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The Eschatological Role of the Sabbath: Some Reflections

Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, Retired Director of the Biblical Research Institute

Adventist eschatology assigns to the Sabbath commandment a major eschatological role shortly before the return of Christ. This particular eschatological emphasis raises at least one important question: On what grounds can we assign to the Sabbath such eschatological import? In what follows we will discuss some thoughts that could be useful in framing an answer to our question and that presuppose knowledge of the narrative of the fallen heavenly cherub (Isa 14:12–14; Ezek 28:12–19) who questioned the integrity of God’s character (e.g., Gen 3:4–5; Job 1:8–11) and sought to be like God by claiming to be a legitimate object of worship (Isa 14:13–14; Matt 4:8–10).

Sabbath and God’s Love

Although the Sabbath is phrased as law, it surprisingly attests to the validity of the eternal gospel and exhorts and commands us to remember it. The Sabbath is the only commandment in the Decalogue that clearly identifies God by referencing His two most significant mighty works. Here is the first: “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. . . . For in six days *the LORD made* the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day” (Exod 20:8, 11 NASB, emphasis added). The Sabbath witnesses to God as Creator. Here is the second: “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and *the LORD your God brought* you out of there; . . . therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day” (Deut 5:15 NASB, emphasis added). The Sabbath witnesses to God as Redeemer.¹

What do creation and redemption have in common? Much, but we will mention only a few commonalities. Creation and redemption were the result of the work of the Son of God (John 1:1–3, 14; Rom 3:23–24), and consequently requires a Christological interpretation of both (cf. Col 1:15–20). They are God’s exclusive work through His Son, totally independent of human activity and productivity.² They both participate in what is a fundamental characteristic of the gospel—it is not the result of human works (Rom 3:20). Creation and redemption constitute the two most powerful

manifestations of divine activity known to us. The vastness of the cosmos suggests that its creation was a magnificent demonstration of divine power. The personal and direct involvement of God in the work of redemption through Christ, that makes it possible for every human being to be restored to permanent fellowship with God, is indeed an incomparable manifestation of the power of God’s saving grace (Rom 5:20). Perhaps the most important similarity between creation and redemption is that they both are a manifestation of divine love. Creation was an expression of divine love before the rebellion of Lucifer (e.g., Gen 1:31; 1 John 4:8, 16) and redemption is the most glorious expression of divine love after the fall (John 3:16). The original creation displayed God’s wisdom and love (Pss 19:1; 8:3–6) and the redemptive work of Christ is a magnificent revelation of divine self-sacrificing love (John 10:17–18). The God who out of love created everything gave us the Sabbath to remind us that He is a loving Creator. The God who out of love and grace redeemed us gave us the Sabbath to remind us that redemption is a gift of His love and grace. The Sabbath is a dazzling witness to God’s love as Creator and Redeemer.

Thus, it should not surprise us that, at the close of the cosmic conflict, the Sabbath will become an object of attack by evil powers who are opposing the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ (Rev 12:4; 14:8). This they will try to achieve through the mark of the beast (see chart, pages 4–5). It is indeed the intention of the fallen cherub to silence the testimony of the Sabbath to creation as the first act of divine love in the history of the cosmos and of the gospel of salvation through Christ’s sacrificial love (Rev 14:13; 13:15). But the witness of the Sabbath would not be muted.

The Sabbath and God’s Character

The fallen covering cherub seems to believe that changing the Sabbath commandment would be an effective way of achieving his evil intents. From the beginning he has been in open conflict against the will of God (e.g., Gen 3), but his enmity against the law of God is clearly unmasked in biblical apocalyptic literature (e.g., Dan 7:25; 2 Thess 2:3–4, 7–8). His opposition to the law of

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God conceals a direct and vicious attack on God Himself. Since the Decalogue is a verbal expression of God's character, a change in the law is in fact an attack against the integrity and perfection of God's character—that He is not whom He claims to be, as the serpent suggested to Eve (Gen 3:4–5). Were any change or modification of the law of God needed, it would clearly demonstrate that the law, and more specifically the Lawgiver, is imperfect and in need of improvement. Consequently, Lucifer seems to argue, it is legally and morally justifiable to disobey such an imperfect law. The most radical change in the law occurred when the attempt was made to displace the seventh-day Sabbath with the observance of Sunday. Thus the fallen cherub hoped to discredit God's character and to manifest his own authority over the law. When humans acknowledge his authority by accepting the change and by obeying the altered "commandment," they would, in fact, be rejecting the integrity of God's loving character. This explains why the Decalogue, as a reflection of God's character, plays such an important role in the book of Revelation (Rev 12:17; 14:12).³

Sabbath and Worship

A change in the fourth commandment—changing the day of rest and worship—would result in the worship of a false god. We should always remember that the Sabbath commandment is not about a secular day of rest, but about a *holy* day. It is holy because God is present in a particular way in this period of twenty-four hours. This is a time that God and believers have in common and that frees Sabbath-keeping believers from the concerns of human productivity or works. We enter this sacred time to be in communion with the Creator and Redeemer; we worship Him (e.g., Isa 66:23). In fact, the holiness of the seventh-day Sabbath constitutes it as a divinely designated holy "space in time" to worship God.

Today, Sunday is considered by the vast majority of the Christian world to be the true day of worship. The intention of the fallen cherub seems to have been accomplished: He changed the law at the junction where law and worship intersect each other. In fact, they are inseparable and consequently changing the Sabbath commandment leads to idolatry. This is masterfully ingenious and profoundly deceptive! By changing the fourth commandment the fallen cherub seems to have achieved his original intent—namely, to discredit the character of God and become the object of worship. For him the Sabbath has to go! It is therefore necessary for the human race to listen once more to the gospel of salvation by faith in Christ that is not opposed to the law of God as preserved in the Decalogue. The perpetuity of the law is to be proclaimed not as a means of salvation but as evidence of salvation through faith in Christ.

