

DYNAMIC

# Steward

the power to live to submit to abide to give to serve

April-June, 2006

## Contentment

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Volume 10 Number 2



## Why Can't I Be Happy?



*Claire L. Eva, Assistant Director  
General Conference Stewardship Department*

### That nagging feeling

Living life as an unhappy Christian is the most difficult life to live. God is concerned about us too, when we live like this. It is this condition of “neither hot nor cold” that keeps us in a dyspeptic state (Rv 3:15). Some may say the phrase “unhappy Christian” is an oxymoron and, in the truest sense, I would agree. However, far too many Christians have that nagging feeling of dissatisfaction and lack of contentment.

To admit there is something missing in life is not a popular thing. For leaders like us (and this journal primarily goes to Church leaders), this is part of the reason life is so hard—we cannot, we feel we *dare* not, admit any lack in our life. We need to keep up that image and stay in line for promotion, or at least recognition!

Scripture is evidence that God calls all kinds of people into His kingdom, and that is real encouragement for us! Paul is an example of this. He was a “hot and cold” fellow. When he persecuted Christians, he coldly went all out! When he realized what he had done, by God’s Spirit, he turned around and became a living flame for the Gospel and his Christ.

### Beyond physical need

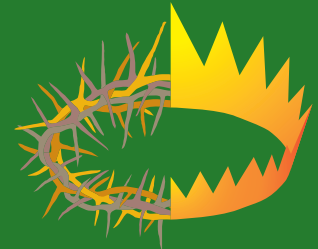
One of the few and most popular passages regarding contentment, quoted in this issue, is found in Philippians 4. Here Paul says, “... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” I must admit, I had not contemplated this passage so thoughtfully, until I began editing this issue. I have mentally gone beyond the physical needs issue—the “plenty or in want”—to consider what it means to be content, in *all* situations.

How can one be happy, be satisfied, when a wintry blast blows in with a positive diagnosis from the doctor’s lab, or when someone you loved with your whole heart dies? How can you keep warm when financial hardships chill you to the bone?

I believe our “hot and cold” apostle has the answer. “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Php 4:13). He reminds us that “all things work together for good” for us children of God. He tells us that God is on our side, and therefore, nobody of any significance can be against us! Finally, he assures us that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God—not even death! (Rm 8)

“Contentment is having the inner peace and assurance that God will always be with you ... no matter what,” says Ken Schnell in his sermon on page 8 of this issue. Practicing His presence, sharing His gifts with those around us, can help us regain the happy life we long for, despite any wintry blast that blows our way.

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Exploring partnership with God

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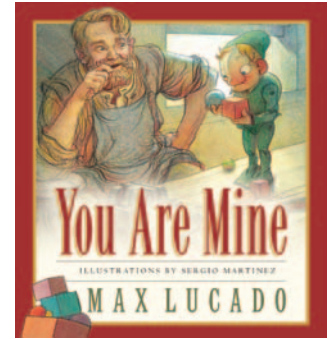
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## You are Mine

In the language of author, Max Lucado, “Good Wemmicks have a lot. Not-so-good Wemmicks have little.” With these words, the theme of this engaging children’s book—contentment—is dramatized. *You Are Mine* takes us on a journey to Wemmicksville to visit Punchinello and his wooden friends. Readers may recall the first book about Punchinello, *You Are Special*.

When Tuck brags about his beautiful new box, Punchinello finds himself being drawn into a competition to have the best and most boxes and balls. Soon the whole town is involved and the situation is looking quite ridiculous. Punchinello sacrifices just about everything he owns, including his home, to have the most boxes and balls.

The use of story has a way of drawing us in and seeing ourselves in the struggle. Beautifully illustrated by Sergio Martinez, this work is an excellent way to talk to children about truly being content in Christ.



by Max Lucado  
Crossway Books  
Wheaton, Illinois  
2001 US \$10.99

*“Punchinello felt a big hand on his shoulder. ‘Do you know how much your boxes and balls cost you?’  
‘My books and bed. My money and my house.’  
‘My little friend, they cost you much more than that.’”*

## stewardship window

news from the  
director’s desk ...



### Nine New Division Stewardship Directors!

Nine of our thirteen division stewardship directors are new this quinquennium and will be attending the World Stewardship Advisory at the General Conference, March 13-17, 2006. We are looking forward to getting acquainted with these new friends and leaders, as well as meeting with our four returning directors.

The newly appointed nine are Salomon Assienin, WAD; Micah Choga, SID; M. D. Joseph, SUD; Miguel Luna, NSD; Donald McFarlane, TED; Joseph Talipuan, SPD; Noldy Sakul, SSD and Mario Brito, EUD. The final four division directors are Nikolai Chekelek, EAD; Kigundu Ndwiga, ECD; Mario Nino, IAD and G. Edward Reid, NAD.

