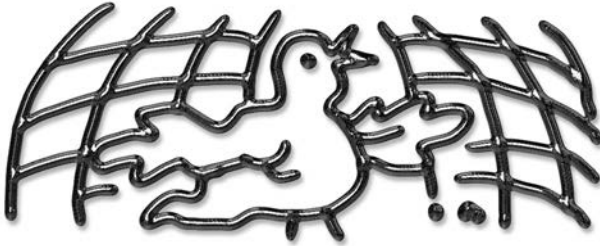


The Birdcage



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exodus 14, Exod. 15:22–27, Exod. 17:1–7, Luke 4:1–13, 1 Pet. 1:6–9, Proverbs 3.*

Memory Text: “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials” (*1 Peter 1:6, NKJV*).

In the full light of day, and in hearing of the music of other voices, the caged bird will not sing the song that his master seeks to teach him. He learns a snatch of this, a trill of that, but never a separate and entire melody. But the master covers the cage, and places it where the bird will listen to the one song he is to sing. In the dark, he tries and tries again to sing that song until it is learned, and he breaks forth in perfect melody. Then the bird is brought forth, and ever after he can sing that song in the light. Thus God deals with His children. He has a song to teach us, and when we have learned it amid the shadows of affliction we can sing it ever afterward.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 472.

Notice that the one who carries the bird into the darkness is the master himself.

It is easy to understand that Satan causes pain, but would God Himself actively take a part in guiding us into crucibles where we experience confusion or hurt?

The Week at a Glance: What examples can you think of in the Bible in which God Himself leads people into experiences that He knows will include suffering? What do you think were the new songs He wanted them to sing?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 16.

To the Promised Land via a Dead End

“And when Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians marched after them. So they were very afraid, and the children of Israel cried out to the LORD” (*Exod. 14:10, NKJV*).

Have you ever been set up, led into a trap or to a dead end? Sometimes it can be nice, like walking unexpectedly into a room of waiting friends who all shout “Surprise! Happy birthday!” At other times it can be quite a shock, even a very unpleasant one. It may have been bullies when you were at school or a work colleague who unexpectedly tried to make you look bad.

From the day the Israelites left Egypt to the day they reached the Promised Land, “the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night” (*Exod. 13:21, NIV*). Every part of their journey was led by God Himself. But look at where He led them first: to a place where the sea was before them, mountains were on either side, and Pharaoh’s army was within eyesight right behind!

Read Exodus 14. Why did God bring the Israelites to a place where He knew they would be terrified?

Following “the pillar” doesn’t assure us of constant happiness. It also can be a hard experience, because training in righteousness takes us to places that test our hearts, which are so naturally deceitful (*Jer. 17:9*). During these difficulties, the key to knowing when we are truly following God is not necessarily the absence of trials or pain but, rather, an openness to God’s instruction and a continual submission of our minds and hearts to His leading.

What lesson did the Israelites learn from this experience? *Exod. 14:31*.

Why is trusting God sometimes so hard, even though we may know many of the wonderful promises He has for us? Recount a difficult situation you believe the Lord led you into in order to teach you to “believe” in and to “fear” Him.

Bitter Waters

“The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink” (Exod. 17:1, NIV).

Perhaps we might not get from God everything we want, but couldn't we expect to get all that we need? Not what we think we need but what we truly need?

There was one thing the Israelites certainly needed, and that was water. Just after God in the cloud led the Israelites through the Red Sea, they followed Him through the hot, waterless desert for three days. Particularly in the desert, where finding water is so critical, their desperation is understandable. When would they get the water they needed?

So, where does God lead them? The pillar goes to Marah, where, at last, there is water. They must have been excited. But when they tasted the water, they immediately spat it out because it was bitter. “So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What are we to drink?’ ” (Exod. 15:24, NIV).

Then, a few days later, God does it again. This time, however, the pillar actually stops where there is no water at all (Exod. 17:1).

Read Exodus 15:22–27 and Exodus 17:1–7. What did God reveal to Israel about Himself at Marah and at Rephidim? What lessons should they have learned?

In Rephidim, what question did the children of Israel ask? Exod. 17:7. Have you ever asked the same question? If so, why? How did you feel, and what lessons did you learn after you had it answered? How many times do we need to get it answered before we stop asking it altogether?

The Great Controversy in the Desert

“Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil” (*Luke 4:1, 2, NKJV*).

