Week of Prayer 2024: First Sabbath

**The Word of God in the Life of the Church**

**By Ted N. C. Wilson**

O

n a grassy hillside 2,000 years ago heaven touched earth as the greatest Teacher this world has ever known began to speak timeless words. The people sat transfixed as Jesus broke the bread of life to them. His words opened eyes, touched hearts, and at times startled His listeners as they heard things never taught by the religious teachers of the day.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” He said (Matt. 5:3). “Blessed are the meek. . . . Blessed are the merciful” (verses 5-7). “Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (verse 20).

Going deeper, Jesus taught how one’s innermost soul reveals character. “Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (verse 28); “I tell you not to resist an evil person. . . . Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (verse 39). “Love your enemies” (verse 44). “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (verse 48, KJV). The sermon went on, revealing the secret of peace and the perpetuity of God’s law.

The people were amazed. “No man ever spoke like this Man!” (John 7:46) was on the lips of the multitude. However, “while the hearts of the people responded to His words, few were ready to accept them as the guide of life.”1

Building on the Rock

Knowing their resistance, Jesus concluded His amazing sermon with a powerful illustration, vividly pointing out the importance of putting into practice the words He had spoken.

“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall” (Matt. 7:24-27).

Centuries before Christ’s sermon on the mount, the prophet Isaiah pointed out the permanence of God’s Word: “The word of our God stands forever” (Isa. 40:8). Quoting this passage in Isaiah, the apostle Peter affirmed “This is the word which by the gospel was preached unto you” (1 Peter 1:25).

“The word of God is the only steadfast thing our world knows,” wrote Ellen White. “The great principles of the law, of the very nature of God, are embodied in the words of Christ on the mount. Whoever builds upon them is building upon Christ, the Rock of Ages. In receiving the word, we receive Christ. And only those who thus receive His words are building upon Him.”2

Scripture is Foundational

It was upon this foundation that Christ built His church. From the beginning Christ pointed to the Scriptures as the solid rock on which to build. “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isa. 40:8).

And history has proved this to be true. Against all odds, the apostles built upon that rock and turned the world upside down. Through trials and tremendous persecution, the early church continued clinging to God’s Word, and it stood strong. The Reformers took their stand on Scripture, and the “gates of hell” did not prevail against them.

Through the ages God continued speaking through His Word, leading His people out of darkness and into greater light.

Such was the case with William Miller, an early-nineteenth-century farmer who studied Scripture diligently. From his deep study Miller concluded that Christ’s return was imminent, and he preached the prophecies found in the book of Daniel to all who would hear. When Jesus did not come as expected, it was a bitter experience. But even this great disappointment was foretold in Revelation 10:8-11, where the apostle John was commanded to “eat” the “little book” of Daniel, which was “sweet as honey” in his mouth, but “bitter” in his stomach. Looking to the future, the heavenly command was given: “You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings” (verse 11).

A Firm Foundation of Faith

Believing that God was still speaking through Scripture, the early Advent believers continued to earnestly study God’s Word. Reflecting on that experience years later, Ellen White wrote, “Many of our people do not realize how firmly the foundation of our faith has been laid.”3

Explaining how a small group of Advent leaders searched the Bible “as for hidden treasure” following the Great Disappointment, she wrote, “I met with them, and we studied and prayed earnestly. Often we remained together until late at night, and sometimes through the entire night, praying for light and studying the Word. Again and again these brethren came together to study the Bible, in order that they might know its meaning, and be prepared to teach it with power. When they came to the point in their study where they said, ‘We can do nothing more,’ the Spirit of the Lord would come upon me, I would be taken off in vision, and a clear explanation of the passages we had been studying would be given me, with instruction as to how we were to labor and teach effectively. Thus light was given that helped us to understand the scriptures in regard to Christ, His mission, and His priesthood. A line of truth extending from that time to the time when we shall enter the city of God was made plain to me, and I gave to others the instruction that the Lord had given me.”4

In explaining those intense Bible study sessions, Ellen White shared how, when not in vision, she had difficulty understanding the biblical passages. This, however, made it even clearer that the explanations given her while in vision were coming from the Lord rather than her. She wrote:

“During this whole time I could not understand the reasoning of the brethren. My mind was locked, as it were, and I could not comprehend the meaning of the scriptures we were studying. This was one of the greatest sorrows of my life. I was in this condition of mind until all the principal points of our faith were made clear to our minds, in harmony with the Word of God. The brethren knew that when not in vision, I could not understand these matters, and they accepted as light direct from heaven the revelations given.5

As the small group grew and earnest Bible study continued, a foundational set of biblical beliefs came into place—the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14, the sacredness of the seventh-day Sabbath, and the nonimmortality of the soul.6

A Guiding Light

The Seventh-day Adventist movement, from its beginning, took Scripture as its foundation and guiding light. And while Ellen White acknowledged that “the truth is an advancing truth, and we must walk in the increasing light,”7 she also warned, “Men will arise with interpretations of Scripture which are to them truth, but which are not truth. The truth for this time, God has given us as a foundation for our faith. . . . We are not to receive the words of those who come with a message that contradicts the special points of our faith. They gather together a mass of Scripture, and pile it as proof around their asserted theories . . . And while the Scriptures are God’s word, and are to be respected, the application of them, if such application moves one pillar from the foundation that God has sustained . . . , is a great mistake.8

The Bible is God’s living Word. It is the foundation of the church and serves as the guide to our faith and practice. It reveals God’s will and teaches us timeless lessons we can apply to all parts of our lives. As our official Methods of Bible Study document explains, we are to “seek to grasp the simple, most obvious meaning of the biblical passage being studied” and avoid using the historical-critical method and other human-centered approaches of interpretation.9

Our first Seventh-day Adventist fundamental belief states:

“The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration. The inspired authors spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to humanity the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the supreme, authoritative, and the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the definitive revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history.”10

God’s Word, my friends, is the foundation upon which His church is built, and it is the sure foundation upon which Jesus invites each one of us to build our hope, our characters, and our lives.

“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock” (Matt. 7:24, 25).

1 Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1956), p. 147.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 148, 149.

3 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958, 1980), book 1, p. 206.

4 *Ibid.,* pp. 206, 207.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 207.

6 See Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1946), pp. 30, 31.

7 *Ibid.*,p. 33.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

9 “Methods of Bible Study,” official document, adventist.org/documents/methods-of-bible-study/.

10 “The Holy Scriptures,” Seventh-day Adventist fundamental belief 1, adventist.org/holy-scriptures/.

**Ted N.C. Wilson** is president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. You may follow him on X (formerly Twitter): @pastortedwilson and on Facebook: @Pastor Ted Wilson