

# The Antidote For the Wild Gourds

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

Written By: Pastor John T. Anderson

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I'm going to share with you a story from the Old Testament and make only a few comments. The application, which at first might not seem apparent, will be made later.

"And Elisha returned to Gilgal, and there was a famine in the land. Now the sons of the prophets were sitting before him; and he said to his servant, 'Put on the large pot, and boil stew for the sons of the prophets.' So one went out into the field to gather herbs, and found a wild vine, and gathered from it a lap full of wild gourds, and came and sliced them into the pot of stew, though they did not know what they were. Then they served it to the men to eat. Now it happened, as there were eating the stew, that they cried out and said, 'O man of God, there is death in the pot!' And they could not eat it. So he said, 'Then bring some flour.' And he put it into the pot, and said, 'Serve it to the people, that they may eat.' And there was nothing harmful in the pot." II Kings 4:38-41.

Elisha was one of the most illustrious prophets of Old Testament times, following another shining star, Elijah. Elisha, whose name means "God is my salvation," served the northern kingdom of Israel from about 850 to 800 B.C. Through his ministry the Lord performed many miracles, including the one noted in our story today.

One of Elisha's main points of focus was the maintaining of the "schools of the prophets." In Israel, early childhood education was the responsibility of the parents, but if a youth showed particular skill in learning, he might attend one of the schools originally established by the prophet Samuel many centuries before. Available to the student in these schools, scattered throughout the kingdom, were opportunities to advance in the understanding of God's Word, nature, and sacred music along with a practical knowledge in areas of industry and agriculture. The motto of these schools was, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," and their primary goal was the objective of all true education: the restoration of the character of God in mankind. Because they were begun by the prophet Samuel, and maintained by many other prophets along the way, they were called the schools of the prophets, and those privileged ones attending were called the sons of the prophets.

Our story today takes place at the school located in Gilgal, which was the site of Israel's first encampment after they crossed the Jordan River into Canaan. It was here that the "reproach of Egypt" was rolled from them. ("Gilgal" means "rolling.") Finally all the embarrassment of having

wandered around in the desert for those four decades, enduring the mocking questions of their neighbors was cast off and they stepped foot on the land flowing with milk and honey.

In the episode mentioned in Elisha's day however, it seems that the land that had flowed with milk and honey was suffering under a time of famine and it was necessary to scrounge for food. So one of the students was sent out to find what he could to add to the soup that was to be the meal for the students that day.

Not knowing what he found, he came back with a lap-full of wild, toxic gourds. When they were sliced into the soup and students began to eat, a cry went up as they realized that there was "death in the pot." It was poisonous and making them sick. What did Elisha do? He asked them to put into the soup a supply of flour, or meal, which when added, counteracted the poisonous effect of the otherwise toxic pottage and they were able to eat safely.

You might ask, "What does this have to do with you and me?" Allow me to reserve the application of this story till a little later. Before we get there, though, I would like to share a personal testimony with you, of how the Lord has been at work in my life. When sharing personal testimonies, there are certain dangers involved, so I would like to make a few statements at the outset to make my objective clear.

From what I'm going to relate to you, I hope no one gets the impression that I think I've "arrived." No, the Lord has a lot more work to do in my life! Nor do I want to glorify the ways of the world. I want to give glory to the name of my Savior, Jesus Christ! Nor is this given in condemnation or judgment. It is not. I just want to share what God has done in my life in the hope that it will be of encouragement to you. God is good and God is great, and He is able to make changes in our lives, if we let Him, that will amaze angels, the devil and even ourselves! This work is His work, not ours, but we must comply with the Spirit; we must give our consent and not hold onto the world for the changes to happen.

It may be that the area which I address today is not a problem for you. If that is the case, then I pray that the principle that underlies all change toward godliness will be helpful in another area that might be a challenge. Most of all, I want to give praise to the Lord for His patience and goodness. That's the main reason why we gather to worship, isn't it? The psalmist wrote, "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and *I will declare what He has done for my soul.*" Psalm 66:16. That's what I want to do today.