Read Luke 4:1–13. What lessons can you learn from this account about how to overcome temptation and not give in to sin?

Temptations can be so difficult because they appeal to things we really desire, and they always seem to come at our weakest moments.

Luke 4 is the beginning of the story of Jesus’ temptation by Satan, and it brings some difficult issues to our attention. At first glance, it appears that the Holy Spirit is leading Jesus into temptation. However, God never tempts us (*James 1:13*). Rather, as we have been seeing, God does lead us to crucibles of testing. What is striking in Luke 4 is that the Holy Spirit can lead us to times of testing that involve being exposed to Satan’s fierce temptations. At such times, when we feel these temptations so strongly, we may misunderstand and think we have not been following God correctly. But this is not necessarily true. “Often when placed in a trying situation we doubt that the Spirit of God has been leading us. But it was the Spirit’s leading that brought Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. When God brings us into trial, He has a purpose to accomplish for our good. Jesus did not presume on God’s promises by going unbidden into temptation, neither did He give up to despondency when temptation came upon Him. Nor should we.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 126, 129.

Sometimes, when in the crucible, we get burned rather than purified. It is therefore very comforting to know that when we crumple under temptation, we can hope again because Jesus stood firm. The good news is that because Jesus is our Sin Bearer, because He paid the penalty for our failure to endure that temptation (whatever it was), because He went through a crucible worse than any of us will ever face, we are not cast off or forsaken by God. There is hope, even for the “chief” of sinners (*1 Tim. 1:15*).

What temptations are you facing now? Spend some time in prayer, asking the Lord to teach you how to apply the lessons from Jesus’ example to your own life. Remember, you don’t have to succumb to temptation, ever! Remember, too, that if you do succumb, you have a Savior.

An Enduring Legacy

Read 1 Peter 1:6, 7. What is Peter saying?

Peter was writing to people who were battling through difficulties and often felt very alone. He was writing “to God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Pet. 1:1, NIV). This is the area we know today as western Turkey. A few verses later, Peter says that he knows that they are experiencing “grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Pet. 1:6, NIV).

What does Peter mean by saying that they are “exiles” and “scattered”? How might that add to their trials?

Being a Christian during those times was a new thing; believers were small in number and in various places where they were a decided minority who were often misunderstood at best, persecuted at worst. Peter assures them, however, that these trials are not random or chaotic (1 Pet. 1:6, 7). Genuine faith is the goal of those who persevere through “all kinds of trials.”

Read 1 Peter 1:6–9. What ultimate assurance does Peter seek to give these people amid their trials? What does this hope mean for us, too?

Whatever their trials, whatever they suffer, how can it be compared to the eternity that awaits them when Christ returns? Peter’s words to them are God’s words to us, regardless of whatever we are facing. However difficult or painful our trials, we must never lose sight of the ultimate end, eternal life in a new heaven and new earth, without pain, suffering, or death. With such a promise before us, a promise guaranteed us through the death of Jesus, how important that we not lose faith, but instead, amid our trials, ask the Lord to purge us of everything and anything that stands in the way of our faith.

Trial by Fire

There was a young man whom we'll call Alex. He had come out of a very troubled youth: drugs, violence, even some time in jail. But then, through the kindness of a local church member (whom Alex had stolen from), Alex learned about God and gave his heart to Jesus. Though he still had his problems and struggles, and though elements of his past still lingered, Alex was a new person in Jesus. He loved God and sought to express that love by obeying His commandments (*1 John 5:1, 2*). At one point, Alex felt impressed that he should be a minister. Everything pointed to it. He was answering God's call, no doubt about it.

At college things went well at first. Then one thing after another went awry, and his life began coming apart. His source of money started to dry up; a close friend turned against him, making accusations about him that were false but that damaged his reputation. Next, he kept on getting sick; no one knew what it was, but it impacted his studies to the point where he was afraid that he was going to have to drop out of school completely. On top of it all, he was fighting fierce temptations with drugs, which were readily available in the local community. At one point he even fell in that area. Alex couldn't understand why all this was happening, especially because he was sure that the Lord had led him to this school to begin with. *Was Alex wrong about that? If so, was his whole experience with God a huge mistake?* Even the most basic elements of his faith were coming under doubt.