Sabbath as a Sign of Loyalty

The Sabbath is literally at the center of the Decalogue and its uniqueness and specificity transform it into an *ideal sign of loyalty to God*. In the Hebrew language, the Decalogue, as recorded in Exodus 20:3–17, consists of 152 words. In order to find its center we simply divide 152 by two and the result is seventy-six words on one side and seventy-six on the other. The center of the Decalogue is located in verse 10.⁴ The seventy-sixth word is "the-seventh" (*hashshbi'i*), and the seventy-sixth word in the other section is "Sabbath" (*shabbat*). The following phrase is at the center of the Decalogue: But the seventh day is a Sabbath "belonging to," "for," or "to" Yahweh. In Hebrew it consists of four words:

- 75 "but-the-day" (Heb. *weyom*)
- 76 "the-seventh" (Heb. *hashshebi'i*)
- 76 [is] "sabbath" (Heb. *shabbat*) (the implied verb "is" is supplied by translators)
- 75 "to/for/belonging-to-the LORD" (Heb. *laYahweh*)

From this literary point of view, this specific phrase is at the center of the Decalogue and, based on what we know about the history of the biblical Sabbath, this is hardly an accident. We know that this phrase became extremely important in the history of Sabbath keeping. The specificity of the commandment, found in that phrase ("the seventh day sabbath"), disturbed the Christian world to the point that it was decided to eliminate it, arguing that "the seventh day" is a ritual component in the fourth commandment without any value for Christians.

However, it is precisely the specificity of the commandment—its seventhness—that constitutes it into a sign of loyalty to God in the midst of the cosmic conflict and that underlines the human privilege of having communion with this holy God. The fallen cherub wants exclusive loyalty to him and opposes the end-time sign of loyalty to God, ironically offering instead the specificity of a false sabbath, the first day of the week,⁵ as a sign of a loyalty to him—the mark of the beast (Rev 13:16). But God's law is perfect (Ps 19:7) and unchangeable because it is a reflection of His character.

Summary and Conclusion

We have suggested that the eschatological role of the Sabbath during the last days is connected to the divine intent for it to be a witness to the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ. This is intolerable for the fallen cherub who procures to proclaim his own false gospel. The forces of evil oppose the biblical Sabbath

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because it intends to constantly remind the human race that creation and redemption are the most powerful manifestations of God's loving character, that it unites a specific commandment to the identity of the true object of worship, and that its specificity transforms it into a visible and effective sign of loyalty to the Lamb at a time when the forces of evil fight against the Lamb, His law, and His character. At the close of the cosmic conflict, the obedience of God's people to the Sabbath commandment constitutes a sign, a witness to the world that the Creator and Redeemer is a loving and gracious God and that we have found rest by faith in Christ. The eschatological opposition to it will be defeated by the Lamb of God (Rev 17:14).

The chart (see below, pages 4–5) lists and contrasts some concepts associated with both the biblical Sabbath

and the mark of the beast. There are similarities and differences between both, suggesting that there is an attempt to mimic the Sabbath commandment but that the imitation is imperfect. The intent of evil powers is to deceive by pretending to be what they are not.

The parallels and contrast between the Sabbath and the mark of the beast implies that the mark of the beast is an anti-Sabbath sign commandment⁶ that presumes to occupy the place of the seventh-day Sabbath commandment. History unmask for us the identity of the intruder: Sunday. It is an unquestionable historical fact that the Christian church presumed to transfer the biblical command to rest and worship on the seventh-day Sabbath to Sunday, the first day of the week. We do have a counterfeit Sabbath in the Christian world.

Chart: The Sabbath and the Mark of the Beast

Sabbath	Mark of the Beast
1. Related to worship “ Worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and the spring of waters” (Rev 14:7).	1. Related to worship “Those who worship the beast . . . and whoever receives the mark of his name” (Rev 14:11).
2. Related to a name “Having His [the Lamb ’s] name and the name of His Father written on their forehead” (Rev 14:1; cf. Exod 20:11).	2. Related to a name “whoever receives the mark of his name ” (Rev 14:11); “a mark on his forehead or on his hand” (Rev 14:9).
3. Related to a number “He rested on the seventh day” (Gen 2:2).	3. Related to a number “the mark . . . of the beast or the number of his name . . . 666 ” (Rev 13:17–18)
4. Given to humankind “The Sabbath was made for man/humankind ” (Mark 2:27).	4. Forced on humankind “And he causes all . . . to be given a mark on their right hand . . . (Rev 13:16).
5. Uses language of buying and selling “. . . any grain on the Sabbath day to sell , we will not buy on the Sabbath” (Neh 10:13).	5. Uses language of buying and selling “no one will be able to buy or to sell except the one who has the mark” (Rev 13:17).
6. Sign of identity: followers of the Lamb “[They] follow the Lamb wherever He goes” (Rev 14:4; cf. Ezek 20:20).	6. Sign of identity: followers of the beast “whoever receives the mark of his name” (Rev 14:11); “the whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast” (Rev 13:3).
7. Sign of submission to God “until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads” (Rev 7:3).	7. Sign of submission to the beast “buy or sell . . . except the one who has the mark” (Rev 13:17).

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Chart: The Sabbath and the Mark of the Beast (cont)

Sabbath

8. Rejection leads to idolatry

“Profane My Sabbaths . . . went after the idols” (Ezek 20:16).

9. Rejecters

“Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death” (Exod 31:14).

Mark of the Beast

8. Sign of idolatry (an image)

“If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark” (Rev 14:9).

9. Rejecters

Ordered “to be killed” (Rev 13:15).

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Endnotes

1 When the reading of the fourth commandment in Exodus 20 is compared to what we find in Deuteronomy 5, there are some variations due in part to the homiletical nature of Moses' speech in Deuteronomy. The variations also enrich the theological significance of the Sabbath by associating it with redemption as a post-fall human need. See the discussion in Mathilde Frey, “Deuteronomy,” in *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2020), 1:322–328.