In order for you to understand what I'm talking about, I will have to reveal a few details of my life. Some of you who have known me for a long time will recognize these facts to be true. There are certain risks when one shares things of a personal nature. Someone said, "Confession is good for the soul, but hard on the reputation." Well, when my Lord came to this earth He made Himself of "no reputation," so I will be glad to tell you what He has done in my life and what He has brought me from. Solomon wrote a sermon (the book of Ecclesiastes) referring to his past wanderings to encourage others to stay on the straight and narrow path.

The particular area of which I speak to you concerns music. Music was invented by God. He is a lover of beauty and art and created the systems whereby melody and song could be crafted. There's something wondrous about music. If you haven't looked into it before, there's a mathematical symmetry in music that is amazing. Take a look at some songs from your hymnal, for example, and count the measures (full measures, not the "lead-in" fragments), and you will see that almost all music is built on a 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 arrangement in the structure of its measures. There's mathematics in notes and chords. The organization of the divine is seen in the construction of music. The infinite possibilities of songs coming from a twelve note scale is an evidence of the supernatural.

God gave music as a means of benefit and blessing to mankind. There was music at creation; there will be music when we get to heaven. We are encouraged to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Colossians 3:16.

But, as with all of God's gifts, an enemy has been at work to pervert what is righteous, pure and wholesome, into something that accomplishes his goals and objectives. When in the parable the caretaker was asked about the abundance of weeds in the garden he had planted, his reply was, "An enemy has done this." Today the Lord, the Creator of all that is good and beautiful, scans the horizon of the music of the world and likewise says, "An enemy has done this."

The devil knows that music is a powerful and attractive force. There is something magnetic about a catchy tune wedded to a strong lyric. It's gripping and enrapturing! Thus it was for me since my early childhood. I can remember somehow acquiring a small radio in the days before transistor radios came out. I believe that it was called a "crystal" radio. It was very simple and needed no battery. The one I had looked like a little rocket ship about 3 or 4 inches in length, as I recall, with a stem or rod that came out of the top which served as the tuner; you pulled it out further or pushed it back in to change stations. It came with an "alligator clip" which you secured to metal as a ground, and an ear phone (no stereo!). The metal framework of the bunk bed I shared with my brother was perfect to act as a "ground," and I could listen to the radio when I went to bed at night.

What did I choose to listen to? It was the "mighty 690" and KCBQ, stations which featured the music that was popular at that time. Before I was ten I was hooked on rock and roll music. I was fully addicted, eager to get my "fix" anytime I could. When I couldn't listen to the music on my crystal set, the music floated through my head. Such is the nature of a powerful and enchanting tune, that you can "hear" it in your mind even if it isn't playing at that time.

I should tell you that my parents strongly objected to this type of music, but I was stubborn and wanted to listen to it anyway. I liked it! So I was careful to "sneak" in my listening opportunities so as to avoid unwanted parental lectures. I couldn't afford many records, but I remember two that I was able to acquire. These were "45's," which for those of you growing up in the era of "ipods"

and mp3 players means that they spun at 45 revolutions a minute on a record player, a device which had a needle that wound its way within the grooves of the vinyl platter. I think I played those two records so often that the needle nearly cut through the plastic of the records! Not only that, but they cut deeply into the grooves of my mind. To this day, if I choose to, I can recall those two records clearly. Later I would be able to acquire 33 lps, which means the records spun at 33 revolutions per minute and were much larger, hence styled “long play.”

Through my adolescence and into my teens the music of the world continued its grip on my mind and soul. I can remember sitting in Mr. York’s algebra class and being most excited about the latest Beatle’s release. I’m embarrassed to tell you that this was what was foremost in my thoughts as I sat in the classroom of our church school, the current counterpart of the Schools of the Prophets.

Later in my senior year at San Diego Academy, I experienced a conversion. The Lord came into my life in a remarkable way. I read my Bible daily and enjoyed spiritual themes. The music that I had cherished so fervently fell away and was not a part of my life. I felt good that it was not present, for I had been under conviction that a Christian shouldn’t be listening to such music. But I had dismissed that Voice of conscience, choosing rather to do what I wanted. Now, though, having my heart changed, the music I had so much enjoyed lost its appeal.

