

DWIGHT K. NELSON

PURSUING_{THE}
PASSION
OF JESUS

How “loving the least” helps you fulfill God’s plan for your life



Pacific Press[®] Publishing Association

Nampa, Idaho

Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

www.pacificpress.com

CONTENTS

FOREWORD . . . 8

A WORD BEFORE

“DONE WHILE YOU WAIT” . . . 10

CHAPTER 1

THE LAW OF THE BOOKENDS . . . 15

CHAPTER 2

SMARTY-PANTS . . . 20

CHAPTER 3

THE CHAMPION . . . 34

CHAPTER 4

TRAPPED IN THE SPIN CYCLE . . . 49

CHAPTER 5

THE SHABBAT SHALOM OF THE POOR . . . 58

CHAPTER 6

QUID PRO QUO . . . 67

CHAPTER 7

THE TRUTH OF THE TALKING BULL . . . 79

A WORD AFTER

O CALCUTTA . . . 94

STUDY GUIDE

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION . . . 98

FOREWORD

The world in which we live today is littered with the wreckage of human suffering. Anywhere we look, we find disease, destruction, death, and despair. Such a picture of world conditions is certainly not appealing, but it is realistic. The HIV/AIDS epidemic, as well as the ravages caused by measles and other diseases, is creating personal tragedy and widespread havoc in many areas of the world. One result is that thousands of orphans are being left for society to care for. Add to this the destruction caused by such natural disasters as earthquakes, typhoons, hurricanes, and the terrible cyclones that devastate Bangladesh and other areas of southeast Asia, leaving tens of thousands of families homeless. Man-made strife increases the suffering further—the genocide of Rwanda and the Sudan, not to mention the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq together with all the death, destruction, and despair associated with them.

As Christians, how should we respond? What obligation—individually and corporately—do we have to the poor, the sick, the displaced, the disadvantaged, the downtrodden? I believe this book, with its call to action in this area, will help stimulate your thinking about these issues and point you to answers.

The conviction that such a book is needed has been growing in my heart over the years. As a church administrator, I served the church in

Korea following the Korean War and then in southeast Asia during the Indo-China conflict. In more recent years, I have been the president of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and have visited nearly every area of major conflict upon this battered planet. At times I have had the opportunity of sharing my concerns for humanitarian needs with my nephew, Dwight Nelson, senior pastor of the Pioneer Memorial Church in Berrien Springs, Michigan. As we discussed these issues, I urged him to think of developing a series of messages in which he could articulate a viable Christian response to human need in light of what the Scriptures have to say about how Christians should respond to the plight of those who are suffering from emotional, physical, and spiritual stress. Particularly, we need to take into account the example of our Lord Jesus who demonstrated His compassion for those at the margins of society. In Matthew 9:35, 36 we read how Jesus went about the cities and villages, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of His kingdom, and healing every kind—*every kind*—of disease and sickness. “And seeing the multitudes, he felt compassion for them because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd.”

The Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are replete with counsel as to what our response should be to the plight of the poor in our homes, our churches, our communities, and throughout the world.

Is the task staggering? Absolutely. Can we solve all these issues? No. But we can make a start. We can make a difference—each one of us. I like the words of G. K. Chesterton who wrote, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.”

Yes, it has been found difficult. But as members of the Christian community, shall we not resolve that we will *not* leave this challenge untried?

Ralph S. Watts, Jr.
President, Adventist Development and Relief Agency
1985-2002

A WORD BEFORE

“DONE WHILE YOU WAIT”

Our family was driving down to Florida for spring break when I saw a highway sign that made me do a double take. If you’ve driven through the South, you know that there are all kinds of roadside signs advertising everything from “See Rock City” (that celebrated tourist trap outside Chattanooga) to “Crazy Sam’s” or “Deadeye Dick’s” fireworks stand (since firecrackers are still legal in that region). But I had never seen *this* sign before. And so as we flew by it, Karen grabbed a pen and jotted it down before we could forget it.

It was a sign advertising a tattoo parlor—tattoos being the rage that they are these days. In giant red letters the name of the outfit stretched across the billboard, “Tattoo Charlie’s.” Then below came the slogan: “Done while you wait.”