2 While Christ's work of redemption is entirely independent of human activity, our acceptance of it under the influence of the Holy Spirit is our responsibility.

3 The Ten Commandments are mentioned or implied in Revelation: first commandment: worship God (Rev 14:7); second commandment: worship of images (Rev 13:14); third commandment: misuse of God's name (Rev 13:6); fourth commandment: keeping the seventh-day Sabbath (Rev 1:10 [Gen 2:2–3; Exod 20:8–11; Isa 58:13; Mark 2:28]; Rev 7:3; 14:1 [Exod 31:13, 17; Ezek 20:12, 20]; Rev 14:7 [Exod 20:8–11; 31:17]; fifth commandment: honor parents (Rev 14:1 [believers honor the heavenly Father]; cf. 17:5 [dysfunctional family of the woman]); sixth commandment: do not kill (Rev 9:20–21; 13:10); seventh commandment: do not commit adultery (Rev 9:20–21); eighth commandment: theft (Rev 9:20–21); ninth commandment: false witness (Rev 14:5); and tenth commandment: covetousness/desire (Rev 18:14). See Johannes Kovar, “The Remnant and God's Commandments: Revelation 12:17,” in *Toward a Theology of the Remnant*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Adventist Ecclesiology 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2009), 113–126; Jon Paulien, “Revisiting the Sabbath in the Book of Revelation,” *Journal of the Adventist*

Theological Society 9, nos. 1–2 (1998): 179–186; and Mathilde Frey, “Sabbath Theology in the Book of Revelation,” in Rodríguez, *Toward a Theology of the Remnant*, 127–137.

4 In Deuteronomy 5:7–21 the Decalogue consists of 172 Hebrew words that when divided by two equals eight-six and eighty-six. The center is found in verse 14. The eighty-sixth word in the first part is “any” (Heb. *kol*) and in the second is “work” (Heb. *mela'kah*): “any work.” What precedes the word “any” is the phrase, “But the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; you shall not do any. . .” In the second section what follows the word “work” is the completion of the list of those who should rest: “you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.” The two emphases at the center of the commandment in Deuteronomy are (1) the seventh-day Sabbath that belongs to the Lord and (2) on that day we worship and rest and do no work.

5 While the tie to creation is found in the fourth commandment itself, the Hebrew/Jewish practice of numbering the days in accordance with creation week confirmed the Sabbath on the seventh day. See Clinton Wahlen, “The Sabbath and the First Day of the Week,” in *The Sabbath in the New Testament and in Theology*, ed. Ekkehardt Mueller and Eike Mueller (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2023), 269–295.

6 See Anthony MacPherson, “The Mark of the Beast as a ‘Sign Commandment’ and Anti-Sabbath in the Worship Crisis of Revelation 12–14,” *Andrews University Studies* 43, no. 2 (2005): 263–283. The article stimulated my thinking in the preparation of the chart.

Lessons from Matthew 28

Clinton Wahlen

Matthew 28 presents the culmination of the gospel story. In quick succession we see an angel rolling back the stone from the entrance of the tomb, the guards terrified at the sight, the women who come also fearing but commanded to tell the disciples that Jesus is risen, Jesus Himself meeting them on the way, the chief priests bribing the soldiers to spread a lying report about the empty tomb, and Jesus' appearance to His disciples on a mountain in Galilee, His giving them the Great Commission, and His assuring them of His ongoing presence always, to "the end of the world" (Matt 28:20 KJV).

Interpretation of Matthew 28

1. Verses 1-10

- Jesus has been in the tomb throughout the Sabbath hours. He rose from the dead on "the first day of the week," which literally in Greek could be translated, "the first day leading to the Sabbath"—alluding to creation week (Gen 1:1–2:3).¹ Thus, the biblical way of describing the week is anchored in creation and God's establishment of Sabbath rest on the seventh day.
- The events of verses 2–4 seem to have occurred before the women arrive at the tomb.²
- All four Gospels depict angels at the tomb. Luke and John mention two angels (Luke 24:4; John 20:12). Matthew focuses on the angel who rolls away the stone from the entrance, sits outside, and speaks to the women.
- The address to the women, "Do not be afraid" (Matt 28:5), seeks to reassure their startled minds. Such words are spoken by God (e.g., Gen 46:3; Josh 8:1), by heavenly visitants (Gen 21:17; 26:24), and by Jesus Himself—earlier (Matt 14:27; 17:7) and after His resurrection (Matt 28:10).
- The resurrection of Jesus is usually presented in the New Testament as an act of the Father raising the Son (e.g., Acts 4:10; 5:30; Rom 4:24; Gal 1:1), but also of the Son raising Himself (John 10:18), and the Spirit bringing Jesus to life again (1 Pet 3:18). In other words, all three Persons of the Trinity are involved in this momentous event in the history of the plan of salvation.
- To be effective witnesses of the resurrection, the women are invited to come and see the empty tomb

for themselves. Then the angel instructs them to hurry and tell the news to the disciples, mentioning the meeting in Galilee that Jesus promised (Matt 26:32). It is left with them to act on the command, and they faithfully proceed to do just that.

- Apparently, Jesus is unwilling that the witness of these women to the resurrection be based only on something reported to them, even if it was by an angel. They need to be eyewitnesses themselves.
- The two women recognize Jesus immediately and bow down to worship Him. Like the angel, Jesus tells them also to remind the disciples that He will meet them in Galilee.
- Over the next forty days Jesus will instruct His followers (Acts 1:3), His "brethren," the church (Matt 28:10), to prepare them for their mission to the world. Previously, Jesus had referred to all who do the Father's will as His "brother, and sister, and mother" (Matt 12:50). Therefore, this command—"Go and tell"—is for more than just the eleven; it is for all believers who are to bear witness of Jesus' resurrection and who will be included as recipients of the Great Commission to make disciples.