But the strength of my conversion experience waned, and I know exactly why. Very simply, I was not faithful in my devotional time. I reasoned that since I was studying Bible topics at college, this was sufficient and I didn’t need to “take time to be holy.” My habit of opening the day with personal Bible study and prayer tapered off and disappeared, and the “former things,” crept back into my life.

Here’s what I’ve observed about the Christian pathway. If you have seen the light and walked in it, and then turned away, your wandering away from the Lord may be even farther than before you came to Him. The Bible refers to that principle with these words. “For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning.” II Peter 2:20.

Two things happened that increased temptation for me in the area of music: time and technology. Time passed and the records that I couldn’t afford when I was young were now cheap at the thrift stores and used record outlets! Some of them were literally pennies on the dollar. I began a record collection of all the artists that were popular when I was growing up. Regular excursions were planned and executed to all the stores in San Diego, San Bernardino and Los Angeles which catered to used records. I read with rapt attention all the “record liners,” those protective inserts which often contained tidbits of information about the artists or their music. I could recite to you vast quantities of information and trivia about this music. All this today I consider a total waste of time and money. What if this time had been spent in the study of the Bible, in practical acts of blessing to others! But I liked what I was doing, and was fondly proud of the collection of albums I

had put together, which eventually reached about 4,000. Along with this there were countless concerts attended.

As a sub category of this collection there was an area that had particularly garnered my interest; the music of movies. Here was a media which combined the senses of sight and sound into something extremely powerful. By listening to the soundtrack, you could re-live the film in your mind. I began to “specialize” in soundtracks until I had acquired some 1,200 of them, including something of which I was very proud and occupied the first position in my collection of soundtracks: a collection of every James Bond soundtrack from Dr. No through the latest release. I could tell you all about John Williams, John Barry, Jerry Goldsmith and other film composers. When a new movie came out, some might look to see who the actors were in it: I would look to see who composed the music. If it was any good, I’d look for a way to acquire the soundtrack.

Some of all these albums were purchased not by “pennies on the dollar,” but much more than their original cost. Some of these were obtained only by much research and painstaking endeavor. Of course, special shelving had to be constructed in order to house the products of my research. Do you know how much space 4,000 record albums take up?

The second thing that happened that increased temptation for me was the advent of technology. Not much more than a decade or so ago computers, the internet and digital recording came into their being. All of these things served to make music even more available and deeply ingrained into my mind. Now I could make cds of the albums I had acquired and play them in the car and while I worked. Nearly every room in our house, as well as the cabinet shop attached to our garage, had its own music delivery system. If you came to our house for a meal ten years ago, it is highly likely that the speakers in the dining room would be conveying this music as we ate.

Then, a few years ago (I wish I could say it was longer!), the Lord began to work in my life and say, “There’s a better way.” I don’t mean to say that He wasn’t willing to work in my life before; I’m sure He was. I can’t give you a date or month, but I know that when I humbled my heart and began again a daily pattern of reading His Word and praying, that things began to change. I did not plan for these changes. I did not attempt to initiate these changes. All I did was put myself in the path of His blessing and power by spending time with Him in the Word.

But what I found was that after regaining a daily devotional life, my interest in the music of the world began to fade. I remember loading up a cd carrying case with the disks I had made, so that I could play them in the car as took a trip up north and realizing as I returned home, that I had not even opened it on the trip. Hmmm. More and more I found myself not attracted to that music as I spent time in God’s Word and in prayer.

Finally I came to the realization that that music was not a part of my life. It had no appeal to me. It was less appetizing than a plate of Styrofoam packing peanuts. This change in my way of thinking was brought about by the Lord’s power. If you had asked me before this about a Christian and his choice of music, I’m confident I would have known the truth about what God wants in our minds,

but conviction is not the same thing as conversion. Conviction means you know what you should do, but conversion means you allow God to make the changes necessary in your life to conform to His will.

