

THANKSGIVING FOR THE GOSPEL

By Paul Penno Jr.

November 23, 2012

Well, thank the dear Lord, nobody is “abruptly dead,” but on a dark night in early December a violent thunder and hailstorm pelted her humble home at her bedroom window. Fearing the single pane glass might shatter she got up to draw the curtain. Then the lightning bolt struck; she saw the fireball coming at her. The house went dark, filled with smoke. She rushed out in the cold driving rain and hail, then realized her car keys were in her purse in the bedroom. Wrapping her face in a wet towel she groped her way through the darkness to retrieve it. The volunteer firemen arrived down her winding dirt road within some 20 minutes to put out the flames; but all her personal possessions were finished. The insurance adjuster declared everything a total loss. Her courage is good; we are thankful that nobody “died.” Eventually the insurance covered the replacement costs of a new home and she was out from under the mortgage that previously burdened her old dwelling. Something to be thankful for!

Jesus promises, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. . . . And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues [languages, Greek]; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means

hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”¹

Matthew gives another version of the same assurance of success: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations. . . . And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

And John adds what he remembers hearing the Lord say, which is even more astounding: “He who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.”²

Are these promises too good to be true? They will be fulfilled, without fanaticism and without extremism, in the final message proclaimed by the fourth angel of Revelation 18:1-4. If the Bible is true, the whole world is to be “illuminated” with the glory of a powerful message. It must penetrate to Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist thinking, as well as that of professed Christians. Everyone.

The key to the fulfillment is in two significant phrases: (1) a people must be prepared to “preach the gospel,” and (2) the fulfillment will come through those “who believe in Me.” Only “the gospel of Christ. . . . is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.” In other words, there is tremendous power in the message of true righteousness by faith.

But the devil makes a specialty of telling us that this news is too good to be true. And it seems easy to doubt.

¹ Mark 16:15, 17, 18.

² Matthew 28:18-20; John 14:12.

Moral and spiritual plagues afflict society, drug abuse, alcoholism, marital infidelity, sexual immorality, corruption, compulsive eating disorders, widespread psychological depression. A steady and increasing deterioration of the human spirit is bringing millions to the place where they seem mentally unable even to comprehend Christ's everlasting gospel in the third angel's message.

What's going on behind the scenes? Meanwhile God has instructed "four angels" to "hold" the "four winds" of human passion "till we have sealed the servants of our God."³ You couldn't drive to church safely, otherwise! Thank God the Holy Spirit is still working.

The sealing is obviously the final work to be accomplished by the gospel. The loosing of the "four winds" will be the complete breakdown of social order, decency, morality, fidelity, including economic and political security. The Bible says it will be "Babylon" dropping into the sea "like a millstone"—the end of weddings, Christmases, Easters, shopping malls, sports, materialistic orgies, vacations, and yes, of sensuality.

If the special message which the three angels of Revelation 14 proclaim is "the everlasting gospel" in the setting of the Day of Atonement, then it is obvious that the gospel cannot be clearly understood except in the context of the cleansing of the sanctuary. Ellen White has reminded us of this significance:

³ Revelation 7:1-4; *Early Writings*, pp. 36-38.

"The third angel closes his message thus: 'Here is the patience of the saints; here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.' As he repeated these words, he pointed to the heavenly sanctuary. The minds of all who embrace this message are directed to the most holy place, where Jesus stands before the ark, making His final intercession for all those for whom mercy still lingers, and for those who have ignorantly broken the law of God."⁴

The ministry of the great High Priest in the *first* apartment (the first phase of His sanctuary atoning ministry) prepares believers for death. And that is a marvelous work. The ministry in the second apartment (or phase) is specifically to prepare a corporate body of God's people for translation *without seeing death*.

If His people will faithfully proclaim that sealing message, the Lord has promised that He will do His part to restrain the exploding evil in the world until giving the message is completed. But if the church does not faithfully proclaim the message that alone can prepare a people for the return of Christ, He cannot hold in check those near-exploding global forces of evil. Merely to proclaim a message that prepares people for death is no longer good enough. The time must come when there is a message that prepares a people for His second coming. This gets pretty serious.