Wait a minute! “Done while you wait”? How else are you supposed to get a tattoo? Drop your arm off and pick it up at the end of the day all tattooed and ready to go? “Done while you wait.” Is there any alternative? Pretty clever advertising, wouldn’t you say? It certainly got my attention, anyway.

But come to think of it, the greatest truths in the universe can be posted on a roadside sign with the same slogan, can’t they? “Done while you wait”—the shining truth of God’s original creation of this planet of earth children; He did the work while we waited. “Done while you

wait”—the resplendent truth of God’s saving love poured out in the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross for those same earth children; He did the work while we waited. One by one, you can check them off, the greatest themes and truths of the universe, clustered under the divine pronouncement, “Done while you wait.” He does the work . . . we do the waiting . . . on Him.

What a God—what an offer—what a forever Friend!

But may I be candid with you? There is one truth that *can’t* be done while we wait. In fact, it *won’t* get done *if* we wait. Which may explain why God is still waiting—waiting for us to quit waiting. And start working.

Before you leap to your feet in valiant defense of salvation by faith, let me hasten to begin singing! And if the voice my family long ago relegated to occasions of hydrotherapy (the morning shower) won’t stop you, then perhaps the words I sing to you will. They are the hymn composition of Fred Pratt Green:

When the church of Jesus Shuts its outer door,
Lest the roar of traffic Drown the voice of prayer:
May our prayers, Lord, make us Ten times more aware
That the world we banish Is our Christian care.

If our hearts are lifted Where devotion soars
High above this hungry Suffering world of ours:
Lest our hymns should drug us To forget its needs,
Forge our Christian worship Into Christian deeds.

Lest the gifts we offer, Money, talents, time,
Serve to salve our conscience To our secret shame:
Lord, reprove, inspire us By the way You give;
Teach us, dying Savior, How true Christians live.¹

“When the church of Jesus shuts its outer door.” And waits. When in fact God is desperately hoping, passionately pleading, for us to quit waiting . . . and start working.

I love the church to which I belong. But I fear she waits when she should work. Drugged by her own hymns (*both* traditional and contemporary) and anesthetized by her weekly (weakly?) worship, does she sleep when she should serve? Is she contented when she should contend? Do we flee “the roar of traffic,” when it’s to that urban cacophony that we’ve been sent? Does the church (at least in the West) pray in opulent obscurity, when in fact we’ve been called to impoverished humanity? Are we forever seeking more signs, when the one sign left us is forgotten?

What about that sign writ large on an ancient piece of parchment, the sign of Isaiah 58? Everyone knows Isaiah, but who reads the fifty-eighth chapter any more? Jesus must have. For how else can you explain “the passion of the Christ” (Mel Gibson’s movie notwithstanding)? The truth is you won’t find God any more passionately engaged with His people in the Old Testament or Jesus any more passionate in appealing to the same people (that would be you and me) in the New Testament than they both are over Isaiah 58’s red-hot appeal. Call it “the passion of the Father”; call it “the passion of the Son.”

One thing’s for certain. It is a passion whose time has come. Because God knows we appear to have mastered the waiting part. It’s the working part that He’s waiting for. “Done while you *work*.” Because there’s no other way to get it done.

But if you think *w-o-r-k* spells bad news, guess again. If you will put into practice what you’re about to read, research empirically shows that it will improve your health, boost your immune system, lengthen your life, grow your investments, strengthen your self-esteem, embolden your faith, deepen your prayers, increase your joy—in other words, it will literally revolutionize your personal life. Sound impossible? I hope you’ll examine the evidence and studies cited for yourself in these pages. And if Isaiah 58’s practical strategy has this kind of documented effect on us personally, can you imagine the corporate effect on the church?