2. Verses 11-15

- A select few of the guard, probably the most senior soldiers among them, report the astonishing events to the chief priests who had charged them with guarding the tomb. Had they reported this news to Pilate they would have faced severe punishment or even death for falling asleep on duty. Perhaps they hoped for more merciful treatment from these religious leaders.
- Tragically, Israel's leaders choose to deny what was clearly divine intervention and create their own version of events to discredit the story of Jesus' resurrection. They pay off the entire Roman guard to ensure the official narrative they concoct becomes the accepted version of events. Both parties have an incentive to quash news of the resurrection as an unfounded rumor.
- Of course, the official version strains credulity—how would the soldiers know the disciples stole Jesus' body away if they were sleeping? Nevertheless, the official line becomes the "commonly reported" version of events.

3. Verses 16-20

- The location of the mountain in Galilee where Jesus meets His disciples is never specified. Interestingly, this is the first clear indication that Jesus had previously identified it (though it seems implicit in Matthew 28:10). Mountains in Matthew are a place of divine revelation (Matt 5:1; 17:1-9), communion (14:23), and action (15:29-31).
- Although initially the commission is given to the disciples gathered to Jesus in Galilee, it is implicitly expanded to include all who accept the command to make disciples “to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20).
- Although some who saw Jesus on the mountain doubted, Christ showed no disappointment but simply announced His new authoritative status. The scope of “all authority” is expansive but even more so by being paired geographically with heaven and earth. This assurance is the all-important presupposition for the Great Commission.
- It is instructive to compare the two commissions of disciples in Matthew. The location for both is Galilee, far from Jerusalem and the temple around which Jewish faith centered:

Matthew 10:7

“As you go” (Gk. *poreuomenoi*)

“Preach” (Gk. *kēryssete*)

“Lost sheep of the house of Israel”

“Healing-restoration”

Matthew 28:19

“Go” (Gk. *poreuthentes*)

“Make disciples” (Gk. *mathēteusate*)

“All the nations”

“Baptizing-teaching”

- There is a decisiveness and comprehensiveness in the Great Commission not present in the first commission. In the first the emphasis is less on going than on preaching, whereas the second has two imperative forms, “Go” and “Make disciples.”³ These two commands encompass both the onset and the culmination of a process of reproducing followers of Jesus.
- The process of making disciples is further defined by two present tense Greek participles—“baptizing” and “teaching.” Their parallel form and usage indicate these two activities are to be ongoing and that they occur together. In other words, one cannot make disciples and baptize people without “teaching them to observe/obey all” that Jesus commanded.⁴
- The teachings of Jesus are summarized in Matthew as “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 24:14), which includes far more than Jewish messianic hopes envisaged since it refers to the kingdom of *heaven* (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19-20; 7:21; etc.). It also points to the scope of Jesus’ authority as embracing not just the earth but heaven as well.
- Everything Jesus has said up to this point has prepared His disciples to fulfill the Great

Commission. In Matthew, disciples are those who have accepted Jesus’ call to repentance, understand His teachings, and obey them, which includes making more disciples.

- The comprehensiveness of the Great Commission is also illustrated by the full participation of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the triumphant triumvirate of heaven. Each Person of the Trinity occupies an important role in executing the divine strategy of salvation.
- Baptism in the one “name” shows the unity of the divine purpose and Godhead, signifying the union of believers with the Trinity, the heavenly kingdom, and the church (cf. 1 Cor 12:13). Thus, the references to baptism “in the name of Jesus” (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5) simply emphasize the distinctive element of faith in Jesus and do not suggest any deviation from the command of Jesus to baptize in the triune name of God.
- There is no reason to question the authenticity of the saying of Jesus in Matthew 28:19. All Greek manuscripts, including the earliest ones, agree without variation on the Trinitarian wording of the baptismal formula, and there is no reason to think Jesus could not have spoken these words.
- The Personhood of God is further developed throughout the New Testament (e.g., 1 Cor 12:4-6; 2 Cor 13:14; Eph 4:4-6; 1 Pet 1:2).⁵ But the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels is the all-important foundation and presupposition for this development, especially His self-revelation as the Son and His teachings regarding the Father in the Gospel of Matthew and the Spirit in the Gospel of John.
- God’s name is highly significant throughout Scripture: “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Joel 2:32, which is quoted in Acts 2:21, Rom 10:13, and 1 Cor 1:2); it is the way His people are known (e.g., Jer 14:9; Jas 2:7).
- Interestingly, references to the triune God bracket the beginning and ending of Jesus’ earthly ministry: at His baptism, the Father, the “beloved Son” Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are all involved (Matt 3:16-17); now Jesus instructs that the same triune name be invoked for the baptism of all future disciples, who are to be like their Teacher (Matt 10:25) and to follow His steps (1 Pet 2:21).
- It is with this universal perspective, embracing heaven and earth and pointing to a boundless future, that Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom of heaven concludes, but not without first providing the assurance of His continuing presence with them (Matt 28:20).

Application of the Chapter

Some lessons we may glean from Matthew 28 include:

1. Like the women whom the angels commanded to tell the news of Jesus' resurrection and the disciples who were given the Great Commission, we are given the privilege of telling the good news to others and making disciples. But it is left with us whether or not we will act on this privilege.

2. In the first century, women were not considered reliable witnesses; yet it is to these that Jesus and the angel first entrust the good news of the resurrection. It does not matter who we are in the eyes of others or even in our own eyes; Jesus can empower us to be effective witnesses for Him and we should not hesitate to do all we can for Him and the advancement of His kingdom.

3. Just as the religious leaders, having first paid off Judas, paid an even larger sum to the soldiers to maintain their power, so choosing a wrong path at first seems easy but generally requires even more wrongdoing and dishonesty to cover our misguided choices. When going the wrong way, it is always best to turn around sooner rather than later.