By the time this issue is distributed, the Advisory will be over. However, we are happy to announce that highlights and devotionals from that meeting will appear in the July-August issue of *Dynamic Steward*.

### Upcoming Issues

We are always looking for sermon articles for *Dynamic Steward!* Following are themes for upcoming issues: 1) Stewards in the World, 2) Service, 3) Family, and 4) Worship.

If you have a sermon that you would like for us to review, or if you would like to write a sermon, please note that we look for meaningful stories and illustrations and biblical referencing. The typical article is 1000 words. We extend an honorarium of US\$50 for previously written sermons and \$75 for newly written sermons. Please submit to [EvaC@gc.adventist.org](mailto:EvaC@gc.adventist.org).

## Contentment in God

*Erika F. Puni, Director  
General Conference Stewardship*



Our baby daughter, Janae-Grace, is only three months old, and she has already shown us signs of contentment. Provided her nappy is dry and she has had her sleep and feeding, she is a very happy child. She can be awake and left by herself for a few minutes while we are doing something else and be quite content. Just today, some friends took us out for lunch, and they commented, “She is a very contented baby.” They remarked about her healthy skin, smiling face and cheerful expressions. As parents, we took their comments to mean that our baby’s needs are being met; she is satisfied, comfortable and relaxed. Contentment is a quality of life expected by God’s children.

### Contentment in God’s covenant of love

Included in the Ten Commandments given to Israel at Sinai is the tenth command, which calls for God’s people to be satisfied with the blessings God Himself gives them (Ex 20; Dt 5). Interestingly, like the other nine, this commandment is in the context of a God who had invited Israel to be in a covenant relationship with Him (Ex 19:5-6). They were to be His special people in the world. In Exodus 20, contentment is an experience and consequence that is made possible because of connectedness to God.

Another significant aspect of contentment for the people of Israel was the awareness that God had already saved them (Ex 20:1-2), and as such, He expected them to be content with what they received from Him through grace (Ex 20:17). More importantly, contentment is an expression of our worship of God and a demonstration of our love toward our neighbors.

### Contentment in the sustaining God

The psalmist David was content with God when he said, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Ps 23:1). In this psalm, he pictures himself as a sheep—feeding in green pastures, drinking from a quiet, slow-flowing stream, being watched over by the “Good Shepherd.” To David, the psalm was a hymn of gratitude and testimony to a God who provides and sustains daily. It is a psalm about a God who always watches and protects His flock. It is the story of the Almighty who reaches out to His people in all generations and blesses them, because of His everlasting love. Psalm 23 is a promise of God’s divine providence, protective power and His constant presence with David then, and with us today.

### Contentment in God’s rulership

The disciples had been with Jesus—their teacher and mentor—as observers and ministry assistants, but the time had now come for them to live out the principles of His Kingdom. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt 5:3-6).

In this sermon, Jesus clearly demonstrates how God deals with people who are in relationship with Him. He blesses them before He asks for a love response from them. Moreover, the sense of well-being, inner peace and contentment experienced by the disciples, in spite of the pressing challenges of the world outside, is a reflection of a life that is under the control and lordship of Jesus Christ.

The willing submission of the disciple’s heart to the will of God (as taught by Jesus in the above passage) is what stewardship and discipleship is all about. It is



practical Christian living—for discipleship means surrendering self fully to God. What matters is not just giving Him our resources, time and skills; it is releasing all we have in Him *to Him*, including our hearts. Contentment is trusting God, no matter what the cost. It is living out the principles of stewardship where Jesus is Lord over all.

### Contentment and the will of God

A key element of the Lord's Prayer that Christ taught the disciples is the double emphasis on God's "kingdom" and "will" (Mt 6:10). Both concepts speak to the one reality: that God must rule supremely. For Jesus, this desire to live the life of the Father was paramount in all He did during His earthly ministry. At Gethsemane, when He struggled alone while His associates were asleep, His commitment to this divine purpose was demonstrated as He prayed, "My Father ... your will be done" (Mt 26:42). And, even on the cross of Calvary where He suffered death as the Savior of the world, He continued to trust God with these words, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46).

Contentment for Jesus is living the will of His Father, always. But what about us, His stewards and people today? Are we willing to live out His will in our life and service for Him?

