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## GOD'S PROMISES FOR HARVESTERS

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The leadership for this theological forum has convened a broad cross-section of Seventh-day Adventist Church theologians, other professors who teach various aspects of the sacred Word, and also many ministerial secretaries. I commend the planners of this forum for their attempt to keep all that is done in this forum on a meaningful, practical, biblical level. I also commend them for inviting ministerial secretaries to be present. While the Bible truths to be pondered and plumbed may be deep, they need always to be understood and applied in the context of the crucified, risen, and coming Jesus. Jesus' life and His death testify to the necessity of keeping all we do in the context of the Good News going to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people.

To remind you again of the intent of the Great Commission which remains before us as a church, I will reference briefly a meeting which took place five weeks ago in Virginia. Andrews University Department of Missions professors, the Institute of World Mission leadership, and the General Conference Secretariat representatives met to take a serious look at the mission of the church. Together we studied the book *The Church Is Bigger Than You Think* by Patrick Johnstone.<sup>1</sup> In the center of this book, considerable attention was given to the largeness of the task of reaching the people living within the 10/40 Window. As you know, 65 percent of the world's population lives in this part of the world. Most of the world's one billion Muslims live in this rectangular portion of the world between the tenth and fortieth parallels. The 10/40 Window territory includes Northern Africa, the Middle East, India, and China. Within this territory are countries which have outlawed Christianity. Eighty-five percent of the world's poor live in this section of the world. How should we, as harvesters, relate to this sacred

<sup>1</sup>Patrick Johnstone, *The Church Is Bigger Than You Think* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1998).

responsibility? This will be one of the considerations before us during the 2000 General Conference Session as we meet in Toronto, Canada.

### Harvesters for the Kingdom

For the purpose of this opening presentation, I am placing all of us in this room in one category—harvesters. We are all to be harvesters for the Kingdom of God. Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matt 9:37,38).<sup>1</sup> We exist for one reason—to participate in the great harvest for which the harvesters are few. Whether we are teachers in the classroom or pastors counseling in the home of a church member, we are to be one of the harvesters. We have one purpose, and that is to prepare for the coming of Jesus—to harvest precious people for the Kingdom of God. We are to be used by the Holy Spirit for this harvest of all harvests.

The last chapter in the book *The Church Is Bigger Than You Think* focuses on the portion of Scripture I want us to consider together—Isa 54. Here we find precious promises given to God’s harvesters. There are six precious promises which are applicable to harvesters. I will incorporate some of the insights Johnstone gained from the study of Isa 54, as well as my own. I hope we will understand better that, as Johnstone states, “We are never closer to God than when we share His heart for the unevangelized.”

Isa 54:2 places the six precious promises to harvesters in the proper context. “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.” The principles and hope God expressed to Israel were not to be kept for merely themselves. Sure, Canaan was the place of Israel’s tent, but the people and followers were to “enlarge the place of your tent, . . . lengthen your cords, [and] strengthen your stakes,” until the entire world would be embraced. Sadly, Israel failed to accomplish God’s will for them and for the world. Ellen G. White states, “The words of the Lord in the fifty-fourth chapter of Isaiah are for us.”<sup>2</sup> Then she quotes Isa 54:2-5. The Word of God says God’s people should expect great things of Him and should attempt great things for Him. Now is the time the church is to unite with divine agencies to proclaim the knowledge of a crucified, risen, and soon coming Savior.

### God’s Promises to the Harvesters

Here are God’s promises to the harvesters as the tent is enlarged, the cords lengthened, and the stakes strengthened:

<sup>1</sup>Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

<sup>2</sup>Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 6:23.

1. Fear is removed. "Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood" (Isa 54:4).

"Do not be afraid." What words these are in times like these! When there is so much to be afraid of, we are admonished, "Do not be afraid." For us who are full-time servants of the living God, this is ever so comforting and encouraging. "Do not be afraid" comes to us when even the term "missionary" does not command the respect it used to. As gospel workers, our sanity or theology can be questioned by our fellow believers at home or even maligned by people within the system where we serve. Everything may fail, but God will never fail us. This covers the entire spectrum of living.