4. Often, the human explanations created to replace the Bible's version of history are more easily believed than the supernatural accounts of creation, miracles, and the resurrection. Nevertheless, it is important for us to share the news and present the truth, leaving the results with God.

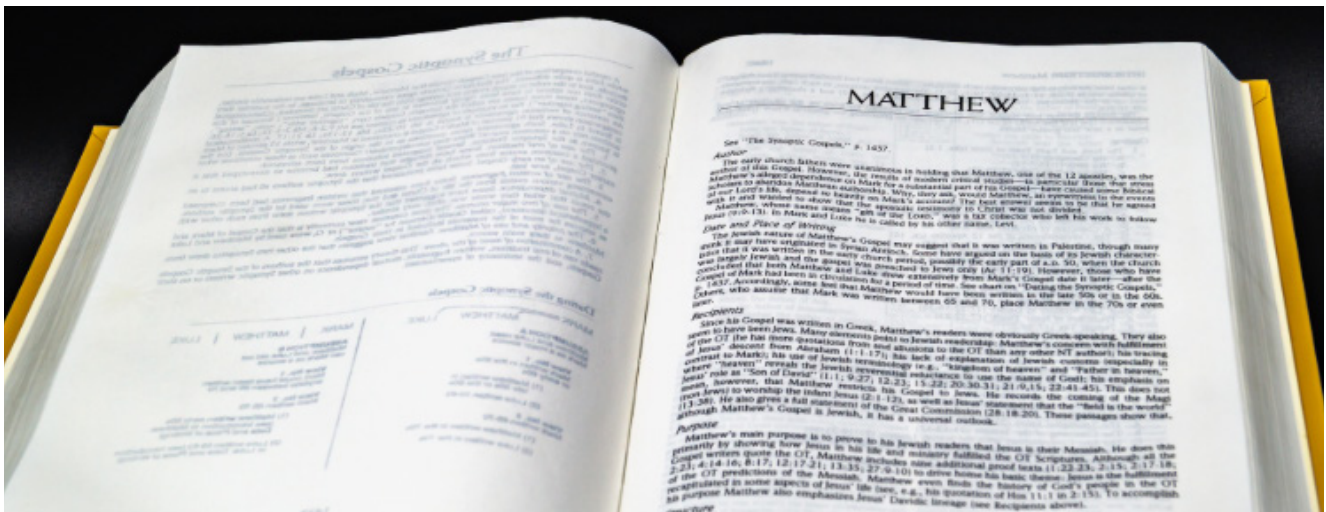
5. Every true disciple of Jesus is also a disciple-maker for the kingdom of heaven. They put first the kingdom of God and His righteousness above all earthly considerations (Matt 6:33). They invest their talents for the kingdom of heaven rather than burying them in the earth, looking to the greater reward as good and faithful servants (Matt 25:14–30).

Endnotes

- 1 See Clinton Wahlen, "The Sabbath and the First Day of the Week," in *The Sabbath in the New Testament and in Theology: Implications for Christians in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Ekkehardt Mueller and Eike Mueller (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2023), 270–272.
- 2 Cf. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 781, 788.
- 3 The Greek participle *poreuthentes* is frequently used imperatively. The identical form is used in King Herod's command to "go and search carefully for the young Child" (Matt 2:8) and in several other commands given by Jesus (Matt 9:13; 11:4; Luke 32; 17:14; 22:8) as well as in Mark's version of the Great Commission (Mark 16:15).
- 4 The verb *tēreō* (keep, observe) can also mean "obey" and is so translated here by several versions (NET, NIV, NRSV). It regularly refers to keeping God's commandments (e.g., Matt 19:17; John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 John 2:3–4; Rev 12:17).
- 5 See Clinton Wahlen and John Peckham, *Exploring the Trinity: Questions and Answers*, Biblical Research Institute Studies on the Trinity 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, forthcoming).

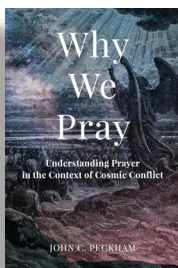
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Why We Pray: Understanding Prayer in the Context of Cosmic Conflict

Reviewed by Frank M. Hasel



Why We Pray: Understanding Prayer in the Context of Cosmic Conflict

John C. Peckham.

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024.

179 pp.

USD 24.99.

There are many books on prayer on the market, but this one stands out for several reasons. While most books on prayer explore the practical aspects and personal blessings of prayer or provide the reader with useful ideas on how to enhance one's personal prayer life, Peckham tackles more foundational questions in a careful and informed manner. The book inspires the reader to think and reflect in new ways on some of the most challenging questions people face when praying, such as: why should we pray at all, if God is good and loving and knows already what we need? It also provides profound biblical answers in an intellectually compelling manner, and it instills a greater desire to practice prayer more intentionally and meaningfully.

Peckham is an accomplished theologian and at the same time writes well, which is no ordinary combination. Being a research professor of theology and Christian philosophy at Andrews University and also working as an associate editor of the flagship magazine of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the *Adventist Review/Adventist World*, helps him to write about complex theological and philosophical questions about prayer in a readable and accessible way.

In six chapters he deals with many foundational aspects of prayer and our understanding of God, His nature, and character. In chapter 1 he raises some initial important questions about petitionary prayer, including seemingly unanswered prayers and the question of how our prayers can influence divine action. Peckham does not shy away from some of the most challenging and tough questions, such as: why should we pray when God is perfectly good, desires our well-being, already knows

everything, and is all-powerful? (pp. 3, 10; see also p. 55 and *passim*).

Peckham then describes in chapter 2 what the Bible teaches about the covenantal God to whom we pray and explores the question of whether our prayers can influence God. Here Peckham outlines important aspects of God's nature and character. He affirms that the biblical God is a faithful covenant God (p. 49) who cares, hears, and responds (pp. 24–40). He is eternal and self-existent (pp. 40–42), perfectly good and loving (pp. 42–44), all-knowing and perfectly wise (pp. 44–45), all-powerful (pp. 45–47), and omnipresent (pp. 47–48).