As I thought about this in succeeding years, I came to realize why God wants to shelter us from the music of the world. I came to understand that there are several reasons why this music is like a toxic gourd in the stew. There are others who have pointed out the dangers of the music aspect of it, that is the tune, rhythm and beat, but I will speak to the message of the music.

First, it is distracting. It occupies the mind with themes that are trivial and unessential at best. The “great conflict,” about which we’ve studied in Daniel, takes place in our minds. The battle is for our brains. Satan wants to control our thinking. At the very time when our minds should be engaged in the warfare between good and evil; at the very time when we should be spending time in Bible study, prayer and sharing, Satan wants to captivate our thinking with things that at best, don’t matter. The reason why carbon monoxide is poisonous is that it takes the place of oxygen which is needed for tissue to survive.

The brain is the medium through which God’s Voice is heard. One of our members had recently acquired a new cell phone. Unfortunately, she dropped it into a bucket of water! After that, it didn’t work. It couldn’t receive the “signals from beyond.” It was of no use and had to be replaced. The devil would like to take the “cell phone” of your mind and “immerse” it in his philosophy, his way of thinking, which he delivers through music and thus keep our minds from receiving the signals of God’s Spirit.

Almost all of the world’s music focuses on things which are not geared to prepare us for heaven. Yes, you might find one song in a thousand that might be an exception. There have been a couple of versions of “Amazing Grace” that made the charts. There was a song built from Ecclesiastes chapter 3 called “Turn, Turn, Turn” that arguably had some merit; perhaps also the song, “Put Your Hand In The Hand.” But for the 99.9% of the rest of the music, I recognized that it is designed by the devil to draw attention away from where our minds should be focused today in these last days of earth’s history.

If you’re satisfied with trying to find that one exception in a thousand, let me guide you to a certain receptacle in our kitchen. After we share our fellowship meal today, the remains will be tossed into that receptacle. Since the garbage truck doesn’t come until Thursday, the contents of that receptacle will be available for several days. I suppose someone could search through its contents after prayer meeting Wednesday night and find something worth eating. Let me see the hands of all those who would like to do that! What we put into our minds is more important than what we put into our stomachs!

Secondly, the music of the world contains concepts directly opposed to Christianity. Since these concepts are presented within a very powerful medium, there is great impact with the message given. The music is saturated with unbiblical concepts of love, and encouragements toward sensuality, infidelity, materialism and intemperance. The picture of life and what is important

presented in today's music is completely different than the picture of life and what is important presented in the Word.

The message of the music of today is basically, "live for self." The message of the cross is, "die to self." The message of the music today is "it's all about me." The message of the cross is, "it's all about Him." The message of the music of the world is, "I did it my way." The message of the cross is, "not my will but Thine be done." The message of the music of the world is, "it can't be wrong if it feels so right." The message of the Bible is, "there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." If you fill your mind with that music, its message is having an impact; its voice is being heard.

Thirdly, popular music, along with the films and television productions today are ways through which the devil takes delight in mocking God. Satan inspires the writers of popular music, many of whom write while under the influence of drugs, to incorporate lines and phrases from the Bible in sport. If words or phrases from the Bible are presented in the context of something that is godless, the overall effect is evil. While Paul and his companion were on a missionary tour, a demon-possessed girl followed them around saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." Acts 16:17. You might think, "What a wonderful thing for her to say! Surely the apostle appreciated her words." But Paul was greatly displeased, and through the Lord he commanded the evil spirit to depart from her. Why? Wasn't she saying something that was true? Yes, but in the context of coming from one whom everyone knew to be the servant of the devil, the overall effect was counterproductive.

One of the more popular compositions of the Beatles was the song "Let It Be." Oh, what a mockery was this! To take the sacred theme of Mary's commitment to God and desecrate it through the music of those whose goals were unlimited pleasure and godless carousing is a travesty! The message of the Beatles and their music does not lead to soul searching repentance and commitment to Christ! "By their fruits you shall know them."

