

“Not One Is Missing”

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church
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Last Sabbath one of our members shared this incident as a children’s story. He related that, when he was about 4 years old, he and his older sister took a walk together to find a cow that had wandered off. Because it was near milking time, mom had requested that they go and retrieve it. Time and location got away from them, and after a while they realized they were lost and had no idea how to get back home. While in a small clearing, about 30 feet in diameter, among tall trees, the older sister suggested that they pray and ask God to help them find their way. Kneeling down, a simple prayer was offered.

When they opened their eyes and got up, they were surprised to see a well-dressed man hiking across the clearing. In his own words, Ben remembers, “I have always thought it was significant the way the man was dressed and how he walked and addressed us. He was wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and tie and a dress hat as was common in the 1930s and 40s. But the most interesting thing to me was his very shiny black shoes. Not what one would expect for someone walking through the wild brush. And he was coming from the wild side, not from the side toward the town, so he would have been walking for some distance in order to come from that direction to where we were.

“He was walking very fast, and he didn't pause to ask us any questions. He simply stated, matter of factly as he was walking by, ‘Children, if you will walk up to the top of that hill and look in that direction (pointing with his finger), you will see your house.’ I remember the entire scene very vividly. The tree we knelt by was a small Digger Pine, common in that area, about 12 feet tall. It was in the center of the clearing on a small rise, and unlike

most Digger Pines of that size, the lower branches began about four feet above the ground rather than the usual habit of spreading branches almost brushing the ground. The general area was scattered mixed manzanita and scrub oak with patchy dry grass in the open spaces. And of course, the purpose of our 'walk' was Mama's request that we go out and find the cow to bring her in for milking. (The cow was waiting patiently at her stall when we got back!)” Since that day, when he was four years old, our brother tells us, he has never had any trouble believing in angels!

I've been thinking about that story all week, and I've thought, "How true to life that story is!" Sometimes the "children's story" has a message for adults too! Like those little children, we're all "lost" and need to find our "way home." Jesus has showed us the way, and if we will humble our hearts and pray to Him, read His Book, and follow His counsel, He will see to it that we'll make it safely there.

The message the Lord has for us today is an encouragement to be thankful. Along *our* "journey home," the Lord would be pleased if we cultivated a spirit of gratitude and cheerfulness, and not a spirit of murmuring and discontent.

Go back with me to an incident that occurred at the tail end of Israel's wilderness wanderings, just before they were to enter Canaan. The Israelites were instructed to engage in battle against the Midianites. We're going to read from a very important, but almost forgotten book of the Bible, the book of Numbers. Today I'm going to invite you today to **author your own book of Numbers**. "And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 'Take vengeance for the children of Israel on the Midianites.'" Numbers 31:1, 2. Who were the Midianites? They were descendants of Abraham, through Keturah, who had become his wife after Sarah's death. Genesis 25:1, 2. The name "Midian" comes from a Hebrew root meaning "contention, discord or strife." (See Proverbs 6:14; 10:12; 15:18; 28:25; 29:22.) Why was the Lord

upset with Midian, that He ordered Israel to go into battle against them?

Israel and Midian had a checkered past. There had been interaction between the two groups, some of it positive and some of it not. It was a group of Midianite merchants, along with Ishmaelites, who purchased Joseph and brought him into Egyptian bondage. It was to the land of Midian that Moses fled when he escaped from Egypt, and it was the daughter of Jethro, a "priest of Midian" that Moses married.

But overall, the Midianites shared little in common with the purposes and plans of Israel. In fact, they had been a thorn in Israel's side, most notably in the recent Balaam incident. Balak, the son of Zippor, king of Moab (the Moabites were descendants of Lot through his one of his daughters) was concerned that the Israelites were going to invade his territory. "So Moab said to the **elders of Midian**, 'Now this company will lick up all that is around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.'" Numbers 22:4.

So they hired Balaam, a half-hearted prophet, to pronounce a curse against Israel. But that didn't work out too well, because every time Balaam opened his mouth, a blessing came out instead of a curse! As long as the Lord was protecting Israel, there was nothing that could bring them harm, and Balaam knew this. However, he suggested to the enemy an alternative plan, whereby Israel could be brought low. He advised them to induce the Israelites into the idolatry of Baal worship, through the seduction of beautiful women. This, Balaam knew, would cause the Lord's displeasure and would gain for Moab and Midian the result they desired. And that's exactly what happened.

