

Reflections

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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The Bible teaches us that we should be open to spiritual lessons no matter what we are doing. We read, "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Deuteronomy 6:6-8.

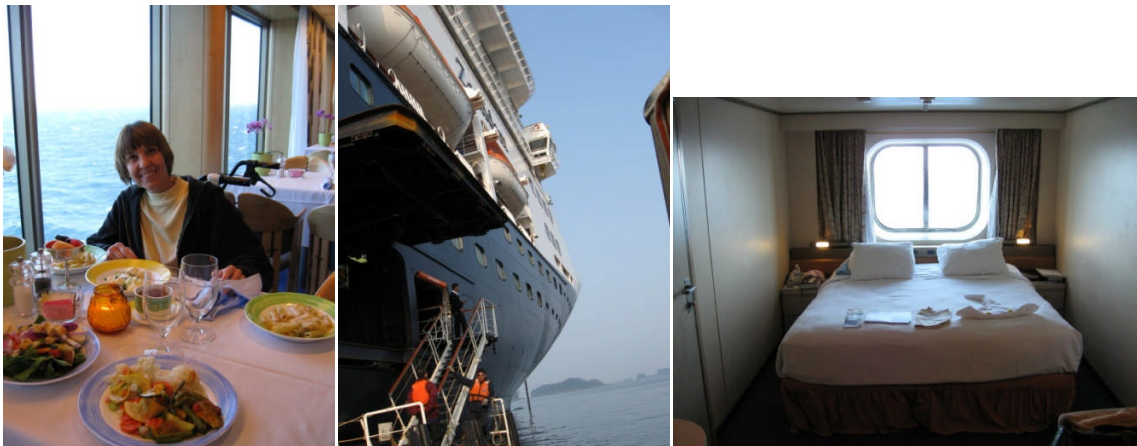
What this Scripture tells me is that we should have "godly" thoughts no matter what we are doing. Wherever we find ourselves, our hearts should be in tune with Jesus and allow His Spirit to speak to us and teach us spiritual lessons. I am encouraged to have His thoughts present in my mind even when I'm on vacation.

In ancient times, this Scripture was interpreted in a literal way, and the Jews of Jesus' day actually went around with verses on little pieces of parchment contained in small boxes suspended from their heads so that they rode on their foreheads. I'm quite sure that's not what God was wanting. What the Lord desires is that we think of Him, that we have Him in our thoughts, in whatever we are doing, whether we are sitting in our houses or walking by the way.

With that in mind, I would like to share some "reflections" gleaned from our recent trip to Alaska. As you may be aware, this trip was a most generous, "once in a lifetime" gift from the San Marcos SDA Church. I can tell you that it was with great surprise that earlier in this year, at a service to celebrate the burning of the mortgage for the San Marcos Church, that I heard my name called and was invited to come to the front of the auditorium. I had no idea what was awaiting me, but when I came to the pulpit, I was told that the church wanted to give my wife and myself an all-expenses paid trip to Alaska as an expression of appreciation for the help I had given during the building of the facility. I was absolutely without words. Finally I managed to say something in gratitude, but it was most feeble. Though they somehow felt that this trip was "deserved," those feelings were not shared by me.

It was a gift! A gift worth several thousand dollars. Not only was the round-trip air flight from San Diego to Seattle included, but enough money so that we could purchase various excursions that were available at our ports of landing on the cruise, including Juneau, Sitka, Ketchikan and Victoria, British Columbia.

This reminded me of another gift; a gift which in a similar way involves a journey. Undeserving though I am, God has by His grace made it possible for me to take a trip to heaven and begin a journey that will last forever. We are told about this great Gift in the Book He has given to us. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." John 3:16. Because we are told that God "gave," means that this is a gift. It is something undeserved. In fact, a definition of the word "grace" that is often heard is "undeserved" or "unmerited" favor. We did nothing to earn this Gift.



"But God, Who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus, for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Ephesians 2:4-9.

A word that appears three times in that passage is the word "grace," which comes from the New Testament word *charis*, which means "gift." Our word "charity" comes from that word. Much of the Bible, Old and New Testament, is a presentation and explanation of this great Gift of salvation through Christ. The greatest fallacy ever invented by the devil is for someone to believe that they have to be good to come to Jesus! If that were true, no one would ever be saved. The

pinnacle of spiritual awareness for the prodigal son occurred when he decided to return to his father "just as he was" and throw himself on his dad's mercy. God intends that we understand that His grace covers our sins. The Bible clearly states that, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." I John 1:9.