There is a double promise in this verse. The last part says, "You will forget the shame of your youth, and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood." Israel had turned from the true God to serve false gods. This was the sin of her youth. Serious, but forgiven and forgotten. "The reproach of your widowhood" refers to the captivity of Israel in Babylon. This too will be forgiven and forgotten. This promise of forgiven and forgotten sin through Jesus is ours today. Things of the past need no longer tie us down with feelings of failure and inadequacy. There is no need to fear things of the past or the future. When we come to Jesus, He forgives and forgets the sins of youth and immaturity. God says, "Do not be afraid."

2. Christ is united with us. "For your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth" (Isa 54:5).

Could there be any more comfort and support than this? Our Maker declares that He is our husband. The Holy One of Israel is our Redeemer. To be forgiven for our past foolishness and sin is already beyond comprehension, but now Isaiah says we are married to our Maker. It is almost overwhelming to realize we are joined with the One who is our Redeemer. He lavishes love and care on you and me, His bride. This is more than any doting husband could ever bestow. Jesus is our Lover, our Provider, our All! The great pre-Reformer in Italy, Savonarola, said, "What must a man possess who possesses the Possessor of all things?" When God is our husband, we can face the world and all its scorn and opposition with confidence "because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

An acceptance of this relationship will provide confidence and assurance unequalled anywhere. The burdens of this work are not bearable alone. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. . . . For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28,30). To attempt to bear these responsibilities and burdens alone will destroy, but when yoked with Christ, this crushing weight becomes light and bearable.

Hudson Taylor, the missionary to China, knew what it was to be almost crushed by the weight of responsibility and the slow progress of the gospel. It was

at the time of his first furlough that Hudson Taylor learned what it meant to have God as one's husband. He was at the point of a nervous breakdown in 1868. Everything seemed dark and he felt as though he was a failure. He met God in a new way on the beach at Brighton in England. There he learned the meaning of Gal 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." He no longer attempted to carry the burdens and responsibilities himself. Christ was his yoke mate. He had nothing to fear. Hudson Taylor went on to found the China Inland Mission, one of the most innovative and successful missions in the nineteenth century.

How many of us have to be reminded often that we cannot bear the burdens of God's work alone? How often have I personally needed to be reminded that this is God's work and not mine? Many times! How good it is to know Christ is our husband! He is united with us! We are not alone!

3. Our purpose is redefined. "'The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—a wife who married young, only to be rejected,' says your God" (Isa 54:6).

These are hauntingly beautiful words. We are the poor deserted wife—married young and rejected. That forlorn woman is you and I. Even though we are poor, deserted, and forlorn, God says of us as Hosea said of his wife Gomer, "I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD" (Hos 2:19-20).

God has a purpose for us. He redefines this purpose and it is that which makes life worth living. We believe there is a God-shaped vacuum within each person. Johnstone also suggests there is a *YOU*-shaped hole in God's kingdom which only *YOU* can fit. God has a plan for each of us.

Rom 12:1-2 indicates that God's guidance is conditional and can only be proved after three tough conditions are met. Paul states these as follows:

a. "Offer your bodies as living sacrifices" (v. 1). Everything we have and are must be committed to God. This is to be without reservation. If we have unforgiven sin in our lives, or if we are unwilling to do what He wants us to do, we would be presumptuous to believe we are reflecting God's plan for our lives.

b. "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world" (v. 2). We live in the world, but are not to be of the world. God's will is to be foremost in all that we do. Johnstone asks, "How can you know God's will if you want to please others or yourself, or if you are more concerned about what others think or say?"<sup>1</sup>

c. "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (v. 2). How is the mind to be transformed? I know of no other way than for the mind to be "bathed" and "washed" daily in the promises and hope found in God's word. Our minds need to be fed with the good and the wholesome, that which comes from God in his

<sup>1</sup>Johnstone, 288.

word, in nature, and from those who also love the Lord. The heart will then be ready to hear the clear, distinct, but still, small voice of God speaking to us.

As the one who married young and went astray, we are called by God to be His own possession. Herein His purpose for our lives and service is redefined.