But let me hasten to inject this caveat: This short book is not about some sort of new “health and wealth” scheme or gospel. Quite the contrary. Isaiah 58 is the cry of the divine heart not only for you and me. It

is a cry ignited with the fire of His relentless love for all six billion plus of His earth children. And while you and I can do very little about the war on terror or the conflict in Iraq or the jittery national or global economy, what we can do is to take seriously God's compassion for His suffering children and His passionate longing that they, too, be included in an end-time portrait of His last generation on earth. Just what it is we *can* do and *might* do to share His passion for them is what this little book seeks.

It is a journey. We must begin. So let us embark together with the prayer of Fred Pratt Green: "Teach us, dying Savior, how true Christians live." After all, thanks to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, Jesus keeps dying a thousand times over on the screens of this nation and world. So it is the right time, isn't it, to ask this "dying Savior" "How, then, shall we live?"

In the few pages that follow, may Christ teach us how to do just that—to follow Him whose passion is why this book was written in the first place.

May Day, 2004
Dwight K. Nelson
Pioneer Memorial Church

¹*Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, No. 581.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LAW OF THE BOOKENDS

Did you hear what happened at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport? It was the Sunday after New Year's Day, and the postholiday crowds were streaming through the terminal on their way home. According to the *South Bend Tribune* (January 6, 2003), one of the security screeners—the person who sits beside the X-ray machine and stares into the monitor to see how neatly you packed your carry-on luggage—apparently had been to one too many New Year's parties. In the middle of his security assignment in front of the X-ray monitor, he fell asleep. He may have done it with his eyes wide open—like it happens sometimes when you're driving down the interstate—but eventually someone noticed. Red alert!

The question now became: How long had he been asleep? He hadn't timed his nap, but through hurried questioning, his supervisor estimated he had been asleep from eight to thirty minutes. The authorities immediately shut down Sea-Tac airport. Four of the five concourses were evacuated, and thousands of passengers were delayed as explosive-sniffing dogs swept through the terminal to make certain no unknown terrorist had breached security during the agent's unintended siesta.

Moral of the story: It's a very serious matter to be found sleeping on the job when so many are depending on your being wide awake, when you have a strategic assignment. I can't imagine that sleepy security guard and his superior having a cheery little postnap chit-chat, can you?

Would it be any different with the ultimate Superior? Do you suppose that's why God sounds so deeply agitated in Isaiah 58's opening salvo? " 'Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins' " (verse 1). After all, that doesn't exactly sound like a page from Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, does it?

So much for our journey through Isaiah 58 getting off to a warm and fuzzy start.

But why such a harsh introduction? " 'Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.' "

Could it be that somebody's been sleeping on the job?

Richard John Neuhaus, editor-in-chief of *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, writes in his provocative book *Death on a Friday Afternoon*: "God's chosen ones live out the drama and destiny of God himself. *It is a fearful thing to be chosen*. It is as though God enters history through his chosen ones" (p. 138, emphasis supplied).

Is that why Isaiah 58 begins with such divine agitation? As Neuhaus writes, "It is a fearful thing to be chosen." Because to whom much is given, much is required (see Luke 12:48). When you live with the thought that you've been chosen by God—not because of who *you* are, but because of who *He* is—you cannot content yourself to live like all the rest. You must live with a sense of destiny. You will live by a higher standard.

Wasn't it that way for Israel?

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Deuteronomy 7:6-8).

The Israelites were to live out their manifest destiny with the abiding sense that “the LORD your God has chosen you.” It wasn’t because of any prowess or might of their own; the Israelites were to live out their divine destiny with the compelling realization that they had been chosen and loved for the sake of mission—God’s mission to save the entire race of lost earth children. God had to start with someone, so He began His mission by choosing Israel.

But as Neuhaus has observed, “It is a fearful thing to be chosen. It is as though God enters history through his chosen ones.” Israel was to be the incarnation of divine love in and through a community of very human missionaries, as it were. God longed to enter into history through them. Then, at last, the rebel planet might know the truth about Him.

But apparently a whole generation of Israelites fell asleep on duty, dangerously compromising their strategic mission to the world. And when you fall asleep at so vital an assignment, you can forget any postnap warm fuzzies from your ultimate Superior.