This leads Peckham to reflect insightfully on God and our prayers through the well-known words of the Lord's Prayer in chapter 3 before he deals with what he calls the "rules of engagement" (pp. 69–71, 75–82, 87–92) and the problem of petitionary prayer in chapter 4. Here he describes the biblical idea of a "great conflict" between demonic forces and God and how this impacts God and His response to our prayers. This aspect is further explored in chapter 5 (pp. 97–125) where Peckham deals with the reality of God's adversary and the problem of unanswered prayers and he suggests some biblical reasons why persistent prayer is significant in this cosmic conflict and spiritual warfare.

The final chapter (pp. 127–149) addresses other important questions that pertain to situations where God seems hidden and to our human response to the injustice we face in this sinful world. Here he briefly deals with the biblical concept of lament and also encourages the reader to trust God and His goodness and to address Him in our prayers honestly and fervently. The book ends with a thirteen-page bibliography that is up-to-date and reflects a wide range of different authors and important publications on the topic. It also has Scripture and subject indexes.

Why We Pray is a stimulating book that is much needed. Peckham skillfully and competently deals with some of the most difficult and perplexing questions Christians face when praying. His distinction between God's *ideal* and *remedial* will is particularly helpful. Peckham explains, "God's ideal will is what God actually prefers, what would take place if everyone always did what

God wishes. God's remedial will, conversely, is what God wills after taking into account all other factors, including creatures' free decisions, which often depart from God's ideal will and thus bring about evil" (p. 62; see also p. 94).

A significant theological contribution is his insight in light of the cosmic conflict perspective (chap. 4 and passim). In presenting various positions and perspectives on prayer and their corresponding understanding of God, Peckham is always fair in his descriptions of other positions, and he is conversant with the latest and most important publications on the topic. His reasoning is rigorous, careful, and convincing and a wonderful example of faith-affirming scholarship. I wish more scholars could take up the challenge of presenting biblical understandings, that many Seventh-day Adventists are intuitively familiar with, in academically sound and knowledgeable ways so that others are attracted to these theological insights.

Peckham interacts with the most important proponents and positions on the subject and engages the reader with his biblically informed, canonical *sola scriptura* perspective on the topic. In a sense his book on prayer is a "theodicy of prayer"—that is, a justification of the legitimacy and urgency of prayer that establishes and grounds prayer in the biblical understanding of God in the context of the cosmic conflict. In this endeavor Peckham builds on several of his previous publications, such as *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (2018) and *Divine Attributes: Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture* (2021), to mention but two. *Why We Pray* is a sustained and accomplished apologetic for biblical prayer and at the same time a robust defense of God's omnipotence, omniscience, love, as well as human freedom.

Peckham is correct that our understanding of prayer is intricately connected to our understanding of God's nature and character (pp. 22–23, 31). Peckham affirms God's omniscience, omnipotence, goodness, love, His faithfulness, and our human epistemic freedom. By placing this in the biblical context of a cosmic conflict, where God is morally bound to certain rules of engagement (pp. 75–96, esp. 80, 87, 91–92), Peckham offers new and helpful perspectives as to why prayer is needed and why some of our prayers are not answered immediately or as we would wish.

While the writing style of Peckham's book leans more towards an academic and scientific audience, he nevertheless writes in an engaging and accessible way and has many practical illustrations. In one chapter he even invites the reader to several prayerful reflections on Scripture passages (pp. 40–51). His book informs the reader not only about prayer but also provides valuable insights into the biblical nature of God and His salvation. It would be nice if Peckham could write a condensed and

less academic version of the book for an audience that is not as academically and philosophically informed as trained theologians and pastors are.

There are a few things that could benefit from a deeper engagement, perhaps in a future second edition of the book. While Peckham deals with various reasons for unanswered prayers and in several places hints at sin—for example, when he writes that "prayers might be hindered by human dispositions and acts" (p. 109; similarly see also pp. 112, 116–117, 123)—the "sin" factor could be explained and expounded more fully as a reason why some prayers are not answered. Also, one misses any engagement with the issue of "prayer and fasting" and how fasting is connected to the cosmic conflict framework that Peckham proposes.

In the subtitle to chapter 6 Peckham mentions lament. His point that the biblical art of lament should be purposefully reintroduced to the church is well taken (p. 138). But his exposition on lament in the context of the cosmic conflict is fairly short and would have benefited from biblical insights that can be found, for instance, in Mark Vroegop's excellent book *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

But these are minor details that do not detract from an otherwise outstanding and excellent book. *Why We Pray* is a book that should be read by every thoughtful pastor and religion teacher. It deserves a place in every serious theological library. It not only addresses some of the most challenging questions prayer involves, but it provides answers that are biblically sound and thoughtfully articulated. But the book is much more than an academic engagement with prayer. It seeks to lead the reader to a deeper understanding and a greater appreciation of prayer, and to ignite a desire to pray more persistently, trusting God's willingness and ability to hear, care, and respond to our prayers in the context of a cosmic conflict. It is highly recommended.

Frank M. Hasel

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Burial or Cremation?

A Statement of the Biblical Research Institute Ethics Committee

Ever since death was introduced into human experience because of sin, we have had to confront questions as to the proper way to care for the dead. Although there are differing responses to caring for the dead due to culture and religious diversity, such variances in views mean we must treat this subject with prudence, discernment, and respect.

The increasing popularity of cremation in the Christian West is often due to being less expensive than traditional embalming and burial. A *USA Today* article reports, “The average cost of a funeral today is about \$6,500 [USD], says NBC News, including a \$2,000-or-more [USD] cost of a casket. A cremation, by contrast, generally costs one-third of those prices – possibly up to one third less expensive.” The article further states, “Cremation was used in 54 percent of deaths in 2019, according to the National Funeral Directors Association [United States]. They project that to rise to around 78 percent by 2040.”¹ This raises questions as to whether the Bible has some prescription in how we should care for the dead. This article will seek to examine the practices of burial and cremation in the light of Scripture.