Surely it was never His will that World Wars I and II should unleash such havoc and pain in the world,

⁴ *Early Writings*, p. 254.

as well as the horrors and violence that are so common in many lands today. The world has been starving for “the third angel’s message in verity,” and still is. We can be perilously close to economic, political, and social ruin.

God’s plan was that a small people would make a great impact on world consciousness by proclaiming a unique message that Heaven could fully endorse. They would be like little David with five smooth stones facing Goliath, and they would be as successful. The gospel power to prevent those tornadoes of passion was to be in the message itself, not in impressive church institutions, budgets, or organization.

Even today, over a century later, those who study the 1888 message realize its built-in “heavenly credentials” that convince both honest Adventists and non-Adventists.

Speaking of power, there are also in the world numerous “faith-healers,” charismatics, and charlatans who prey upon people’s self-centered motivations. Many profess the name of Christ, but there is a problem which is stated clearly by Ellen White:

“They can see no light in the third angel’s message, which shows the way into the most holy place, . . . and they can not be benefited by the intercession of Jesus there. Like the Jews, who offered their useless sacrifices, they offer up their useless prayers to the apartment which Jesus has left; and Satan, pleased with the deception, assumes a religious character, and leads the minds of these professed Christians to himself, working

with his power, his signs and lying wonders, to fasten them in his snare.”⁵

We are told that Satan can work miracles and even give his followers “light and much power, but no sweet love, joy, and peace.”⁶ But there is Good News lurking beneath this shadowed truth. *The presence of the counterfeit only proves that the genuine is in existence somewhere.*

Does a pure gospel message have power? Everywhere the early apostles preached, something happened. No one could sit on the fence after listening to them.⁷ The reason they turned “the world upside down” was not their cleverness or their personalities. The power was in the content of their message.

Peter’s sermon at Pentecost reveals the source of their power: they understood our involvement in crucifying Christ. All the Gentile world, not just the Jewish leaders, were seen to be guilty of the rejection and murder of the Son of God. Pentecost was corporate guilt exposed. Enmity against God had blossomed into the supreme crime of eternity. The apostles minced no words in telling it.⁸ That revelation catalyzed humanity. Two classes emerged: those who hated the truth, and those who rejoiced for it. No one sat on the fences.

The beginning of this *latter rain* message is in our history. But there is a profound truth hidden in this history: it was the message itself—“the revelation of

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 261.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 55, 56.

⁷ See for example. Acts 17:1-6.

⁸ Acts 2:23-37.

the righteousness of Christ, the sin-pardoning Redeemer.”⁹ There was in it “the truth of the gospel,” the most powerful force that can be exerted on human hearts.¹⁰ And once more, had the message been accepted and proclaimed, the world would again have been catalyzed into two groups: those who hated the truth and would enforce the mark of the beast, and those who would receive the seal of God.

Some of the human problems which the apostles’ gospel solved were the same that perplex social scientists today. Miracles took place at Corinth that were greater than mere physical healings: “Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”¹¹

These same problems afflict the human race today. They are not merely occasional moral lapses. Compulsive obsessions or addictions have roots going down to people’s toes. How were those problems solved in Corinth? The answer is in the text: *by the message of justification by faith*.

There was frightful moral depravity then. Citizens and slaves were so violently cruel that they reveled in watching human beings fight wild animals, and

⁹ *Review and Herald*, November 22, 1892.

¹⁰ Cf. Galatians 2:14.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

each other, to the death. The more blood the more fun. Prostitution was sanctified as a part of religion. But through the proclamation of the gospel, “grace did much more abound” and reigned “through righteousness [by faith] unto eternal life.”¹² The story of the cross touched secret springs hidden deep in Gentile and Jewish human hearts, and released latent abilities undreamed of.

The message placed “under grace” people who were shackled by all kinds of compulsive sin, including that of “abusers of themselves with mankind.” Now a new compulsion of love shackled them willingly and gladly to Christ. The result: a happy one. “Sin shall not have dominion over you,” said Paul, “for you are not under law but under grace.”¹³

Even today, that message of grace conquers all kinds of secret addictions when appeals to self-centered concern are helpless to motivate people to a true and lasting change.