Here is one place where it is unsafe to quibble. The Word of God declares it to be so. Don't argue with God! Do not let the devil rob you of peace of mind and assurance of forgiveness because you don't think you deserve it. Remember the two worshipers in the temple; it wasn't the one who thought he was good who received God's favor; it was the one who knew he didn't deserve anything who went home justified. Tell the devil that you know you are a sinner, but Christ came to save sinners! Rest in the knowledge that God loves you, even you! Cling to the promises of God. Experience the freedom from guilt as a "prisoner of hope." Don't make your feelings the criterion. It isn't important that you "feel" forgiven. We are not saved by our *feelings*, but by our *faith*. Nowhere in the Scriptures does it say that our feelings are the basis of salvation.

Paul finds himself at a loss to describe the fantastic favor extended to us through Christ and exclaims, "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" II Corinthians 9:15. The King James Version says, "Thanks be to God for His *unspeakable* gift!" This doesn't mean that we shouldn't talk about it (quite the reverse!); it just means that mortal words could never adequately express the magnitude of this great benefit.

This is very simple; yet a great mystery! For while we can do nothing to earn salvation, we must cooperate with God in His great work of saving us. This great Gift was given to the "world," yet not all the world will be in heaven. Every sin ever committed was placed on Jesus while on the cross, yet not all sinners will be saved. While we are undeserving of grace; while we could never earn God's favor, there is a part that we must play in the salvation process.

I was reminded of this in that while the tickets for both the airlines and the cruise were purchased in our behalf for our trip, there were certain things we had to do to make sure things were taken care of properly. One of the kind brothers from the Church called me and gave me the name of the travel agent with whom we'd be working. I was advised to contact her soon to set up the details. Although the trip was arranged, although the generosity for the cruise was already committed, if I never contacted the travel agent, we wouldn't have gone to Alaska! I suppose that I could have slid into a posture of doubt and said, "I really don't believe that they'd

be that generous as to give us a cruise to Alaska." That wouldn't have been very intelligent. I had to take them at their word and believe that it was true.

I didn't pay for the trip, but I had to respond appropriately to the gift to make it a reality. To carry the analogy a bit further, it would be as if someone were told they had been given a cruise, but never followed through to take the steps necessary, never called the travel agent and thereby forfeited the trip. What a loss! What a greater loss respecting the Gift of eternal life, arranged for, announced, committed, but never received by so many!

Because this cruise would involve entering Canada (we docked at the city of Victoria on Vancouver Island), we had to make sure our passports were in order. We had to provide the travel agent with certain pieces of information. Three days before the cruise, I was involved in a frantic search for the airline tickets. I knew that we had selected the travel dates, and we had received many things in the mail and I thought I had put everything in a "safe" place, but where were the airline tickets! I was able to get in touch with the agent and she assured me that all was okay; they were "electronic" tickets and would be generated at the airport when we checked in, at the time we presented our proper identification.

In a similar way, while we don't earn our salvation, for "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Romans 3:20); while our deeds in no way qualify us for eternal life; we must cooperate with God in the process of redemption. What is our part in this? We must believe His Word. Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him Who He sent." John 6:29. We must open our hearts and surrender our wills to Him. Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." Revelation 3:20. Christ said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." Matthew 16:24. We must feed on His word to gain spiritual strength; we must talk to Him in prayer, for it is the breath of the soul. These things are not done to work our way to heaven, but to keep us in touch with the One Who gives life.

By contacting the travel agent; by having my identification ready at the check-in desk, I didn't pay for the trip to Alaska; that was already done. These things were merely evidences that I believed that the promise was true and demonstrated my faith in the reality of the gift.

We packed our baggage in ended up with one suitcase each and one carry-on container each. I'm surprised that we weren't charged for our baggage being overweight! They were completely full. Do you want to know something? We didn't use half the clothes we jammed into those suitcases! We over packed, and it resulted in them being much heavier and difficult to maneuver than what was necessary.

The Spirit spoke to me and said, "John, do you see the lesson here?" I said, "Yes, Lord, I know. I'm just traveling here on this earth. This isn't really my home. I need to be careful not to pack too much." And yet, how easy it is to accumulate so much "baggage" that the "traveling" becomes cumbersome! As you look around your home, ask yourself, How many things are there that you really need? Or, to put it the other way, How many things could you easily get along without?

The pilgrimage perspective of life is taught clearly by the Word. Are you a child of Abraham? Of him it was said, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to out to the place which he would afterward receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God." Hebrews 11:8-10.

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth, for those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland." Hebrews 11:13, 14. The things of this earth will soon pass away; let us use the means God has given us to bless others and share the truths for this time. My wife and I agreed that should we find ourselves in a similar situation in the future, we'd take many fewer things. Travel light! Don't get loaded down with the goods of this earth! We're only pilgrims here!