*As parents, we took their comments to mean that our baby's needs are being met; she is satisfied, comfortable and relaxed. Contentment is a quality of life expected by God's children.*

### Contentment . . .

A man's life does not consist of the abundance of possessions.—*Jesus Christ*

There are two ways to get enough; one is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less.—*G. K. Chesterton*

Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink. . . . Seek first His kingdom and these things will be given to you as well.—*Jesus Christ*

Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has plenty; not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some.—*Charles Dickens*

We act as though comfort and luxury were the chief requirements of life, when all that we need to make us really happy is something to be enthusiastic about.—*Charles Kingsley*

You will find yourself refreshed by the presence of cheerful people. Why not make earnest effort to confer that pleasure on others? Half the battle is gained if you never allow yourself to say anything gloomy.—*Lydia M. Child*

Happiness is to be found along the way, not at the end of the road, for then the journey is over and it is too late. Today, this hour, this minute is the day, the hour, the minute for each of us to sense the fact that life is good, with all of its trials and troubles, and perhaps more interesting because of them.—*Robert R. Updegraff*

### quotes

## Finding Contentment

*Larry Burkett  
Crown Financial Ministries*



*The late Larry Burkett was the former CEO of Crown Financial Ministries, headquartered in Gainesville, Georgia.*

### Balance

One of the great mysteries of Christianity is contentment. At least one must presume it is a mystery, because so few people have found it and actually have it. Yet contentment is not something that is found, it is an attitude.

There are many people who seemingly have little or no regard for material possessions. They accept poverty as a normal living condition, and their major concern is where they will sleep that night or eat that day. In contrast are the affluent who have the best our society has to offer at their disposal. Their houses, summer cottages, winter chalets and automobiles are the envy of the community. Does either scenario bring contentment? No!

If money cannot buy contentment and poverty does not provide it, what is contentment and how is it attained? Contentment, contrary to popular opinion, is not being satisfied where you are. Rather, it is knowing God's plan for your life, having a conviction to live it and believing that God's peace is greater than the world's problems.

However, Christians often get so involved in the day-to-day activities of earning a living and raising a family that they forget their real purpose in life: to serve God. They discover that their lives are out of balance and do not know how to bring them back into balance. So, they buy more things or get rid of things in order to bring back the balance. But nothing seems to work.

### Making do with more

Christians get trapped into a discontented life by adopting worldly goals—more, bigger and best. The Bible identifies these as indulgence, greed and pride. For a while, after accepting Christ as Savior, there is a peace and a real willingness and desire to commit everything to God. However, there is a tendency to fall back into the same old routine of desiring and getting more, rationalizing that somehow it is “serving the Lord.” The evidence to the contrary is a lack of peace, a lack of spiritual growth and a growing doubt about God's ability to provide.

In today's society, it is not normal to step down. Once a certain level of income, spending and lifestyle is attained, most will go into debt in order to maintain that level. Stepping down to an affordable level is considered failure. Yet, contentment cannot be achieved without personal discipline and staying within the lifestyle parameters God has established, based on His provision (Lk 12:15; 16:13-14).

In poverty, the issue is usually black and white—you either have it or you don't. In affluence, the deception is much more subtle, because anxieties and worries are not usually related to the lack of things but rather the loss of things. In essence, most affluent Christians fear they might lose the material things they have acquired. But unless they are so detached from the goods that they must be willing to lose them, they will not find real contentment. That does not necessarily mean that they have to surrender all their material possessions. It means being willing to.

### God's plan for contentment

Although many Scriptures teach about the dangers of material riches, God's Word does not teach that poverty is God's alternative. God wants us to understand that money is a tool to use in accomplishing His plan through us. If we are to find true contentment, we must establish some basic guidelines.

SCRIPTURE:  
Philippians 4:11-13

*Contentment, contrary to popular opinion, is not being satisfied where you are. Rather, it is knowing God's plan for your life, having a conviction to live it and believing that God's peace is greater than the world's problems.*

1. *Establish a reasonable standard of living.* It is important to develop a lifestyle based on conviction, not circumstances. God will assign Christians at every economic level. On whatever level He has placed you, live within the economic parameters established and supplied by Him. Just having abundance is not a sign of God's blessings. Satan can easily duplicate any worldly riches. God's abundance is without sorrow and is for bringing others to Christ.

2. *Establish a habit of giving.* Along with the tithe, God desires that every Christian provide for the needs of others through the giving of offerings, gifts and personal involvement.

3. *Establish priorities.* Many Christians are not content—not because they are not doing well, but because others are doing better. Too often Christians look at what they do not have and become dissatisfied, rather than thanking God for what they do have and being content with what He has supplied.

4. *Develop a thankful attitude.* It is remarkable that we could ever think that God has failed us materially. That attitude is possible only when we allow Satan to convince us to compare ourselves to others. The primary defense against this attitude is praise to God.... Thankfulness is a state of mind, not an accumulation of assets. Until Christians can truly thank God for what they have and be willing to accept God's provision, contentment will never be possible.