What truth does a message of grace emphasize? The apostles’ message of grace proclaimed what is often neglected or denied within the church today—the reality of Christ’s human nature being *like*, not *unlike*, ours. What impressed those people was the Son of God coming “nigh at hand,” taking their nature, being tempted as they were, suffering in their place, accepting their poverty that He might give them His wealth, conquering their temptations by faith but with the same “equipment” of nature they had. Paul reminded the Corinthians of what

¹² Romans 5:20, 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6:14.

they had learned from him: “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.”¹⁴

Here was a power that gripped human hearts as nothing had done in all previous history. The most hopeless captives found deliverance. The cross-reality burned its way into the deepest recesses of thinking, as a spiritual catharsis. A new sense of self-respect emerged that nothing could destroy.

For a brief time in our history, the precious message was proclaimed with similar results in our camp meetings and schools. What were its fruits? Ellen White said: “The present message—justification by faith—is a message from God; it bears the divine credentials, for its fruit is unto holiness.”¹⁵ There seems to have been something phenomenal about it:

“I have never seen a revival work go forward with such thoroughness, and yet remain so free from all undue excitement. There was no urging or inviting. The people were not called forward, but there was a solemn realization that Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. . . . We seemed to breathe in the very atmosphere of heaven.”¹⁶

“I saw that the power of God attended the message wherever it was spoken. You could not make the people believe in South Lancaster that it was not a message of light that came to them. . . .

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 8:9.

¹⁵ *Review and Herald*, September 3, 1889.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, March 5, 1889.

God has set His hand to do this work. We labored in Chicago; it was a week before there was a break in the meetings. But like a wave of glory, the blessing of God swept over us as we pointed men to the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. The Lord revealed His glory, and we felt the deep movings of His Spirit.”¹⁷

Note that it was not the speakers, hierarchical pressure, promotional strategies, or advertising, that had such power. *It was in the message itself.*

Has this “most precious message” been clearly proclaimed to the world since then, so that the final sealing work could be done?

The obvious fact of over a hundred years of history since the loud cry “began” seems significant. If the message had been truly proclaimed, Christ would have come. It’s that simple. Ellen White boldly says that “in a great measure” it has been “kept away” from both the church and the world.¹⁸

But there is good news—to discover the reason for the long delay of over a century has to give us hope. It is in our power to recover the message because the same “Lord [who] in His great mercy sent” it has provided for its being available in out-of-print books and periodicals for us to see today. If He “sent” it through “His special messengers” who were given “heavenly credentials,” it makes very good sense to see what they had to say.

The heart of God yearns for all the heart-burdened captives of Satan in the world today. Christ paid the price for their deliverance, and yet millions, yes,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, March 18, 1890.

¹⁸ *Selected Messages*, Book One, pp. 234, 235.

billions, are virtually ignorant of His work as High Priest in the Most Holy Apartment. He must depend on His church to proclaim and to demonstrate that unique message which alone can deliver from Satan's grip.

He has promised that His remnant church is to be the avenue through which His much more abounding grace is to be communicated to the world. No off-shoot can succeed. There is a grace greater than can be understood by any people who have no knowledge of the Most Holy Apartment ministry:

"It shall come to pass afterward [in the last days] that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh. . . . And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the remnant whom the Lord calls."¹⁹

"The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."²⁰

"I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated with his glory. . . . And I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her [Babylon], my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues."²¹

Note that word, "having great *authority*." In the original language it is the same word that Jesus used when He told His disciples that "all authority

has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." Now, in His closing work of atonement, He is finally able to communicate that "authority" through His people on earth. Now at last through His name they will be empowered to do the "greater works" than He did on earth.

Is the prophecy too good to be true? Ellen White says it will happen: "In visions of the night representations passed before me of a great reformatory movement among God's people. Many were praising God. The sick were healed, and other miracles were wrought. A spirit of intercession was seen, even as was manifested before the great day of Pentecost. Hundreds and thousands were seen visiting families. . . . Hearts were convicted by the power of the Holy Spirit, and a spirit of genuine conversion was manifest. On every side doors were thrown open to the proclamation of the truth. The world seemed to be lightened with the heavenly influence."²²

People thought Paul was beside himself in his unmeasured devotion to Christ. He replied that it was not because he was made of more heroic stuff than others. Christ's love at the cross "constrained" him. That is, it motivated him, pushed him forward relentlessly, almost in spite of himself. Now he found it impossible to go on living for self. It made him a "new creation." To be reconciled to God, to have the psychic barrier removed that had beclouded his soul all his life, was totally joyous. The cross captured him forever, and he begs us not

¹⁹ Joel 2:28, 32; Acts 2:17.