But the Lord did not appreciate the way Midian hindered the progress of His children on their way to their homeland. And notice that Midian didn't come up with the idea in the first place; Moab did that. But they collaborated, they assisted, and the Lord did not take kindly to their efforts. Remember what Jesus said

about those who put stumbling blocks before the feet of His children? Something about millstones being placed around their necks and being thrown into the sea. (Millstones were often about the size of a car tire and weighed about a ton. This was a form of capital punishment actually practiced by Romans, Greeks and Syrians.)

For that reason, the Lord commissioned Moses to attack Midian. "So Moses spoke to the people, saying, 'Arm some of yourselves for the war, and let them go against the Midianites to take vengeance for the LORD on Midian. A thousand from each tribe of all the tribes of Israel you shall send to the war.' So there were recruited from the divisions of Israel one thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for war. Then Moses sent them to the war, one thousand from each tribe; he sent them to the war with Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, with the holy articles and the signal trumpets in his hand. And they warred against the Midianites, just as the LORD commanded Moses, and they killed all the males. They killed the kings of Midian with the rest of those who were killed, namely, Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. **Balaam** the son of Beor they also killed with the sword." Numbers 31:3-8.

After the conflict, the spoils were divided and an offering was collected. Remember that there's a reason this book is called "Numbers". That is because it's concerned with the numbering, or accounting of how many people there were in Israel after they left Egypt and as they entered Canaan. But after the battle against the Midianites, there was a special "numbering," a special census taken. Take a careful look at the report of the commanders: "Then the officers who were over the thousands of the army, the captains of thousands and captains of hundreds, came near to Moses; and they said to Moses, 'Your servants have *taken a count of the men* of war who are under our command, and **not a man of us is missing**. Therefore we have brought an offering for the LORD, what every man found of ornaments of gold; armlets and bracelets and signet rings and earrings and necklaces, to make atonement for ourselves before the LORD.'" Numbers 31:48-50.

There are many lessons that emerge from this story. It speaks about:

- The devil's attempts to harass God's people on their journey
- The devil's usage of partially committed Christians to hinder the progress of the Church
- God's unhappiness toward those who discourage His children
- But the specific point I would like us to think about today is the wonderful protection of God through our lives, and the appropriate response we should give to our loving God for His kindness.

Think of the incredible odds-defying result of that battle against Midian. When they returned they said, "Not a man of us is missing." Imagine the scene! "Judah, how did your tribe fare in the war?" "All safe and accounted for, sir." "Let's hear from the tribe of Issachar. How'd you come out?" "We're all here, sir!" And on down the list of the twelve tribes. Think about it!

- Not one arrow if the Midianites found its mark.
- Not one javelin hit its target.
- Not one sword reached its goal.
- Not one dagger struck its objective.

Unbelievable! In this instance, the protection of God was 100%! It'd be like a shutout in an NBA game! It had to be a miracle!

When they conducted their census and realized how God had protected them, they were overwhelmed by the consciousness of His providence, and could not restrain themselves from giving an additional offering, besides what had already been given, in sincere gratitude for His watchcare.

"Not one is missing." Does that phrase evoke gratitude in your heart? Are you writing your own book of "Numbers"? Are you conducting your own "census" and "accounting" along the way? For about 35 years now I've been involved in cabinet making and wood working, either as a hobby or as a business. I remember a

teacher friend of mine, Dr. Leslie Hardinge, who wanted to impress the concept of safety in my mind. Before I was to use it to do a job, he held up a router and said with his pronounced English accent, "Let's do some math." We checked the label on the tool and saw that it turned, at top speed, at 25,000 rpm. However, he pointed out that the bit that we would be using had two sides, each with a cutting edge, so that meant that every **minute** a cutter was passing by 50,000 times. That meant that every **second**, a cutting edge has swept by 833.3 times. He said to me, "Let's say that you have super-fast reactions; you're really quick, and you're able to pull your finger back from the cutting zone in 1/10 of a second. Too late! It's **already cut you 83 times!**" I never forgot that illustration!