5. *Reject a fearful spirit.* One of the most effective tools used by Satan against Christians is the question, "What if?" Dedicated Christians are trapped into hoarding because they fear the "What if?" of retirement, disability, unemployment, economic collapse and so on. Although God wants us to be concerned about these things—when fears dictate to the point that giving to God is hindered, foolish risks are assumed, and worry seems to control every decision—contentment is impossible.

6. *Seek God's will.* "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ" (Php 3:8).

7. *Stand up to fear.* "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Php 4:13).

8. *Trust God's promise.* "The peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Php 4:7).

## Conclusion

Contentment is so far removed from many Christians that it seems they will never be able to find it or be at peace. However, contentment is not something that must be searched for and found. It is an attitude of the heart. Once the attitude has been modified and all has been transferred to God, contentment will be evident.

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## When Enough is Enough

**Kenneth Schnell**  
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Resource Specialist  
Community of Christ Headquarters  
Independence, Missouri



*Ken Schnell is a fellow member of the Ecumenical Stewardship Center and friend of the GC Stewardship Department staff.*

### Life's journey

**L**ife is a journey—a series of unique experiences for every person who comes into the world. Even though each of our paths is like no other, we frequently intersect with other paths as our lives touch in meaningful ways.

Let's say we decide to take a trip by car. Spend a moment to select your destination! You may have chosen from many destinations— short or long, by air or train, but you now have the one in your mind that will be our trip together. We pack our vehicle and set the course, and, after a prayer to God for guidance, we begin the trip.

If we drive all night and stop only to refuel and grab food, we can get there sooner, but we would miss so much along the way. So we choose to make the most of every day, whether we are in the hot plains or the majestic mountains or along the ocean's coast. We will visit with people (especially the children and the aged), watch for animals, admire the beauty of the flowers and be in awe of the sunsets. In the end, it would be a wonderful trip, primarily because we would not always be on the highway, and all we packed was the "stuff" we really needed.

What about your life's journey? Is your destination clear? What path has God been calling you to take? What are those little and big decisions that aligned your course with God's divine purpose for you? Maybe some are still pending. Take a moment to ponder that.

### Rules for the road

On your journey, you might adopt some "rules or values for living" that will help with those day-to-day decisions, just as you have determined to honor the traffic signs along the road. Following these signs helps to reduce anxiety and increase the consistency of your discipleship. What would you put on your list of rules? It might include, I will:

- Not wish to be somewhere else today, but anticipate that I could be somewhere else tomorrow.
- Begin right now to share something, save something and spend the balance wisely.
- Have a sufficient emergency fund to reduce stress, avoid debt and be able to share as opportunities arise.
- Use only enough of God's resources to fulfill my purpose so I can share the rest.
- Freeze my expenses at "enough," but not my income, if I have the potential to generate more resources to share.
- Be reminded that my excesses were created to help meet another's need.
- Watch for the signs and evidence of Jesus next to and in front of me.
- Sense when "good enough" really is good enough. More expensive, more bells and whistles, is just not necessary.
- Live a life of contentment that will also include a bit of spontaneity.

How much really is enough? The world's culture will always be pulling you to higher levels of spending, but only you can know what resources you need to fulfill your unique, God-given calling. Of course, you also know that others around you are

**SCRIPTURE:**  
2 Corinthians 9:8



trying to deal with similar things. Here we can learn from the Israelites, as they were gathering manna according to their need— some more, some less, but all had enough (Ex 16:18).

Remember our role as stewards. As Jesus’ disciples, we will serve best if we are flexible and pliable. God can use us most effectively if we are open and willing to respond to the many options He might choose for us. It may be the time for us to stay and grow where we have been planted, or God may need to transplant us and have us move on.

But sometimes on our journey, it is just best to stop. We marvel at the beauty of the landscape, take a deep breath of fresh air or lay outside at night and just look at the stars—and wait. We anticipate an advent experience and contemplate what might come next.

## Always enough

God wants us to have the same attitude about our life’s journey as Paul did when he said, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Php 4:11-13).

Once we realize we cannot have it all, nor do we need it all, it is such a freeing blessing to be able to say, “No!” Being content is not about having more things. For “whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless” (Ec 5:10). Now every “yes” will fit. You have enough and you are in control of your stewardship. God always knows your measure.

But when is enough, *not* enough? When we stop before our journey is complete, before we reach our potential. It is when we are satisfied—closed to growth—willing to stay in the comfort, ease and security of the oasis, regardless of our stage of life.