I’ll never forget that afternoon when, as a boy, I awakened from my nap and proceeded to disobey my missionary parents by putting on my brand-new maroon Sabbath shoes and sneaking out the door to play with my Japanese friends. I wanted to show off my shoes, and besides, what harm could a little week-day romping do? Soon all caution was thrown to the proverbial wind, as we boys raced through the muddy rice paddies near our home. Suddenly, my errant memory revived. I looked in horror at my now brown Sabbath shoes. In panic I raced back to the house, hoping to sneak in the back door and scrub them clean. But when I crawled through the hedge fence, who should be there in the yard, snapping some pictures, but my dad! And before I could duck away, he spotted me and waved me over to pose for the camera. *Maybe he won’t even notice my shoes*, I secretly prayed. But of course, being a dad, he did. Since the camera was already set up on a tripod, he told me we’d have our picture taken together first, and *then* we’d talk. To this day I look at that old black-and-white photograph of my dad and me—his grin full and natural, mine tepid and forced—remembering the rather painful corporal “conversation” that took place as soon as that picture was snapped!

There are no warm postnap fuzzies with your ultimate Superior when you've blatantly disobeyed Him, no matter how loving He is. " 'Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins' " (Isaiah 58:1). After all, these are the "my people" of God. And even a quick reading of Isaiah 58 reveals what that "my people" status actually means.

Number one, it means that you embrace God's Day of Atonement (judgment) "cleansing of the sanctuary" teaching. Key code words to that unique divine teaching are embedded into the opening salvo of Isaiah 58. The "trumpet" in "raise your voice like a trumpet" is *shophar* in the Hebrew. And only one liturgical feast day was heralded by the blasts of the *shophar*—Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 23:23-27).

And no sooner does God call for the "judgment" trumpet to be sounded than Israel quickly protests: " 'Why have we fasted,' they say [to God], 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' " (Isaiah 58:3). Their claim to fasting and humbling themselves is straight out of the ceremonial code book for acceptable Day of Atonement activities. "It [the Day of Atonement] is to be a sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may *humble* your souls" (Leviticus 16:31, NASB, emphasis supplied). As God's "chosen ones" Israel unapologetically embraced the divine teaching of the Day of Atonement.

But that "my people" status with God also means that you embrace and revere the Creator's seventh-day Sabbath memorial. And Israel did that as well, as the ending to Isaiah 58 makes incontrovertibly clear:

"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
and from doing as you please on my holy day,
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the LORD's holy day honorable,
and if you honor it by not going your own way
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,

then you will find your joy in the LORD,
and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.”

The mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isaiah 58:13, 14).

There they are—the two bookends that frame Isaiah 58. Two unique divine teachings that comprise part of the spiritual DNA of God’s chosen people. And Israel claimed them both!

Have you met anyone else—perhaps another spiritual community that you might know—that also claims them both?

“It is a fearful thing to be chosen.” Why? Because to whom much is given, much is required. So “cry aloud” and “spare not,” as the King James English renders it, and “shew my people their transgression.” For they have forgotten what is required of the “chosen ones.”

And what is required is much more than simply the bookends. For you see, neither God nor Isaiah here in chapter fifty-eight is attempting to prove either bookend. The veracity of the bookends (the cleansing of the sanctuary judgment and the seventh-day Sabbath memorial) isn’t what’s at stake in Isaiah 58.

What’s at stake is what’s *in between the bookends*. Have you ever gazed upon the hallowed shelves of a rare book collection? Isn’t there a verse in the Bible somewhere that breathes the prayer, “May my days come to an end in the house of a book collector”? Perhaps not. But the sentiment surely belongs to every bibliophile. And as every lover of books knows, the great attraction in the shelved collections of rare books lies in the masterful artistry of the leather-bound and yellow-paged tomes held firmly and securely upright by the bookends. The beauty and glory of a shelf of rare books lie not in the bookends. What is of inestimable value is what is preserved *between* those bookends. That is the law of the bookends.

Isaiah 58 is not an ode to the bookends, as crucial as they are. Rather, it is God’s passionate cry, calling us to turn our attention to what is *between His two bookends*.

And what is between them? The answer to that question is the rest of this book.