



THE GOOD NEWS FOR LAODICEA

Study Guide Two

The Heart-Thrilling Beauty of the 1888 Message

God loves beautiful things, and we should appreciate them too. "The lovely birds making the air vocal with their happy songs, the delicately tinted flowers in their perfection perfuming the air, the lofty trees of the forest with their rich foliage of living green,—all testify to the tender, fatherly care of our God, and to His desire to make His children happy" (*Steps to Christ*, p. 10).

We can know some of the thrill of appreciating this beauty of God's creation; but can we feel the thrill in appreciating the beauty of His message of salvation? Is the gospel a system of abstract theology as impersonal as the science of mathematics or chemistry? Is making sure of salvation a cold process of commitment like taking out an insurance policy? Or is it a heart-response that motivates us to a never-dying devotion to Christ?

The true gospel is something fantastically beautiful, *a message* that grips the human heart more deeply and more lastingly than any human love could do. Throughout the long years of her ministry Ellen White tried to awaken that heart-response in the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with less than perfect success. But she was overjoyed when she heard the 1888 message. It was what she said she had been "trying to present" for forty-five years. She was so happy about it that she declared it to be the "beginning" of the latter rain and the loud cry of the fourth angel of Revelation 18. Never at any time did she identify any other message in such glowing terms.

Surely such a message highly deserves our close attention.

How the 1888 Message Was Thrilling Good News

1. It is shocking to many Christians to realize that Jesus said there is only one prerequisite to salvation. Can this be true, or must we try to add something to what He said? John 3:16, last part.

Note: According to what Jesus said, our part is to *believe*. (The Greek word for believe and to have faith is the same.) Thus He taught

clearly that salvation is by faith, and since He added nothing else, He meant that salvation is by faith *alone*.

That makes us draw a deep breath. Isn't it necessary to keep the commandments, to pay tithe, to give offerings, keep the sabbath, do good works, *ad infinitum*? Yes, but we have no right to add to John 3:16 words that He did not utter.

Then did Jesus teach the "only believe!" heresy that lulls so many people into a do-nothing-and-love-the-world deception? No; He taught the kind of "faith *which works*" and which itself produces obedience to all the commandments of God and makes the believer "zealous of good works" (Titus 2:14).

2. How can one obtain this dynamic faith which Jesus said is the one thing needed for salvation? John 3:16, first part; Galatians 5:6.

Note: Our text tells us that God has already done the *loving*, and the *giving*. Faith comes from hearing that good news; it is responding to it with appreciation. What was the measure of His love? The giving of His only Son. Note carefully that verb: He did not merely *lend* Him.

In our human judgment we assume He was *lent* to us as a missionary or foreign diplomat who spent 33 years in exile on this planet and then went back to the luxury and security of His heavenly homeland. We know of course that He suffered the agony of the cross, but we think it lasted only a few hours, and the entire episode of His life on earth seems to be a comparatively brief term of service. But this idea is not true. The Father *gave Him*. We talk and sing about His love and His cross, but the astounding reality of that sacrifice means infinitely more than almost all Christians imagine.

"Now a question: Was this gift a gift of only thirty-three years?...Or was it an eternal sacrifice?...The answer is that it was for all eternity....He gave himself to us....He bears our nature forevermore. That is the sacrifice that wins the hearts of men....That is the love of God....Whether the man believes it or not, there is a subduing power in it, and the heart must stand in silence in the presence of that awful fact....Ever since that blessed fact came to me that the sacrifice of the Son of God is an eternal sacrifice, and *all for me*, the word has been upon my mind almost hourly: 'I will go softly before the Lord all my days'" (A. T. Jones, *General Conference Bulletin*, 1895, p. 382).

To *believe* therefore means to appreciate that fantastic love. It means to stand in awe of it, to let your human heart be moved by it to the place where you forget yourself and your petty human desires and ambitions, and you let that love move you to a devotion you never dreamed was possible for you to feel. Salvation is not by faith *and* works; it is by a "faith *which works*."

But we have a problem. *How* can we learn to appreciate that love, so that this powerful faith can begin to work in us?

3. What is so special about Jesus dying for us? Lots of people have died, and many have suffered physical agony for longer periods of time. Read Philippians 2:5-8; Galatians 3:13; Deuteronomy 21:22, 23.

Note: The Bible speaks of two different kinds of death, and we must not misunderstand the kind that Christ died. What we call death the Bible calls a sleep, but the real thing is called "the second death" (Revelation 2:11; 20:14). It is the death in which the sufferer feels not a ray of hope because he feels utterly forsaken by God. More than this, it is the death wherein one feels the full weight of sin's guilt, the fire of condemnation and total self-aborrence burning in every cell of one's being. Such a death involves the curse of God that Moses mentioned. Since the world began, not one human soul has as yet died that death or suffered that complete God-forsakenness, with the exception of Jesus. He was "made a curse for us." No one else has ever been physically or spiritually capable of feeling the full weight of the guilt of sin. No lost human being can feel this full load so long as the heavenly High Priest continues to serve as mankind's Substitute, for "He is the propitiation...for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

"The Saviour could not see through the portals of the tomb. Hope did not present to Him His coming forth from the grave a conqueror, or tell Him of the Father's acceptance of the sacrifice....Christ felt the anguish which the sinner will feel when mercy shall no longer plead for the guilty race" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 753).