## The fruit of good choices

So, as Christ’s disciple, created with a unique purpose, gifted and blessed with potential and abundant resources, what might you do? You can be and become you by focusing on the life and ministry of Jesus, rather than “keeping up with the Joneses.” You can define your needs, based on your life’s purpose, not by the pressure of culture that assumes your needs and wants will automatically increase with your income. Know that you have the power to say, “No.” And minimize stuff, so you will have more time and funds to share.

Take stock of your “tool box”—your time, energy, money, giftedness, relationships, possessions and connection to God. Are each of these aligned with the purpose and goals of your life?

Contentment is the fruit of good choices—the big ones, and the countless daily ones that add up to the opportunities and experiences of a life’s journey. As you struggle with these daily decisions, keep this prayer in mind: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”—Reinhold Niebuhr.

Perhaps the real moment of contentment comes when we hear the words: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant. I called you to be and to become. You achieved

*Contentment is having the inner peace and assurance that God will always be with you on your path no matter what.*

your potential. When your path intersected with those in need, you responded with care and love as you knew Jesus would have done.”

Journey now in peace and determination. Make today a very meaningful event. And “know that God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work” (2Cor 9:8).



## Yes, But ...

**Kigundu Ndwiga**  
Stewardship Director  
East Central Africa Division



### Introduction

It had been a long, bloody day for the peace-loving diplomat, Abram. A day that had dawned like any other, but news from an escaped prisoner of war changed everything.

The escapee had come with the alarming news of the defeat and plunder of Sodom and Gomorrah and the abduction of "...Abram's nephew Lot, and his possessions..." (Gn 14:12). Abram, with his 318 servants, pursued the mighty enemy and triumphed, rescuing the prisoners and their possessions.

As they returned from battle, Melchizedek, the King of Salem, met Abram and his band. Melchizedek brought out refreshments for the men and blessed Abram. With a heart overflowing in gratitude for God's miraculous salvation on the battlefield, Abram worshipped the Lord by returning a tenth of everything.

However, like Elijah after the victory on Mount Carmel, when Abram's adrenaline dropped, apprehension filled his mind as he reflected on the battle and his future, and he began asking himself "what if" questions.

### The vision

God, who understands our human weakness and our roller-coaster emotions, decided to reveal Himself to Abram in a vision. And when God speaks to us, He always addresses the pertinent concerns that seize our souls. In response to Abram's despondent plea, God uttered three wonderfully encouraging promises. In that vision, God said to Abram—

**1** *Do not be afraid.* Abram was fearful concerning the future. That creative Word that made the world from nothing has power to melt all fear from the heart. God's word does not return to Him empty, but does what He sent it to do (Is 55:10-11, NAS).

**2** *I am your shield.* "Abram," God seems to say, "Do not be afraid, because I am your Protector. All the spears and arrows of the enemy will not touch you. Anything he hurls at you will not harm you." He echoes the words of the Psalmist: "For he rescues you from every trap and protects you from the fatal plague. He will shield you with his wings! They will shelter you. His faithful promises are your armor. Now you do not need to be afraid of the dark any more, nor fear the dangers of the day; nor dread the plagues of darkness, nor disasters in the morning. Though a thousand fall at my side, though ten thousand are dying around me, the evil will not touch me" (91:3-7, TLB).

**3** *Your very great reward.* What an overwhelming promise to Abram! "Abram, I am all you need. I am the greatest treasure in the universe. *Possessing Me is the secret of contentment in life!* When you have Me—wealth, position or fame—whatever is highly esteemed among men, pale in comparison. I am sufficient for you."

### Yes, but...

Abram responds, "But ..." What an anticlimax to God's awesome revelation! Rather than rejoicing and declaring, "Yes, Lord, you are all I need, in this life and in the life to come," he responds by reminding God he is childless. In other words, "God, you have been so good to me, but if you want me to really be content, you need to give me a child!"

SCRIPTURE:  
Genesis 15:1-2

God does not rebuke Abram for what sounds like ingratitude! He seems to understand that Abram's brush with death in the battlefield has forced the issue of his own mortality to his consciousness. Instead, He challenges Abram to put His trust in Him, for He will give him the deepest desire of his heart, a child (Ps 37:4). With God's assurance, Abram's despondency lifts. God is so pleased with his childlike faith that it is counted to him for righteousness. Once again, the loving, understanding Father relieves his anxieties.

## Abram's obsession

Waiting is a test that many people fail, and Abram is no exception. With the passage of time, Abram's desire for a son eclipses his trust in God's promise. His desire becomes an obsession or idol. According to author, Ken Sande, "An idol is anything apart from God that we depend on to be happy, fulfilled or secure. . . . It is not what we want that is the problem, but that we want it too much." (*The Peacemaker*, Baker Books, p. 104).