I wonder how Christ feels when the candle-waving crowds repeat John Lennon's lyric, "All we are asking is give peace a chance." But the Bible tells us, "He is our Peace." Ephesians 2:14. Would the same crowds gather and sing, "Give Jesus a chance"? Hmmmm. Was John Lennon speaking of Jesus when he wrote that? The testimony of his life says, "No."

I was reading through the book of Ecclesiastes this last week and came upon what is written in chapter 2:14 in which the phrases "eyes in his head" are followed immediately by the phrase, "but the fool." Hmm. Is it mere coincidence that these phrases are found in the lyrics of one of the Beatle's more famous songs?

Today the scene has changed from seemingly harmless references to hard core blasphemy. A current award-winning heavy-metal band called Avenged Sevenfold, a name which in itself is a clear reference to the story of Cain in the Bible features music marinated with biblical content, although the group maintains that they are not religious. One song contains the lyric, "dust the

apple off, savor each bite, and deep inside you know Adam was right." This is nothing but Satan's agenda of ridiculing God.

Like Samson before the audience of Dagon's temple, like Belshazzar raising the vessels that came from Jerusalem's temple, Satan delights in mocking God. In the titles of today's films and television programs, in the phrases of the world's music, Satan works to deride and taunt the Creator God. I knew in my heart that I could no longer have that music in my mind.

But what of that wonderful collection of albums and cds? For a period of time, although I didn't listen to them, those albums occupied the entire wall of the master bedroom, as well as many other locations throughout the house. As I was reading the Bible in the morning my eyes would glance beyond the Scriptures to the wall of albums. The Lord spoke to me quietly and said, "John, they've got to go." But how would I get rid of them?

First, I called all those stores from whom I had bought the albums, inquiring if they would be interested in purchasing them. They weren't. Then I thought, "Maybe these can be sold on eBay or Craig's list and money can be obtained to be put to a good cause." When I began to calculate the immense amount of time involved in that, I began to wonder if that was the proper thing to do. It was about this time that in my Bible study that I read through the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, which tells about Christians disposing of their articles of witchcraft by bonfire. The Lord spoke to my mind and I began to feed our trash bin each week with a dosage of all those records and cds. Do you know how many weeks it takes to throw away thousands of albums?

Each week as I did this, a sense of relief as well as sorrow came upon me. It was not a "sacrifice." It wasn't something that I had to "force" myself to do or felt pain of separation. It was done with a recognition that these things were no longer part of my life and had to go. *It's important that we clean our house of those things that have the devil's name on them because it is through them that he retains a foothold.* So each week as I wheeled out the bin (I have no idea what it would have weighed, but each week the mechanical arms of the trash truck successfully lifted it and disgorged its contents), there was a sense of peace that came into my heart.

At the same time, I felt remorse as I saw all the dollars going into the trash truck; dollars which could have sponsored a child to a Christian school in India or fed hungry people through ADRA. I felt sorrow as I realized that probably 6 or more "one day churches" could have been built at \$1,500 each by the money I had invested in this music. I felt remorse as I contemplated the hours spent in acquiring, transferring and listening to them. I also felt a determination to "redeem the time" by His grace in redoubled efforts to live according to His plan.

Back to our story of Elisha. You've probably already figured out the connection. The student had been sent out to find food and had come back with a "wild gourd" which caused "death in the pot." The remedy prescribed by Elisha in this case was *not to try to extract* the slices of the wild gourd, *but to add flour* or meal. The fruit of the wild gourd stands for the food of the world, more particularly the world's material, concepts and philosophies, with which the devil intends to feed

our minds. It produces death. The antidote for the poisonous mixture was the flour or meal, which stands for the Bread of Life, the living Word and the Holy Scriptures by which we obtain knowledge of and connection with Him.

We can try all we want to extract the evil from our lives, but if we will turn to the Lord, spend time in His Word, He will do it for us. It's time to put the "meal" in. Are you spending time in His Word? Are you adding the "flour," the "meal." Don't do this if you're happy with your life the way it is, if you don't want anything to change. But if you sincerely desire to be conformed to His likeness; if you want the mind of Christ to be active in your life; if you want to grow in grace and be more than a conqueror, "take time to be holy."