4. Read Ephesians 3:14-19 and see for yourself some of the dimensions of the love revealed at the cross.

Note five beautiful truths here: (a) Paul is not concerned about our *doing* this or that but about our *comprehending* a truth. He knows that if we grasp what the cross really means, a new motivation will possess our hearts, and all the right doing will then surely take place. (b) For Christ to dwell in our hearts by faith requires that we

be "rooted and grounded in love [*agape*]." This is another way of defining faith as a heart-appreciation of that love. (c) The dimensions of this love are as high as heaven, as deep as hell, as broad as the human race, as wide as your heart need. (d) It is possible for us to know "by faith" what "passes knowledge." Don't wait until eternity to learn to know and appreciate the cross of Christ! Without already stretching your mind and heart to comprehend it, you may not be able even to enter into eternal life. Our modern hearts are so little—they need to be enlarged! (e) Someone very important, the apostle Paul, prayed *for you* that you might join "all saints" in comprehending this precious truth. People all over the world are learning to appreciate it. Don't let yourself lose out.

5. Why has this great truth not been understood as it deserves?
Daniel 8:9-13; 7:25; Revelation 13:1-8.

Note: Satan knows that if human beings can appreciate the dimensions of the love revealed at the cross, they will "be filled with all the fulness of God." Hence he wants to eclipse or to becloud the truth of the cross. This has been the principal work of the "little horn." Perhaps his most successful trick has been to invent the doctrine of the natural immortality of the human soul. If the soul is naturally immortal, Christ could not have died the equivalent of "the second death," and His sacrifice is automatically reduced to a few hours of physical and mental suffering sustained by hope. This pagan-papal doctrine dwarfs "the breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of Christ's love, and reduces His *agape* to the dimensions of a human love which is motivated by self-concern and hope of reward.¹

The result is a watering down of the idea of faith. Almost all Christian churches accept this pagan-papal doctrine of natural immortality. So long as their minds are blinded thus they cannot appreciate the dimensions of the love revealed at the cross, and in consequence it is impossible for them to know true New Testament righteousness by faith.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church officially rejects this pagan-papal doctrine. However, for many decades we have gone to these same popular churches to get help in understanding righteousness by faith, not realizing that this popular pagan-papal doctrine permeates their understanding of righteousness by faith. Our understandings have been adulterated by theirs, and the result is our widespread lukewarmness.

Luther understood the truth as best he could in his day, yet fell far short of an adequate grasp of its full dimensions. And his followers soon abandoned it after his death. Our 1888 message began to recover the full truth, cutting the ties that bound us to the bankrupt Protestant views and rediscovering what Paul and the apostles understood.

How the 1888 Message Was Such Unusual Good News ²

6. When Jesus died on the cross, did He (a) make a mere *provision* whereby something *could* be done for us if we first did our part; or (b) did He actually *do something* for "all men"? Romans 3:23, 24; 2 Corinthians 5:19; Hebrews 2:9.

Note: The common idea is that the sacrifice of Christ is only provisional, that is, it does nothing for anyone unless he first "accepts Christ." In other words, salvation is a heavenly process that is inactive until *we* take the initiative. Like a washing machine in a laundromat, it does nothing for you until you first push in the coins.

In contrast, the 1888 message recognizes that Christ actually did something for "all men." It correctly understood our texts: (a) Christ "tasted death [the second death] for every man." (b) As "all have sinned," so "all" are "justified freely by His grace." This is a *legal* justification, as we shall soon see. (c) By virtue of Christ's sacrifice, God does not "impute their trespasses" unto the world. He imputed them to Christ instead. This is why no lost person can suffer the second death until after the final judgment.

Ellen White agrees with this glorious good news: "To the death of Christ we owe even this earthly life....Never one, saint or sinner, eats his daily food, but he is nourished by the body and the blood of Christ. The cross of Calvary is stamped on every loaf. It is reflected in every water-spring" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 660).

When the sinner sees the truth and believes, he is *justified by faith*. Justification by faith is therefore far more than the legal declaration of acquittal, which was made at the cross for "all men." *It includes a change of heart*. The believer, the one who exercises faith, is made inwardly and outwardly obedient to all the commandments of God. Such faith, if it is not hindered and adulterated with Babylon's error, will grow to be so mature that it will actually prepare a people for the return of Christ.

Not all will be saved. But the reason is deeper than that they were not clever enough or prompt enough to seize the initiative. All who are lost at last have resisted and rejected the salvation already "freely" given them in Christ. God has taken the initiative to save "all men." But we have the power, the freedom of will, to thwart and veto what Christ has already accomplished for us and placed in our hands. We can cherish our alienation and hatred of God until we close the gate of heaven against ourselves.

7. According to Jesus, what is the only sin for which anyone can be lost? John 3:17-19.

8. How can it be that the cross is stamped on every loaf of bread, and even unbelieving sinners enjoy life because of Christ's sacrifice? Romans 5:18; 2 Timothy 1:10; cf. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 660.