Where there is an idol, "We keep fighting to achieve our desire, dwelling on our disappointment and allowing our desire and disappointment to control our lives. . . . [Such an attitude] utterly destroys important relationships and draws us away from God" (Ibid, p. 103).

In his obsession, Abram does not notice the sorrow in Sarah's heart as she gives him her maidservant, Hagar. What's more, he does not even consult God! Abram's obsession causes him to use Hagar as an object and separates him from God.

All hell breaks loose in Abram's household with Hagar's pregnancy. Even Ishmael's birth falls short of Abram's anticipated joy, as he realizes how low he has sunk in pursuit of his obsession. His idol does not bring fulfillment. Mercifully, God forgives him upon repentance, even promising blessings upon Ishmael.

## Trust and obey

In His time, God gives Abraham the promised son who grows to be an obedient, dutiful son. How Abraham's loves Isaac! Nevertheless, to bring Abraham to a point of unquestioning trust, God asks him to do the unthinkable—to sacrifice his only son.

Without hesitation, Abraham obeys God. As he raises his trembling hand on Mount Moriah, he reveals his faith and trust in God. Abraham believes God can even raise Isaac from the dead! But God provides the sacrifice and the test is complete. Again, God calls to Abraham: "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you . . ." (Gn 22:15-17a).

## Conclusion

Trusting and obeying our eternal Father with all our hearts is the real secret of contentment. Learning to wait upon Him and putting Him first gives us the peace that passes understanding. Possessions and status, which are temporal, cannot bring contentment to our hearts. May we pursue and embrace that which is eternal.

*...When God speaks to us, He always addresses the pertinent concerns that seize our souls.*



## Blessed to be a Blessing

David VandenBurgh, Senior Pastor  
Kettering SDA Church  
Kettering, Ohio



This sermon is an abridged version of the original, preached on September 3, 2005, at the Kettering Church.

### The story of two sponges

In one hand, I have a dried-up sponge. It is unattractive and has nothing to give. In the other, I have another kind of sponge. In fact, I had to put it on a plate because it is oozing blessings everywhere. Two kinds of sponges. One dry. One full. The dry one in need, and the full one so full that it is giving up its blessing, even without being asked. There are two kinds of Christians in the world. I am speaking in extremes purposely.

There are dry Christians. Sometimes when you meet these people, you know they are in great need because they *feel* needy. There are dry churches too. When you attend them, there is not much joy there. On the other hand, there are Christians who are full and rich. You cannot be around them without being blessed, for their joy in Christ is infectious. There are churches like this as well. When you walk in the door you say, “Wow, it feels good to be here!” These are two extremes, and we are all somewhere in between.

### God’s plan—a man

In Genesis, God’s creation is like the sponge that is full of water; it just oozes blessings everywhere. And God says, “This is very good.” But it is not long before something goes wrong. As you read to Genesis 11, you see that God’s creation is in deep trouble, and His effort to fix it does not seem to help. For example, He wipes away evil and begins again, but it is not long before that goes bad too. By the end of Genesis 11, you say, “How is God going to fix His problem?”

Then in Genesis 12, you discover that He has a plan to restore His broken world, and this plan involves a relationship with a man named Abram. “The Lord says to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people, and go to a land I will show you.’” And He adds, “The first thing I want you to do is to walk with me.” This sounds simple, but think about what is involved here.

When God says, “I want you to leave everything that is familiar, He is asking a lot of Abram. Abram might have said, “You know I am willing to go with you if you just tell me where we are going.” But God says, “No. Just walk with me!” This requires a tremendous amount of faith for Abram. Then God says: “I will make you into a great nation. I will make your name great. I will bless those who bless you...” (Gn 12:2-3). In Hebrew, the word “bless” means, “to bestow favor upon.” God is saying, “I will bestow my favor upon you.” There is no indication Abram has done anything to deserve God’s favor. God says, “Leave home. Walk with me and I will bless you. It may be scary, but I will be with you.”

### The last, important part

Then comes the last part of the contract. God says, “All people on earth will be blessed *through* you. You will not only be blessed, but you will be a blessing. In fact, the whole world will experience blessings as a result of the blessing I give to you.” And so, Abram was blessed. He acquired many flocks and herds. (Gn 12:16). When he asked his neighbors for land to bury his wife, they replied, “You are a mighty Prince among us” (Gn 23:6). Clearly, God kept His promise.