So, in my own personal "Book of Numbers," I look at my fingers today, after all those years in the shop, and yes there have been a few close calls, but "**not one is missing!**" Praise God! I remember certain occasions when I was careless at the table saw and things happened, but I was spared from serious injury. I remember once, when working on a drill press, that my thumb was pulled into a sharp tool while it was in motion, and I lost a lot of my thumb nail, but there was no permanent damage. The nail grew back and today you'd never know what had happened.

I think back in my life, at the many times I know I've been spared from serious injury or death, but He has been there to give protection. Besides the times I'm aware of, I'm sure there are a multitude of times I don't know about. I say, "Thank you, Lord." I agree with David, "Many, O LORD my God, are Your wonderful works which You have done; and Your thoughts which are toward us cannot be recounted to You in order; if I would declare and speak of them, they are **more than can be numbered.**" Psalm 40:5.

What about you? What's in your book of Numbers? Has God protected you, like He did the soldiers of Israel in their conflict against Midian? If our eyes were only open, to see the

ministration of God's holy angels in our behalf! If we could have been there at the battle of Midian, I believe we would have seen angels deflecting the arrows, the swords and spears. The Midianite soldiers were well trained; they had probably spent more time in training than the Israelite troops. Their forces were not inferior in skill. There was nothing wrong with their eyesight, nothing defective about their weapons as they lined up their opponents. But God, in His great mercy, intervened in behalf of His children that day, so that "not one was missing."

I see apricots growing on the trees in my yard, and in a few weeks we'll be enjoying them. Thank you, Lord! How long would it take me to develop the knowledge and expertise to grow one apricot on my own? I think the figure of a "sideways eight" is the correct answer to that question. A week and a half ago I was at a pastors' meeting in a local restaurant, and felt something on my arm. I pulled it off and examined it; it was a tick! (I had been doing some yard work hours earlier and evidently had picked up an unwanted hitch-hiker.) Thank you, Lord, that I was able to "get it" before it "got me."

Did you wake up this morning? Praise God! When you opened your eyes, could you see? What a miracle! Don't take it for granted; try to imagine the absence of vision. Did your car start this week as you went to work? Thank the Lord! How many disabled vehicles (some newer than yours!) did you pass on the freeway this week? Has the company for which you work remained solvent so that your paycheck didn't bounce? Hallelujah! Did your house escape being robbed this week? Just look at the news: not everyone can say that! We take for granted so much, while there is so much for which to be thankful! How many times the phrase could be applied to our experience, our Book of Numbers, "Not one is missing."

Did you know that it is a ***Christian duty to cultivate gratitude***? I use the word "cultivate" with intent, because the garden of our soul sprouts weeds easier than the plants that bear the "fruit of the Spirit." We please the Lord when we focus on His

blessings, and allow His Spirit to turn our minds in the direction of thankfulness. Every morning we should begin the day by recounting a few of His blessings. He is the Giver of every perfect gift, as James points out.

What will be the result if we see life this way? When we focus on His presence in our lives and His blessings in our experience, the shadows of doubt and discouragement will be driven away. Our lives will be a fountain of joy, spilling over in smiles and expressions of gratitude. The choice is ours to make, each day. When we don't choose to see things that way, **we rob** our family members or our work associates of the blessing of our cheerfulness. We have no right to commit such robbery and carry a cloud of unhappiness wherever we go.

When we realize that our very being is a gift of life from Him, humility will replace pride. What are we, after all? Dust and air! That's all there really is to us. Scientists might be able to put together the physical ingredients in our bodies, but never will they be able to create life from among those elements! One living cell contains more complexity than the human mind will ever be able to completely understand.

Thank God that your body has the mechanism to clot blood when you cut yourself. Take a moment sometime and do some research into the miracle of blood-clotting, then give God praise. I read somewhere that there are something like 25 or 30 separate events that must come together in proper order so that you don't bleed to death when your skin is penetrated.