Only a few days into our cruise something happened. Maybe you heard about it on the news. Monday morning the captain's voice was heard on the ship's loudspeaker with a solemn announcement. In his Dutch accent he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please. We have a passenger who is missing. Please go to your room and look at her picture on your TV screen and report to one of the stewards if you have any information about her whereabouts."

It happens that this lady's room was on the same floor as ours, at the same end of the ship. 45-year old Amber Malkuch was reported missing sometime late Sunday

evening, her purse being left, we were told, near the back of the ship on a bench. This lady, we were led to believe had been seen with a very anxious, distraught look on her face. Monday morning the search was conducted, to no avail. Then we were told by our captain that might have to "retrace" our steps back to Juneau, where we had spent Sunday, to fulfill the search protocols. After several hours of the same announcement being repeated, the captain came on the loudspeaker again and told us that it had been determined that we would not have to return to Juneau. Later we learned that her body had been discovered by a search helicopter, washed ashore on Douglas Island, a short distance from Juneau.



The coast guard authorities came on board to investigate whether there was any foul play involved, but to date it is still being called a suicide. I thought, if it is true that she ended her own life, "How sad!" Here, in a place, at a time when you are supposed to be having the "time of your life," someone apparently came to conclusion that life was no longer worth living. What an incredibly morose and forlorn frame of mind! It seemed such a contrast, with so many people enjoying themselves on the cruise, with many "family reunions" evident, with parents, kids and grandparents sitting at dinner tables and going together on the various excursions, that this soul apparently felt there was no longer a point in facing life.

My wife is quite certain that she saw Amber the day before, walking down the hall toward us, with a most anxious look. She almost remarked to me about it. I thought, How sad it is that there are many, walking amongst us on the corridor of life, who do not know the truth about God and feel that life is not worth living. Perhaps they don't take the tragic and climactic step that this woman took, in jumping over the railing to plunge to her death, but they miss out on the true purpose, the central joy of knowing that there is a God Who cares, Who has planned for our future, Who provides for our every need and Who is coming soon

to take us to a place forever free from all the frustrations and encumbrances we experience in this life. If she could have only known Jesus! If she could only have known how much He cares for her! Is it remotely possible that had I paid a bit more attention and offered a cherry "Hello," that things might have changed? I thought, "How many are going about their lives with no real purpose? How could I possibly represent the "better way" through Jesus which might bring encouragement to them?"

While we were in Alaska, we had the opportunity to visit many places of interest. We saw fish "ladders," where salmon return to the place of their birth and jump the barriers to "climb" to the next levels.



I wondered, "Who put the marvelous intelligence into the minds of these creatures to know how to find their home?" The Lord asked Job, "Who gives intuition and instinct?" Job 38:36 New Living Translation. These fish swim amazing distances of several hundred miles to return to where they began. Scientists as yet don't know precisely how they navigate, but it appears that their keen sense of smell is directly involved. The Chinook and Sockeye salmon of Idaho travel over 900 miles and climb nearly 7,000 feet against strong currents in order to return to the place of their birth. The Bible tells us that it was God who put intelligence into the brains of the animals, whether sea, land or flying creatures, to be able to perform wondrous acts of navigation.

Unfortunately, we saw reminders of those implements which do not give God the credit for the amazing things of nature. We saw many totem poles, which tell in carved form the legends and stories that attempt to account for the things seen in nature.



In one such myth recorded on a totem pole, our tour guide explained that Raven and his two men were out to sea fishing when they were surrounded by a thick fog, out of which appeared a beautiful woman. She promised that she would take them to her village where they would be safe. Raven soon fell in love with the Fog Woman. Because their cooking pot was always full, Raven followed her to the stream, where he was surprised to see her swirl her hand in the water, after which the salmon jumped out, one by one.

Raven wanted the Fog Woman to teach him how to do this, but she responded that it was a secret, and she turned back into fog and drifted out to sea, promising that she would return salmon each year by the help of her daughter Creek Woman. This doesn't square up with the Bible portrayal of life, does it!

This is portrayed on a totem pole depicting a woman holding two fish in her hands. I thought, "How tragic, that the truth about a God who controls nature and oversees every aspect of what happens on this planet is obscured by the clouds and mists of myth and legend. Philosophically, the message of the totem poles is virtually indistinct from the religion of the Canaanites of the Old Testament, who looked to the "baals" and had their Asherah poles to proclaim wisdom and explanations of what exists on Earth. Still today, these myths and legends are given life in the totem poles and native dances and festivals. How much superior is the simple Bible truth!

Wherever you go this week, be reminded that God loves and cares for you!