

Mission to the Powerful



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Daniel 4, 2 Kings 5:1–19, John 3:1–12, John 7:43–52, Matt. 19:16–22, John 19:38–42.*

Memory Text: “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (*Matthew 16:26, NKJV*).

Though written many years ago, the Bible, the Word of God, is the revelation of God's truth for our world. And among the many truths it reveals is that of human nature, and that—whether in seventh-century Judea or twenty-first-century Brazil—people are basically the same: sinners in need of divine grace.

This includes the rich and powerful. The rich and powerful of Bible times were no different from the rich and powerful in modern times, especially in their pursuit of wealth and fame and power, often (but not always) at the expense of the vulnerable. Yet, God is as concerned about the salvation of the rich and the powerful as He is for that of the weak and the needy. Scripture provides some gripping examples of Bible characters who were powerful, or rich, or both, and how God used them to be a blessing to the nations: Abraham, Isaac, Job, Solomon, and Joseph, to name a few examples.

This week we will explore God's mission to the rich and powerful. Journey with us as we see how God reached some of these people and how He is calling and preparing Seventh-day Adventists to be a witness to them today, as well.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 2.

Nebuchadnezzar

As Seventh-day Adventists, we believe in what is known as “unlimited atonement.” This means that, in contrast to some Christians, we believe that Christ’s death was for all humanity, not just a special group of those predestined by God for salvation. Because God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (*1 Tim. 2:4, NKJV*), Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice “for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (*1 John 2:2, NKJV*). That’s why everyone was chosen “in Him before the foundation of the world” (*Eph. 1:4, NKJV*), even if not everyone chooses Him in return. That’s why, too, we find accounts in the Bible of all sorts of people being reached for God.

Read Daniel 4. What happened to the king here, and what does this tell us about salvation coming to one of the world’s most powerful men?

A striking example in the Bible of how God reaches powerful unbelievers is the story of King Nebuchadnezzar. God’s judgment was executed on him in a way similar to some Israelite kings (*see, for example, 2 Chron. 32:25, 26; 1 Kings 14:21–31; 1 Samuel 28*). The biblical account of Nebuchadnezzar, who came to his senses and acknowledged the Creator God, shows that God cares about the wealthy and powerful, as well as the weak and needy. In verse 37, the most powerful man on the earth declared, “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down” (*Dan. 4:37, NKJV*). If only all the rich and powerful and haughty among us mortal beings understood this truth!

What can we learn from this story? First, God uses committed believers, such as Daniel, as a bridge to reach powerful unbelievers. Second, God can directly intervene in the witnessing process in order to reach powerful unbelievers. Nebuchadnezzar was humbled by God for his pride and arrogance. And though this was a very dramatic story, there are many other ways in which the rich and powerful and haughty can be brought low.

Even if we are not rich and powerful by the world’s standards, why must we be careful to avoid the kind of arrogance that this king had manifested? Why might that attitude be easier to have than we might think?

Naaman

Christ died for all, regardless of their background, wealth, ethnicity, or status. God ceaselessly draws all humanity to Himself, including those individuals classed among the powerful non-Christians of the world (see Ellen G. White, *The Acts of Apostles*, p. 416).

Read 2 Kings 5:1–19. What can we take from this story about reaching people for the Lord?

In 2 Kings 5:17–19, Naaman made two unusual requests after God healed him of leprosy. First, he asked to take two mule-loads of earth from Israel back to Syria for the purpose of worshiping the living God. He states, “For your servant will no longer offer either burnt offering or sacrifice to the other gods, but to the LORD” (2 Kings 5:17, NKJV). Though Naaman is clearly now a believer in the only true God, his first request shows that pagan influences still held sway over his thinking to a degree. The Syrian commander regarded the God of Israel as a divinity who must be venerated on soil native to that land. Although Naaman acknowledged the reality that there was no God aside from the Lord of Israel, he had not wholly dispossessed himself of the notion that God was, by some particular means, connected to the land of Israel. Thus, in his own country he desired to worship God on Israelite soil.

Naaman’s second petition shows the sincerity of his faith. While he resolved to serve only the God of heaven, he realized carrying out such a resolution in his own idolatrous country wouldn’t be easy. Moreover, the king of Syria still worshiped the god Rimmon, and in this occupation Naaman would serve as the king’s escort. While Naaman had no intention of forsaking his duties to his earthly king, he did not wish to be deemed as bowing in worship to Rimmon. Having surrendered his heart to Jehovah, Naaman desired not to make any concessions to idolatry by worshiping the heathen god. Nor did he want word to get back to Elisha that he was doing so.