What does this have to do with us? Something very significant! In Scripture, Abraham is the father of—not only Jews—but *all* of God’s people. Paul argues this when he says, “Those who have faith like Abraham, are Abraham’s descendants

SCRIPTURE:  
Genesis 12:2-3

*He wants us to expect great things from Him and to have lives that are full, rich and overflowing.*

(Rm 4). Therefore, Abraham is our spiritual father. The covenant promise passes down from Abraham through Jesus, and therefore, to those who trust Jesus. Abraham's promise is our promise: "I will bless you, and you will be a blessing." We may think of ourselves as God's favored people. We can expect God to bless us, as He blessed Abraham. God wants us to receive His blessing so that we may be channels of blessings to others. Why this is so important?

## Woefully inadequate

Some years ago, J. B. Philips wrote a book called, *Your God is Too Small*. In that book, he argues that most Christians have a concept of God that is woefully inadequate. Most of us think of God in the way we conceive of ourselves. Bigger and better, but not a whole lot bigger and better. As a result, we have little faith, small expectations and large doubt. We do not expect much of God, so we do not ask much of Him. We do not ask much of Him, so we do not receive much. As a result, our lives are not so different from the lives of those who do not believe in God at all. During the week, we eat the same food. Watch the same programs. Work at the same jobs. This is not God's plan.

Unfortunately, we are less like the sponge dripping God's blessings and more like the dried-up sponge. God wants us to see Him as a God of abundance. As a God of grace and blessing. As a God of glory and power. He wants us to *expect* great things from Him and to have lives that are full, rich and overflowing. Isn't that His promise? "The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall want for nothing" (Ps 23:1). He asks of us exactly what He asked of Abraham: 1) Journey with me. 2) If you do, I will bless you abundantly. 3) And from your blessings, others will be blessed.

## The importance of process

If our material blessings cause us to become greedy, then God stops giving material blessings. The reason God could make Abraham fabulously wealthy was because Abraham owned nothing. He never did! Not even his own son. When God said, "Give him back to me" Abraham did. Abraham had everything but he presented nothing. He was open-handed with it all. God's intention to bless us abundantly can go astray if we fail to share the blessings He bestows. If we "get" to keep, instead of getting to give, we become callous to the needs of the poor and oppressed and our ears are deaf to their cries. We forget that God has blessed us so that we can bless them.

The Church is not a building. It is people. And God blesses His Church so that it can be a blessing. Just like Abraham, we journey with God. We have not arrived but are in process. God calls us to leave everything that is comfortable and safe. To put our hand in His and go wherever He leads. Into places unknown. He says, "If you do this, I will bless you. I will pile blessing upon blessing, and you will be like a sponge dripping blessings wherever you go. I will do this because my intention is to bless all people around you, through you.

## The two seas

Years ago, my wife and I went on a tour of the Middle East. When we stopped at the Dead Sea, we decided to take a swim. We changed into our swimsuits and tiptoed barefoot across the burning rocks. The water is beautiful to look at—shiny, blue under the desert sky. You just want to plunge in, splash and drink. But as you walk

in, your skin begins to sting because of the high salt content. Why it is called "The Dead Sea?" Because it is dead. There is nothing alive in it. No fish. No seaweed. Nothing.

We also visited the Sea of Galilee. It was beautiful! Clean, sweet, refreshing water. It was full of fish and still supports the thriving fishing industry there. This sweet, fresh water is the same water that goes into the Dead Sea, but here is the difference. The Sea of Galilee takes water in one end and gives it out the other. The Dead Sea takes it in, but it does not give anything out.

God wants His church to be like the Sea of Galilee—receiving and giving. He will pour blessings upon His people. "I will open up the windows of heaven," God says, "and pour out such a blessing that you will not be able to contain it" (Mi 3:10). Today, we may claim God's abundant blessing, so that we can bless others. That is the way He designed it be. It is the Abraham story. And it is ours.



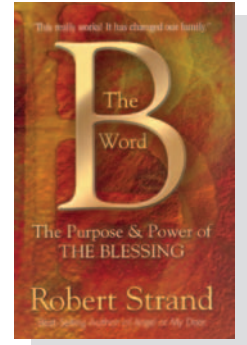
## *The B Word: The Purpose and Power of the Blessing*

Reviewed by Will Eva, Associate Pastor  
Spencerville SDA Church

The book, *The B Word: the Purpose and Power of the Blessing* by Robert Strand, is short and interesting—even absorbing—with many down-to-earth stories that illustrate its central theme. The work is highly practical and has the potential for making a positive difference in the way we relate to our children or anyone who is part of our lives.

Strand describes the heart of the biblical act of giving and receiving blessings in our daily interaction with one another. He opens up the largely forgotten power, relevance and practicality of actually blessing one another or encountering the blessing of God. One thing is certain, this book will radically change the rather dull conceptions we tend to hold by default when it comes to the whole idea of blessing this and blessing that or them....