Burial and Cremation in the Ancient World

Archaeological records attest rituals of burial and cremation in antiquity. For example, with the exception of the Egyptians, Chinese, and Hebrews, “cremation seems to have been the standard practice of the ancients.”² These cultures linked the immortality of the soul to cremation. Ancient Hinduism, for example, believed that the immortal soul would survive the fire and fly birdlike to “the world of the ancestor or the world of the gods.” Similarly, the ancient Greeks were convinced that “the fire separated the pure soul from the impure body and freed it to ascend, phoenixlike, from its altar of flames to the heavens.”³

Concerning Jewish tradition, Naftali Silberberg cites a Midrash on the resurrection, and then comments, “The very body that died will be resurrected. According to tradition, there is a miniscule bone in the upper spine called the luz bone. It is from this indestructible bone that G-d will reconstruct the entire body when the time arrives for the Resurrection of the Dead.”⁴ Thus, it appears that Jewish tradition seems to make God dependent on some bone or similar remains to be able to resurrect the

original body back to life. Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones coming to life may be one passage behind this idea.⁵

By contrast, early Christians practiced burial rather than cremation due to their belief in the burial and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, belief in the resurrection of the body made cremation “repugnant to the early Christians, whose use of burial is attested by the evidence of the catacombs at Rome.”⁶ Furthermore, David Jones reports that Christianity followed its Jewish roots, where cremation was seen as an “unacceptable heathen practice.” Jones further cites historians who argue that it was the dignity Christians bestowed on the body of the deceased by Christians that played a meaningful role in the spread of Christianity.⁷ As a result, “by the late 4th century, cremation had been effectively uprooted in the most Christian West.”⁸ For Bible-believers, though, Christian tradition is not automatically normative as it could contradict Scripture. So, the question remains, does Scripture offer any normative guidance on how we should dispose of the dead?

Burial Practices in the Bible

Throughout the Bible burial is the predominant practice in dealing with the dead.⁹ This suggests that burial was at least a common way to dispose of the dead in those times. In some cases, the biblical text notes that the burial was preceded by some form of perfuming or embalming of the dead bodies. For example, Joseph commanded the Egyptian physicians to embalm his father Israel (Gen 50:2), and later he was embalmed as well (Gen 50:26). The body of Jesus was wrapped in a “clean linen” and the women used “spices and fragrant oils” to prepare him for the burial (Matt 27:59; Luke 23:53; John 19:40). The question, then, is this: are such biblical records of burial practices prescriptive, or should they be understood as only descriptive narrative?

The fact that John describes the funerary preparations of the body of Jesus as being performed according to “the burial custom [literally, *ethos*] of the Jews” (John 19:40) seems to suggest that John saw himself as simply reporting contemporary practices, without prescribing a moral norm for all places and times. It comes as no surprise, then, that some authors conclude that “there is no direct command regarding burial” in the Scriptures.¹⁰ Thus, it seems safe to suggest that when the Bible depicts burying the dead it is describing contemporary customs and is not making

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any prescription or command. This opens an alternative question: namely, does the Bible describe the burning of bodies for crematory purposes?

In the Bible, burning dead bodies is rarely attested. One example occurs after Saul and his sons were killed in battle. The Philistines fastened their bodies to the wall of Beth Shan (1 Sam 31:10). Then “valiant men” from Jabesh Gilead rescued their bodies and “burned them.” After burning the bodies, they took “their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh and fasted seven days” (1 Sam 31:12–13). Two points emerge. First, the bones were not consumed by the fire but were still buried, which differs from modern cremation. One reason may have been to prevent further desecration of their bodies by their enemies.¹¹ Alternatively, Ronald F. Youngblood suggests that the Jabeshites may have burned the corpses to avoid “risk of infection from the quickly decomposing bodies.”¹² Thus, in the biblical record, the burial of the dead usually took place on the day of death (cf. Deut 21:23) or within twenty-four hours. As H. W. Mare observes, “problems of sanitation and fear of possible defilement through the contact with the dead body” (Num 9:10–14; 19:11–13) constituted reasons for such swiftness. Lazarus was interred on the day he died, for he died because he was “sick” (John 11:1, 17, 39).¹³ These alternative interpretations suggest that whichever explanation of the case of Saul and his sons one prefers, neither seems to be analogous to current cremation practices in which the whole body, including the bones, are reduced to ashes. By contrast, modern cremation often seems more grounded in economics than in matters of public health or theological concerns. However, cultural or religious traditions, practical issues, and personal preferences may also be factors in such decisions. The lack of analogy between this text and contemporary practices (at least in the West), suggests that this story offers no clear moral guidance on current questions concerning cremation.

Most other burnings were not for consuming corpses, but rather involved exhuming buried bones to burn them in acts of desecration. Examples include Amos 2:1–3; 1 Kings 13:2; 2 Kings 23:16, 20; and 2 Chronicles 34:5. In each case, though, these incendiary acts were not disposing of the dead, but burning the exhumed bones for the symbolic purposes just mentioned. Thus, such texts appear to offer no moral guidance concerning the question of cremation.