Elisha responded to Naaman’s entreaty by saying “Go in peace” (2 Kings 5:19, NKJV). “These words must not be thought of as either expressing approval or disapproval of Naaman’s parting request. He was to depart in peace, not in doubt or restless uncertainty. God had been kind to him, and he was to find happiness and peace in his knowledge and worship of God. Naaman was a new convert, a man with conscientious scruples, who would grow in strength and wisdom if he clung to his new-found faith. God leads new converts on step by step, and knows the appropriate moment in which to call for a reform in a certain matter. This principle ought always to be borne in mind by those who labor for the salvation of souls.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 878.

What lessons should we learn from this story about not pushing people too quickly, especially those who come from a non-Christian background?

Witnessing to the Learned: Nicodemus

Nicodemus was a learned man. The Bible describes him as a ruler of the Jews (*John 3:1*). Jesus referred to him as a teacher of Israel (*John 3:10, NKJV*). He had a good understanding of the Bible and had a spiritual hunger for the Lord. From a human perspective, he may have looked as though he were a follower of God. He kept all the commandments, and he was a respected leader among the Jews. He was powerful and wealthy. Many looked at these as signs that God had blessed him. Nevertheless, it turns out that the surface appearances were only that—surface appearances.

Read *John 3:1–12*. What does this story reveal about Nicodemus’s spiritual needs and how Jesus addressed them right away?

When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he tried to maintain the façade, the status quo. But God knew his heart. Similarly, God knows the hearts and needs of all the rich and powerful, whatever their background. Nicodemus came to Jesus because Jesus’ teachings had convicted him. His pride kept him from openly confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, but that night changed him forever. Even after his conviction that Jesus was sent of God, he still did not openly acknowledge that he was a follower of Jesus Christ.

Read *John 7:43–52* and *John 19:39*. What do these texts tell us about Nicodemus and Jesus?

We can see here in these verses that Nicodemus had, obviously, been greatly impacted by Jesus. He sought to protect Him when Jesus was alive and then to honor Jesus after Jesus was dead. No question, Jesus had reached Nicodemus, who, even in his vaunted knowledge and wisdom, had a great need of the Savior, as we all do.

Why must we be careful of the trap of thinking that because “we have the truth” (which we do), then the knowledge of this truth alone is enough to save us? How many souls will be lost who had more than enough knowledge, even of the three angels’ messages, to be saved?

Mission to the Rich

Read Matthew 19:16–22. What lessons can we learn from this story, in which, in contrast to Nicodemus, a person did not accept Jesus?

Jesus' interaction with the rich young ruler shows just how dangerous a trap wealth can be. Look at these words: "And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (*Matt. 19:24, NKJV*). This, of course, does not mean the rich cannot be saved, but only that, if these people are not careful, their riches can truly be an impediment to salvation.

In the end, the rich and the poor face the same fate: the grave. This means that the rich are in as desperate need of salvation as is anyone else. Whatever else money can buy, it cannot buy an exemption from death. That exemption comes only as a gift, offered freely by Jesus to whoever will claim it by faith. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live" (*John 11:25, NKJV*).

Read Luke 19:1–10. What made the difference in this story, in contrast to the one about the rich young ruler?

Zacchaeus responded to Jesus in a way that, unfortunately, the rich young ruler didn't. Notice, Jesus didn't tell Zacchaeus to sell what he had and give to the poor, as He did to the rich young ruler. Jesus must have known just how tied to his money the rich ruler was, which was why Jesus said what He did to him. In contrast, though we don't know all that was spoken when Jesus was in his house, Zacchaeus obviously was convicted by Jesus and knew that he had to make some changes in his life, especially as it related to his wealth.

"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (*Matt. 16:26, NKJV*). What should these words say to us all?

Mission to the Powerful

Jesus knew how to make friends with the powerful. He was admired and respected by many of these people and, at the same time, was also despised by many. The powerful people in the Bible who came to Jesus for help surely sensed that He cared for them. Also, many of the rich and powerful did not openly come to Jesus right away; they waited until they were certain that Jesus was truly the Son of God. Such was the case both with Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

Read **Matthew 27:57–60** (see also *Mark 15:43–47, Luke 23:50–53, and John 19:38–42*). **What does this account tell us about how the Lord used a rich man who clearly had been impacted by Jesus?**

Until this time we have heard nothing of Joseph of Arimathea. Suddenly this rich man appears, almost out of nowhere, and is used to help fulfill prophecy. God has used and will continue to use the rich for His purposes. Hence, we must have a mission to them, as well.

