride. In Ezek. 31:14 it's "exalting self." Both the NEB and the GNB render 2 Chron. 17:6 as Jehoshaphat being proud of his righteous devotion to the Lord.

Sincere King Jehoshaphat was indeed a good man, but he didn't know he was a Laodicean leader proud of his righteousness. Like Hezekiah, unknown sin was buried in his heart.

If the story of God's people were a theater stage, most of the plays would be tragedies. A fascinating one is King Josiah. Inheriting bad DNA from father Amon and grandfather Manasseh (both evil kings) he surprisingly turned out good. The big pastor of

that day discovered the Book of Moses tucked away in a cupboard in the Temple (can you imagine? they had lost their Bible!). Josiah was only 26, but he followed to the letter everything Moses had said, and commanded every one else to follow him in revival and reformation.

Of course, the basic motivation was raw fear of disasters God threatened if they didn't. It was an Old Covenant revival but the Lord blessed, for it was the best the king or people knew to do. They were happy celebrating Passover; and it seemed that at last after the horrors of Manasseh's reign, heaven had come down to earth. All went well until .

. . .  
A new unlikely and strange voice was heard—a message “from the mouth of God.” Yes, unmistakable credentials. But it wasn't through a mouthpiece Josiah and the people were ready to accept—it was the king of Egypt! So Josiah felt it was militant duty to oppose the message. Sad. He buckled on his armor and went forth to prove that this latest message from God was a fraud. Pharaoh Neco had warned him not to “meddle with God that He destroy thee not,” but in spite of all the good deeds Josiah had done, and although he disguised himself in battle, he died in the war. The young prophet Jeremiah composed a heart-moving Requiem for him (we wish we had it). The story? See 2 Chron. 34 and 35.

Not learning the lesson from Josiah, church leaders in modern times with records of good deeds have also rejected messages God sent them from unlikely sources, and have undone the good they

had done. Resting on laurels of God's past blessings, they have opposed most precious fresh blessings the Lord in His great mercy sent. Let's learn our lesson!

There are good sincere people who believe in Old Covenant principles of revival and reformation in God's church. They cite the reformations of Kings Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah as a good ideal, not stopping to realize that they all failed ultimately. God's true “church,” the church of Old Testament times, the church of those good kings, immersed as it was in the Old Covenant, ended up crucifying the Lord of glory.

In truth there was and is nothing good about the Old Covenant. It was bad news all the way. Still is, because its “children are born into slavery,” it “produces slaves as offspring,” it “gendereth to bondage” (Gal. 4:24, NEB, Peterson, KJV). It's directly responsible for the numerous backslidings that occur in the church, the loss of youth, the spiritual confusion that produces Laodicea's “wretched” lukewarmness (Rev. 3:14-21).

When children are dragged through the Old Covenant with legalism-laden stories and so-called “Bible” lessons, many drop out when finally free from home or church control. Mothers weep their eyes out, not knowing what's wrong. It's often not their fault—they did their best to toe the mark of legalism teaching, because that's what they were told in church. Can anyone this side of the final Judgment assess the enormity of these tragedies?

And all this while the dear Lord tries repeatedly to lead His people into “the glorious liberty” of the New

Covenant. It was always His intention that they be “a kingdom of priests” through whom “every family on earth [should] be blessed.” The New Covenant is God’s promises to Abraham and his descendants (by faith, of course)—that His people be the greatest nation on earth (Gen. 12:2, 3; Ex. 19:3-5; Dt. 30). No need for Assyria to arise!

That New Covenant promise applies to every little church that will respond and *believe* as did Abraham. It also applies to every individual who will *believe* as did Abraham. Best of all, you will not only *receive* a blessing, but you will *be* a blessing to others.