²⁰ Habakkuk 2:14.

²¹ Revelation 18:1, 4.

²² *Testimonies*, Vol. 9, p. 126.

to look at it and yawn in boredom: “We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain.”²³

Let us try to immerse ourselves in Paul’s message of grace so that we can feel those waves rolling over us.

“Through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand. . . . The grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. . . . Those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. . . . Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. . . .

“Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? . . .

“Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are. . . under grace.”²⁴

Here’s what this treasure-laden-passage says: Righteousness by faith is not cold theology. It is the day-by-day practical-godliness ministry of grace.

Faith provides access into this grace which opens the gates to hope and glory. One’s self-respect goes up to ten when you understand the gospel.

“The gift by the grace . . . abounded to many.” “In the matchless gift of His Son, God has encircled the whole world with an atmosphere of grace as real as

²³ 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:1.

²⁴ Romans 4:13, 16; 5:2, 15, 17, 20, 21; 6:1, 14, 15.

the air which circulates around the globe. All who choose to breathe this life-giving atmosphere will live, and grow up to the stature of men and women in Christ Jesus.”²⁵ Walk outdoors and fill your lungs with fresh air; then ask: could you get more if you were the only person on earth? And then look at all those we-thought-wicked-people breathing their fill of the same “atmosphere of grace.” Who knows who of them will respond at last?

Grace is greater than our sin (that is stupendous!). Hard as it is to believe, believe it.

Grace abounding makes it impossible for the believer to continue living in sin. Obsessions, captivity to evil habits, alienations, are disarmed.

Grace thus imposes a new captivity which is an unending motivation to holiness of life.

How can you be sure that you are included? Not one human soul in all the world is left out.

“The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”²⁶

“To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”²⁷

²⁵ *Steps to Christ*, p. 68.

²⁶ Titus 2:11-14, NIV.

²⁷ Ephesians 4:7.

The Holy Spirit imparts to “all men” an intruding sense of the kindness and mercy of God, knocking for entrance to all despairing worldly hearts. Listen, look, don’t slam the door. Pause to appreciate that grace, and you will find yourself beginning to cherish it.

There is an insight here that the Supreme Court needs to see. Much as we may excuse ourselves by thinking that addictions to alcohol, drugs, or lust are merely a “disease,” *they are in reality volitional*. The problem is that the human will is held captive. But the grace of Christ actually teaches us how to exercise a *controlling* volition, *how* to “say ‘No’” to impulses to evil. Granted, it sounds like a truism, but nevertheless it’s true.

No addict in all the world faces a more terrible compulsion than Jesus felt as He knelt in Gethsemane and prayed, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.”²⁸ And a few hours later, the compulsive temptation to come down from the cross and abandon His suffering was even stronger; no one has ever felt such tugging at the soul.

When the grace of God teaches us also to say what Jesus said to temptation—“No”—this is not a vain choice. When *grace* teaches us to say that powerful word, the result is guaranteed. We henceforth “live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” even with alluring temptations all around. It would be no great

achievement to live such lives in perfect surroundings, but Paul adds that God’s great salvation is demonstrated in a wicked world, as *wicked* as the one that crucified the Son of God.

However, saying “No!” would be vain if the motivation is egocentric. That’s why the popular “just say no” is so fruitless in solving the drug problem. Only when “*grace* teaches us to say ‘No’” does the volition become a sanctified, successful one.

This deliverance by grace fills the heart with “the blessed hope” of seeing Jesus face to face at His return. Paul’s righteousness by faith is Adventist to the core, and the core of Adventism is the message of the cross of Christ in the light of the Day of Atonement.

Thus the secret of this marvelous power is in that sacrifice where He “gave Himself for us,” His truth penetrating deeper than all the psychiatry in the world in probing the source of our sin and alienation.

The Savior does a good job when He saves; no lingering root of “wickedness” left in the heart to produce a future fall from grace.

Is all this too good to be true? Beware lest you let yourself think so, for it is dangerous to doubt how good the “good news” is.

²⁸ Matthew 26:39.