Thank God that, without your giving any thought to it, your eyes blink to wash away dust and impurity. Praise God that an electrical current stimulates your heart to beat with regularity. Thank God that He designed the body to be able to form habits by repetition and learning, so that you can speak, walk, eat and perform the myriad of functions your body is capable of doing, without having to think through every step of what are actually

very complicated processes. The entries in your book of Numbers can be unlimited!

If you focus your mind on His many blessings, cheerfulness will radiate from your life into the home and place of business. The light of gratitude will brighten the atmosphere of your home, driving away the clouds of bitterness. Take a census of your life, like the officers of Moses, and see if it isn't true that "not one is missing."

When the commanders realized how good the Lord had been to them, what was their reaction? They could not restrain themselves from giving a love offering. Their hearts overflowed with gratitude. They knew God had blessed them. This was altogether appropriate. It was the suitable response. God would be pleased if that would be our reaction to the plenteous blessings He's poured out on us.

We can start by giving an **offering of praise**. The Bible says, "Whoever offers praise glorifies Me." In the book of Hebrews we read, "Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name." Hebrews 13:15. Let our conversation be filled with the giving of thanks to God for His bountiful gifts. A Chinese proverb says, "When you drink from the stream remember spring." Robert Louis Stevenson observed, "Keep both eyes open to your mercies. The man who has forgotten to be thankful has fallen asleep in life."

We can thank Him with that which speaks louder than words; the **language of our wallet**. Besides being faithful in regular tithes and offerings for the upkeep of God's work, let your heart be softened and opened to giving a special offering for unusual blessings you recognize in your life, like the officers did after the Battle of Midian. Someone observed, "Thanksgiving, to be truly Thanksgiving, is first thanks, then giving." By acknowledging in a tangible way the "good thing that happened" as being a gift from God, it will make more visible to you the

connection between God and His blessings to you. It will help you to realize that the Almighty has His kindly eye on you and “these things” aren’t just what others might call a stroke of good luck, or mere happenstance.

We can express gratitude to Him **by our lives**—living in joyful obedience to all of His commandments. Obedience is an offering that is acceptable to God and outweighs those expressions of gratitude not confirmed by loyalty. “To obey is better than sacrifice,” is Bible truth still applicable.

We can be thankful even in adverse circumstances. Matthew Henry, who was a pastor, scholar and author, was once robbed by thieves. Following the experience, he wrote these words in his diary: “Let me be thankful first, because I was never robbed before; second, because although they took my purse they did not take my life; third, because, although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.”

Dr. Alexander Whyte, a preacher in Edinburgh, was famous for his pulpit prayers, in which he always found something for which to be thankful. One of the members of his church, as he sat in his pew, thought to himself, “He can’t possibly be thankful for anything on such a wretched morning as this.” Dr Whyte began his prayer, “We thank Thee, O God, that it is not always like this.”

Among the blessings we need to acknowledge are the ways in which God is bringing transformation into our lives. “Lord, I’m thankful that (you fill in the blank) is not a part of my life anymore.” God is in the business of protecting us and giving us temporal blessings. But what He really wants to do is to change our hearts and remove sin and selfishness from them. This is the greatest miracle of all, something only He can do, and for it we should be supremely thankful.

Are you writing your own book of Numbers? Are you taking an account of the blessings He gives to you? Are you taking a census of the providences He spreads across your pathway?

One day soon Jesus will come. The war will be over. Satan, the original "Midianite," the one who sowed "discord, contention and strife," and all those who followed him, will be defeated. A census will be taken, and like it was back in Moses' day, it will be discovered that among those who have served as His soldiers, "not one is missing." What a subject for our prayers and our efforts now! May it be said that among our families, our friends, our loved ones on that day, "not one is missing." In His priestly prayer of Thursday night Jesus said, "While I was in the world I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost." John 17:12.

I've never seen an angel, that I know of. If I had been lost with the children in our opening story, and had presence of mind to "connect the dots" as to what was happening, I should have liked to call out to the one gave the kindly instruction, "Wait a minute, sir. I'd like to ask you something. What is Jesus like? What can you tell me about Him?" I rather think that he would have smiled and said something like, "Jesus is wonderful, and He loves you very much. Everything you need to know about Him is written in the Book. Read it faithfully each day and you will become acquainted with Him. He will guide you safely home."