In ministry there must be the deep assurance that God has personally led you. The safest place for you is in the center of God's will—even with chains on your feet as a hostage, with your body racked with fever or trembling in a cellar with . . . rockets crashing into the house above.<sup>1</sup>

4. Failures are covered with compassion. God says in Isa 54:7-8,10,

"For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you," says the LORD your Redeemer. . . . "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

"With deep compassion I will bring you back." Failures are covered with compassion and forgiveness. If God ever seems afar off, or if we ever feel rejected by God, it is the enemy planting these thoughts, and we are to resist him. When we become overburdened with work, when we fail to have the right balance between work and recreation, there is a price to be paid.

Every one of us can look back and remember when we failed, made a wrong decision, or reacted inappropriately. A sense of failure can crush us and lead us into spiritual darkness. This promise in Isa 54 says we can never go too far for God to not pick us up again, forgive, restore, and perhaps lead us into a new and more effective ministry which would not have been possible without the failure. What a marvelous God we serve! Regardless of our past mistakes, God has a "Plan A" for each one of us.<sup>2</sup>

Ellen White states, "We know altogether too little of the greatness of the love and compassion of God."<sup>3</sup> Failure is covered with compassion. What love this is!

5. There is fruit for the harvester. God promises in Isa 54:11-13,

"O afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted, I will build you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires. I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones. All your sons will be taught by the LORD, and great will be your children's peace."

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 288-89.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 289.

<sup>3</sup>Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students Regarding Christian Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), 455.

These are beautiful, poetic verses. At first reading their meaning may seem a bit obscure, but let us examine them further. The imagery of the jewels and precious stones seems to be a glorious preview of the New Jerusalem in Rev 21. We observe victory over the evil one being described in these verses. In other parts of Scripture, twelve stones on the breastplate of the high priest represent the twelve sons or tribes of Israel. These stones clearly represent tribes and people.

Could it be that the stones described here by Isaiah are also referring to the harvest, the fruitage of the preached and witnessed gospel? The sapphires, the rubies, the sparkling jewels—could they be the fruit from every nation from throughout the 10/40 Window and every other nation of the world and island of the sea? Perhaps. What a glorious picture!

“All your sons will be taught of the LORD, and great will be your children’s peace” (Isa 54:13). “Sons” includes those who are young of years, but does not refer to them exclusively. All who come to God the Father through Jesus are “sons . . . taught of the LORD.” Jews and all others who will respond to the saving blood of Jesus are included as “sons.”

Finally, as parents who have been called to be harvesters, we claim the promise that “All your sons [and daughters] will be taught of the LORD, and great will be your children’s peace.” I praise the Lord for children who love the Lord and are preparing for the return of Jesus. They indeed have a most precious gift—peace.

6. Protection is promised. God promises us further in Isa 54:15,17,

“If anyone does attack you, it will not be my doing; whoever attacks you will surrender to you. . . . No weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and this is their vindication from me,” declares the LORD.

We are involved in the greatest and most bitterly fought war ever to be waged. *The Great Controversy*, by Ellen White,<sup>1</sup> describes in graphic detail the culmination of this great struggle between righteousness and evil. The enemy will not surrender his final grip on his crumbling empire until the King of kings breaks through the clouds in glory. Every stronghold, every bunker, every sinful heart is and will be a battlefield. Wounds and casualties will be severe. Prior to those final moments, suffering and martyrdom are our expected lot. Yet we have the promise of supernatural protection in it all. Isa 54:17 says, “No weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you.”

<sup>1</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950).

### **Conclusion**

In the words of Jesus, as recorded in John 16:33, we are reminded, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” God’s protection is assured, for Jesus overcame the world. We are privileged to be a part of the final events of this old world. With this responsibility comes the assurance that in Jesus we will be conquerors.

As we by the grace of God enlarge the tent, lengthen the cords, and strengthen the stakes, these six promises are for each harvester.

Fear is removed, Christ is united with us, purpose is redefined, failures are covered with God’s matchless compassion, fruitage for the harvester is assured, and protection is promised. With these promises clearly in focus, let us prayerfully begin the study for this forum entitled “Millennium and Prophecy.” May we each become more effective harvesters for the Kingdom of God as the result of this study and our time together.