Imagine that, amid this crisis, Alex comes to you and asks for advice. What would you say? What experiences of your own have you had that could help someone like him? What Bible texts would you use? How helpful might the following texts be in such a situation? *Proverbs 3, Jer. 29:13, Rom. 8:28, 2 Cor. 12:9, Heb. 13:5.*

Almost all who follow the Lord have had crises during which they've been tempted to doubt the Lord's leading. The important thing in such situations is to cling to the promises, recount God's leading in the past, and pray for faith and endurance. The Lord will never give up on us. The question for us is: How do we not succumb to the temptation to give up on Him?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Exodus,” pp. 281–290; “From the Red Sea to Sinai,” pp. 291–302, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Temptation,” pp. 114–123, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“But of old the Lord led his people to Rephidim, and he may choose to lead us there also, to test our loyalty. He does not always bring us to pleasant places. If he did, in our self-sufficiency we should forget that he is our helper. He longs to manifest himself to us, and to reveal the abundant supplies at our disposal, and he permits trial and disappointment to come to us that we may realize our helplessness, and learn to call upon him for aid. He can cause cooling streams to flow from the flinty rock. We shall never know, until we are face to face with God, when we shall see as we are seen, and know as we are known, how many burdens he has borne for us, and how many burdens he would have been glad to bear, if, with childlike faith, we had brought them to him.”—Ellen G. White, “Rephidim,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 7, 1903.

Discussion Questions:

- ① We often talk of temptation as an individual thing, which, of course, it is. At the same time, are there any corporate temptations, things that we as a church or a local church family might have to guard against as a group? If so, what?
- ② Ask those who are willing to talk about any of the “unpleasant places” that they have been brought to. Why were these unpleasant? If they had to revisit those experiences today, would they view them any differently?
- ③ We all understand the principle behind God allowing us to be purified and refined by trials. How, though, do we understand the situation in which trials appear to have no value—for instance, someone is killed instantly in a car wreck? As a class, seek to work through possible answers.
- ④ As a class, take time together to pray for each other, that each might be strengthened to endure trials and stay faithful.
- ⑤ Does your class know of anyone who, having faced trials, lost the way? If so, as a class what could you do in a very tangible way to help lead that person back?

Part 3: Abandoned by Father

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Father always seemed to be angry after Mother told him that she was going to the Adventist Church. Every little thing irritated him. One night, he exploded with rage when Mother arrived home late from a church event.

The next morning, Mother arrived at the dental clinic, where she worked as a secretary, in Manaus, Brazil, and learned that she no longer had a job. The clinic had closed. All the way home, she wondered how to tell Father. But he wasn't at home, and he didn't answer phone calls. Then Mother noticed that his clothes were missing from the closet. He had left home.

Mother didn't say a word to their son, Junior. The boy, busy at school and the gamers club, only noticed that Father was gone three days later when he received a WhatsApp video message on his cell phone. Father said Adventism and his faith, Candomblé, could not coexist in the same house.

Mother also received a WhatsApp message. Father said he had moved to the Candomblé temple, where he worshiped evil spirits as a high priest.

"I'm never going to give up my religion," he said. "You have to accept it."

Mother had never heard about the great controversy between Christ and Satan. But she was worried, and she met with Ricardo Coelho, pastor of Alpha Seventh-day Adventist Community Church. Weeping, she confided that Father worked as a Candomblé high priest and had deserted the family.

Pastor Ricardo comforted Mother and, opening his Bible, said kindly, "Let me share some advice with you." In 1 Corinthians 7:3, he read, "Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband" (NKJV). In Proverbs 14:1, he read, "The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish pulls it down with her hands" (NKJV). Looking at Mother, he said, "Be a good wife to your husband, Eduardo, and pray for him."

The Bible verses encouraged Mother, and she decided to pray even more.

Weeks passed, and Mother ran out of money. She found strength in the Bible and prayed the promise of Joshua 1:9, which says, "Be strong and of good courage . . . for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (NKJV).

When Grandmother, Father's mother, learned that the family was low on food, she called Father, and he began to deliver groceries.

One day, Grandmother told Mother that spirits had summoned her and Junior to the temple. When the pair arrived, Father was possessed by an evil spirit who spoke through him in a low, distorted voice. The spirit said Father could go back home but threatened to kill him if Mother or Junior tried to teach him about their religion or invited him to church.

Father returned home that day. He had been gone for two months. Mother prayed even more.

Your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help open eight churches in the South American Division, including four in Brazil, where Father (EDUARDO FERREIRA DOS SANTOS) and his family live.