Note: These texts teach us that Christ literally saved the world from suicidal death. As the Lamb "slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8), He has "brought life...to light through the gospel." The human race was so degraded and wicked in the time of the Romans that mankind would have eventually committed a mass suicide if Christ had not come when He did "in the fulness of the time." Even the wicked draw their next breath because of Christ's cross. For "all men" He has brought "life." For those who believe and appreciate His cross, He has also brought "immortality."

There are four ways to understand Romans 5:18: (a) The Calvinist view says that Paul did not say it right—"the free gift...unto justification of life" came only on the elect, not on "all men." (b) The Universalist view says that "all men" must be saved. But they also err. (c) The standard Adventist view implies that Paul did not say it right—"the free gift...unto justification of life" did not actually come upon "all men." Christ only made a *provision* for that to happen *if* and *not until* they do something right first. (d) The 1888 message view accepts that Paul did say it right; "all men" have been *legally* justified, but the sinner can veto that blessing by continued unbelief. Thus he condemns himself before the universe and unfits himself for eternal life. He shuts himself out of heaven. (See *The Great Controversy*, p. 543).

9. How is the true Good News better than we have been led to think? Read Luke 15:3-10; 19:10; John 4:23; Romans 10:6-8, 10-13.

Note: Much teaching that professes to be righteousness by faith is in

reality a subtle works program. It nurtures lukewarmness. It produces either a false sense of security that can be fatal ("I'm OK, you're OK"), or a sense of discouragement ("I keep blowing it because I can't maintain the proper relationship"). It is questionable if modern experts can invent a righteousness by faith better than that which Ellen White described as "most precious" which the Lord sent us in His great mercy, the 1888 message.

The Bible teaches that it is not our job to initiate a "relationship" with Christ. He is not a shepherd who waits for the lost sheep to find its way home. It is *He* who has initiated the relationship. The lady didn't wait for her lost silver coin to come back; she went looking for it until she found it.

Neither is it true to say that our salvation depends on our *maintaining* the relationship. Jesus says that the Good Shepherd keeps looking for His sheep "*until He find it.*" In other words, He wants you to be saved more than you want to be saved. Your salvation does not depend on your maintaining a right relationship with Him; it depends on your believing that He loves you so much that He maintains that relationship with you. In other words, your salvation depends on faith. Your job is not to climb up to heaven or descend down to hell looking for Jesus as though He is hiding from you, but to recognize that *He has found you* by "the word of faith, which we preach." What is important is not your holding on to God's hand but your believing that He is holding on to your hand. You'd have to be very hard-hearted not to say "Thank You" when you realize that the Good Shepherd has found you and has saved you from the horror of a hell here and now, and at last the second death.

But still people have problems with the Good News!

10. Doesn't the Bible tell us that it is our job to "seek the Lord"? Doesn't that sound like the Good Shepherd is hiding in His office until we seek Him out? Do these "seek ye the Lord" texts contradict Jesus' parable of the Good Shepherd?

Answer: It is a serious mistake to twist Old Testament texts into a contradiction of the clear words of Jesus in the New Testament. That was the sin of the ancient Jews. The Old Testament says, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" (Exodus 21:24). But Jesus came to reveal a "grace [that] did much more abound" (Romans 5:20). We must understand this New Testament principle, or we will forever wallow in a subtle form of legalism and remain listless and lukewarm, paralyzing our message to the world.

There is nothing in the New Testament that implies even remotely that the Saviour waits indifferently until the lost sheep somehow seeks his way back. If that were true, wouldn't the sheep have something to boast of? Even the Old Testament texts that *appear* to give that impression do not when studied in context. For example, the Hebrew word translated "seek" in Isaiah 55:6 (*darash*) does not truly mean seek, but "pay attention to," "inquire of" (cf. its use in 1 Samuel 28:7). Isaiah emphasizes the nearness of the Lord, not His farness. He says, Pay attention to Him "while He is near."

11. What beautiful motivation for serving Christ does the true gospel give? 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15.

Note: The apostles proclaimed a message much different from what we usually preach today. Their primary appeal was not to hope of reward in heaven or fear of being lost in hell. All self-centered motivation was swallowed up in their righteousness-by-faith message. Their message proclaimed the cross so graphically and powerfully that their listeners were motivated "henceforth," with no thought of self-concern, to devote all they had to Him who had died for them. This was *faith*, and it worked.

"It is not the fear of punishment, or the hope of everlasting reward, that leads the disciples of Christ to follow Him. They behold the Saviour's matchless love,... and the sight of Him attracts, it softens and subdues the soul" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 480).

This true motivation fulfills the precious assurance in Hebrews 2:15 that Christ came to "deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." The pure gospel reactivated in the 1888 message provides a deep peace. That peace can grow only in a heart that has been delivered from the subliminal fear that shadows us humans from our cradle to our grave.

¹ See *Natural Immortality, A Key Deception*, by Alexander Snyman.

² Documentation can be found in *The 1888 Message, An Introduction* and in *1888: A Brief Look at the History and Content of the Message and Knocking at the Door*.