Burial and Resurrection from the Grave

When dealing with burial and cremation as optional methods for disposing of the dead, an important point to discuss is the relation between the doctrine of the resurrection and burial practices. For example, Jesus

promises the resurrection of those faithful ones “who are in the graves” (John 5:28). On the other hand, Daniel speaks about the resurrection of those who sleep “in the dust of the earth” (Dan 12:2). Meanwhile, Paul does not talk about where the dead are buried in his resurrection passages in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4. He only says that the “dead in Christ” will be resurrected, without mention of tombs or graves. Still, common sense suggests that in a fundamental sense, these variations are not contradictory with each other. It would appear that the authors’ focus is more conceptual than geographic. This can be observed in how Matthew depicts the resurrection of many saints from the “tombs” during the earthquake at the death of Jesus. Matthew then indicates that those people went into Jerusalem to bear witness to the resurrection (Matt 27:51–54). According to Ellen G. White, that multitude ascended to heaven with Jesus who presented them to God as “the wave sheaf, those raised with him as representatives of that great multitude who shall come forth from the grave at his second coming.”¹⁴ Since this group were representatives of all the saved (cf. Eph 4:8; Rev 4:6), we would expect them to be from different times and places, yet they are all depicted as being raised to life in Jerusalem. It seems less than reasonable to suppose that God chose only those who were buried in Jerusalem to be raised in this event. Thus, the language of “graves” is not meant to indicate the precise location where each was buried. Rather, the depiction serves as a generic descriptor of the state from which they were called to life again. Unlike Jewish tradition as previously noted, in which preserving the bones was needed to make a resurrection possible, this suggests that God is not dependent on the physical remains of a person in order to resurrect them.

That God need not be dependent on preserved remains for resurrecting the dead is further suggested by the phenomenon of bodily decomposition and breakdown after death. It is a fact that the elements of the lifeless bodies are dispersed in the earth, air, and water over time, and that they may also be incorporated into new forms of life, whether plant, animal, or human, thus losing their identity as the remains of a deceased person. We observe, however, in 1 Corinthians 15, that unlike Jewish tradition cited earlier, Paul clearly differentiates the resurrection body—a “spiritual body”—from our current “natural body.” This difference reinforces the conclusion that God is not dependent on the elements of our current body, which decompose into the environment, in order to raise the dead, since He will create a completely new “spiritual” body for each resurrected individual. Thus, biblically, we understand the final resurrection to be a divine act of creative power in which God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom 4:17). God can recreate us out of nothing, just as

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He created in Genesis 1. Therefore, we can conclude that the mode of disposition of a dead body does not affect or hinder God's ability to raise that dead person back to life.

It seems clear, then, that when it comes to the questions of how we dispose of the dead, that the Bible offers no direct prescriptions. This would suggest that in most cases, the biblical Christian is free to pursue any respectable, practical course within the context of their culture. Cremation does not appear to be ruled out as a legitimate option for consideration.

Some Special Considerations

While the Bible does not prescribe particular funerary and burial practices, we need to consider the spiritual and theological implications of local customs. As previously noted, in Western countries like those in Europe as well as the United States, considering cremation as an option is often driven primarily by economic considerations. This stands in contrast to early Christians who associated cremation with paganism. From this Western perspective, then, a key consideration for funerary options is that of biblical stewardship, in which the believer may consider the differences in expense of funerary options, seeking to balance the need to treat the dead person's remains with appropriate dignity, while using the Lord's money prudently as a good steward.

On the other hand, there may be cultures in which a funerary practice such as cremation communicates a meaning and message that contradicts biblical teachings, especially about the state of humans in death. Earlier, this article briefly mentioned ancient cultures where cremation is linked with the concept of the immortal soul being freed to journey to its forever home. In such cases, these practices would stand in contradiction against the biblical perspective. Additionally, there may be other, little-known examples of local cultural funerary practices, which also contradict scriptural teachings. It seems, then, that the biblical Christian should evaluate cultural practices, especially those that are very familiar and thus easy to accept uncritically. If closer examination reveals that some elements of local practices communicate a message contrary to biblical teachings, then believers committed to biblical authority should consider modifying their methods of funerary procedures to avoid affirming such contradictions. They should seek to minimize potential controversy by honoring the cultural practices and the personal preferences of the deceased, as much as is morally permissible. When deviations from local practices are chosen, the believer may need to diplomatically explain why such changes were made. In summary, believers should seek to be as culturally sensitive to funerary practices as biblical teachings

permit while seeking to exemplify appropriate sympathy and support to the bereaved.

Endnotes

- 1 Erica Lamberg, "The Pros and Cons of Cremation," *USA Today*, accessed February 6, 2024, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/community-hub/funeral-planning/2020/03/24/cremation-pros-and-cons/5065222002/>. This article is undated but contains a reference to 2019. Since these are average figures, it may be that in some locales, cremation may not be the more economical option.
- 2 Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 5.
- 3 Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 6.
- 4 Rabbi Naftali Silberberg, "The Resurrection Process," Chabad.org, accessed February 7, 2024, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1127503/jewish/The-Resurrection-Process.htm.
- 5 Devorah Dimant, "The Valley of Dry Bones and the Resurrection of the Dead," *The Torah*, accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-valley-of-dry-bones-and-the-resurrection-of-the-dead>. See also N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 139–194.
- 6 F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone (orgs.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 434.
- 7 David W. Jones, "To Bury or Burn? Towards an Ethic of Cremation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 2 (June 2010): 335–347.
- 8 Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 6.
- 9 Examples include: Abraham purchased a burial site for his wife Sarah and himself (Gen 23:9, 19; 25:9–10). It was also the tomb for other patriarchs (Gen 35:29; 49:29–31; 50:13). Joseph ordered his brothers to carry out his bones from Egypt to be buried in Canaan (Gen 50:25; Josh 24:32). The Lord buried Moses (Deut 34:5–6). David was also buried in a tomb (1 Kgs 2:10; 2 Chr 25:28). John the Baptist (Mark 6:29), Stephen (Acts 8:2), and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:6–10) were all buried, as was Jesus Himself (Matt 27:57–60).
- 10 Norman L. Geisler and Douglas E. Potter, "From Ashes to Ashes: Is Burial the Only Christian Option," Christian Research Institute, April 14, 2009, <https://www.equip.org/articles/is-cremation-christian/>.
- 11 Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 1:195.
- 12 Ronald F. Youngblood, *1 & 2 Samuel*, vol. 3 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 800.
- 13 H. W. Mare, "Burial," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 1:672.
- 14 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 834.

Index to Reflections

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