Where to begin can be one of the most difficult phases in making friends with powerful people. In general, it is better not to pursue them; let them come to you. Jesus did this; they became a witness to His message, healing, and power from God. They were convinced behind the scenes that He is truly the Son of God.

Powerful people will seek to partner with genuine ministry for a number of reasons. They want to be part of something good that is changing the lives of people. This is one way they know that it can also change their lives. It provides a subtle way for the rich and powerful to get the help they need without publicly disclosing their needs.

The second phase is to begin a genuine ministry as an avenue for the rich and powerful to be part of God's ministry. Take some time to invest in the lives of the rich and powerful in your society.

Challenge: Add someone to your daily prayer list who is in a position of power, is not a believer, and is someone you could come in contact with from time to time.

Challenge Up: Address a letter or email to someone in a position of power—even if it is someone you may never have met—and tell that person that you are praying for him or her.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Ministry to the Rich,” *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 209–216; “Captive Maid Shows Concern for Naaman,” *Reflecting Christ*, p. 337.

Jesus’ love is the same for the poor as it is for the rich and powerful people in the world. He died for princes as well as for paupers. Jesus knew the most effective way of reaching their hearts. He warned us that “ ‘it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God’ ” (*Mark 10:25, NIV*). We are challenged this week to reach powerful and wealthy individuals with the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are as much in need of salvation as is anyone else, even if, unfortunately, they might not realize it because of the “security” that they believe their wealth offers.

“Much is said concerning our duty to the neglected poor; should not some attention be given to the neglected rich? Many look upon this class as hopeless. . . . Thousands of wealthy men have gone to their graves unwarned. But indifferent as they may appear, many among the rich are soul-burdened.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 210.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Jesus broke down caste and class barriers when ministering to the rich and the poor during His earthly ministry. How do we as Adventists address this issue, that of the gap between the rich and the poor, that is so ingrained in all our societies?
- 2 Jesus said the following: “ ‘Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful’ ” (*Matt. 13:22, NKJV*). What do you think Jesus meant by “the deceitfulness of riches”? Why do we not necessarily have to be rich to be deceived by riches?
- 3 In class, go over the question asked at the end of Tuesday’s study about the fact that knowing the truth is not the same thing as being saved by it. Why is this such a crucial distinction for us to make? If knowing the truth alone is not what saves us, what does save us?
- 4 What other reasons can you think of for why the rich young ruler rejected Jesus while Zacchaeus accepted Him?

Mission Path to Spain: Part 3

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Pastor Luis Paiva miraculously received US\$1,000 to pay off a debt, leading him to believe that God’s will was for him, his wife, and their three children to leave Venezuela. But they didn’t have any savings.

“Lord, how do I leave with no savings?” he prayed.

At home, his wife said a pastor in the United States had called, wanting to speak with him. The pastor was looking for a volunteer missionary to work for a year in an area of Mexico without a Seventh-day Adventist presence. Luis went to Mexico, and his wife and children joined him two months later.

Over the next eight months, 35 people were baptized through Luis’s efforts. One new member donated a building, and a new church was opened.

But the authorities denied Luis a visa to stay in Mexico. He seemed to only have two options: move to the United States illegally or stay in Mexico illegally. He didn’t want to live anywhere illegally. Luis had become acquainted with a regional immigration official. When the official heard about Luis’ situation, he promised not to deport him. Luis believed him. But he believed God even more when God said, “Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save” (*Psalm 146:3, NIV*).

Worried, Luis prayed. He also made phone calls to the United States and Canada, seeking legal advice on leaving Mexico. Only two churches replied—an Adventist church and another church, both in Canada—but Luis remained in Mexico. Then a church member visited his home.

“What’s your biggest fear?” the man asked.

“I don’t want to live illegally in Mexico, and I don’t want to travel illegally to the United States,” Luis replied. “I also don’t want to return to my country.”

“If you had the money, what would you do right now?” the man asked.

“I would buy a plane ticket to fly to Spain,” Luis said.

Luis had a same-age aunt who had immigrated to Spain 20 years earlier. If he moved, he would have a family member nearby. Also, he had visited Spain three years earlier and felt comfortable there.



After listening to Luis, the church member said, “So, let’s buy the tickets and have you fly to Spain.”

After buying plane tickets for Luis and his family, he told Luis not to worry. “God is with you and is leading you,” he said.

Today, Luis and his wife are missionaries in Spain.

Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offering that helps support missionaries around the world. Read next week about how Luis left a fruit stand to become a missionary.