The author shares how significant the practice of giving and receiving blessings was to the lives of biblical heroes. He exposes the powerful influences set in motion by this important act and contrasts the dramatic difference with what happens when no blessing is given. Says one single mother who practices the principles of the book: “The attitude of my eight-year-old son has taken a dramatic change for the better. I cannot believe it! I even like him now. I’ve always loved him, but “the blessing” has made the difference.”



by Robert Strand  
Evergreen Press  
Theodore, Alabama  
2005 US \$10.99

## *God is Closer Than You Think*

Reviewed by Claire Eva, Assistant Director  
General Conference Stewardship Department



by John Ortberg  
Zondervan Publishing  
Grand Rapids, Michigan  
2005 US \$18.99

Says author John Ortberg, “The central promise of the Bible is not, ‘I will forgive you’ but ‘I will be with you.’” *God is Closer Than You Think* is a thoughtful, engaging and blessing-filled work on finding out this very fact—He is indeed close.

Ortberg’s initial illustrations that set the tone for the book are Michelangelo’s mesmerizing painting of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and the illusive cartoon character in the book series, *Where’s Waldo?* In the painting, “God’s arm is stretched out, his index finger extended straight forward; every muscle is taut” (p. 12), as He tries to move as close to the man as possible.

In the series, Waldo is a funny looking little man with a red and white striped tee shirt and black eyeglasses. You are to search for him on each page spread, for he progressively becomes more difficult to find. Sometimes God is there, but we have a harder time finding him. Especially helpful is the chapter on the spiritual pathways. We tend to be more “at home” with the path that predominantly fits our lifestyle, whether it is the contemplative, activist, relational, serving, or another of the seven pathways. There is so much more to share. The book is packed with excellent illustrations. A blessing throughout.

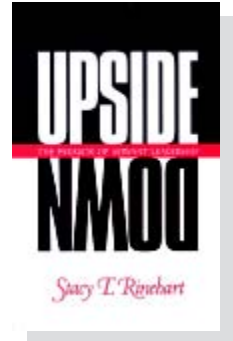
## Upside Down

Reviewed by *Jean-Luc Lézeau*, Associate Director  
General Conference Stewardship Department

This is a book for people who want to influence others spiritually. After years of research and many conversations with church leaders, Stacy Rinehart recognized a sad fact: there is very little difference in the way religious organizations function as compared to those found in the marketplace.

The dark side of religious leadership is that human ambition is coated with the veneer of spirituality. Similarly, in Jesus' time—the only institution He confronted was the church. Stacy quotes Alister McGrath's *Power of Religion* in which a parallel is drawn between the distorted idea of priesthood in the medieval church and ministry in our time. Both are highly authoritarian. Both rest upon an ideology of power, which places the right to speak for God in the hands of a small and unaccountable elite. Leaders perceive any questioning of the vision or integrity of the ministry as a direct threat. The church should not be a chain of command as it often is, but a network of love.

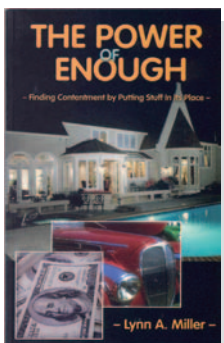
Religious organizations readily embrace business models to embody the acronym of success (ABC): Attendance, Buildings and Cash flow. On the other hand, the servant-leader believes that God alone produces the fruit, which is often hidden and always defies measurement. If leaders in the corporate world are to ask themselves if they have followers, then spiritual leaders should ask themselves if Christ has more followers, thanks to their ministry. *UpsideDown* is a must for church leaders who want to follow Jesus' example.



by Stacy T. Rinehart  
NavPress  
Colorado Springs, Colorado  
1998 US \$12.00

## The Power of Enough

Reviewed by *Jean-Luc Lézeau*, Associate Director  
General Conference Stewardship Department



by Lynn A. Miller  
Evangel Press  
Nappanee, Indiana  
2003 US \$10.00

Lynn Miller is best known for *Firstfruits Living*, his theology of stewardship that is worthwhile reading. (Also available in video format). However, after years of presenting his *Firstfruits Living* seminar, Lynn realized that one thing was missing in his book: if we are to return our “firstfruits” to God, He also has a plan for each one of us to give ourselves away!

What kind of car is enough in meeting our transportation needs? What kind of house is enough? In a unique and humorous way, Lynn tries to help us answer these kinds of questions. With practical examples, the second part of his book puts theories into numbers to help the reader calculate how much is enough for the Christian lifestyle.

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