

WHAT JESUS PROVED

Kevin D. Paulson

During the 1960 presidential campaign, while John Kennedy was campaigning in the West Virginia primary, the story is told that a coal miner approached Kennedy at a campaign stop, and asked,

“Is it true, Senator, that you have never had to work a day in your entire life?”

As the smile of wordless embarrassment crossed Kennedy’s face (after all, how does one answer such a question?), the miner leaned across the railing and whispered in the candidate’s ear,

“You haven’t missed much!”

I have often wondered what the miner would have thought—not to mention what the media might have said—if Kennedy had answered something like this:

“Be of good cheer sir; we rich folks have financial problems too!”

Would Kennedy have been lying had he said this? Certainly not. Wealthy people do have financial burdens, dilemmas, challenges, on a scale unknown to the average poor or middle-income wage earner.

But we would be hard pressed, I am sure, to find any poor or middle class person who struggles each month with a meager or mediocre salary, who wouldn’t gladly exchange his or her financial problems for those of a Kennedy, a Rockefeller, a Bill Gates, or a Michael Bloomberg.

Brothers and sisters, it is this question of practical relevance, of down-in-the dirt empathy, which explains why the issue I am going to address this morning remains likely the most controversial and divisive subject in the Seventh-day Adventist Church today.

But if we’re going to answer from God’s Word the question posed at the heart of Last Generation Theology:

Why are we still here?

. . . we must recognize the importance of the example Jesus left us, and how this example makes possible the final display of God’s glory we’re going to discuss this afternoon.

Biblical Evidence

Many of us may not realize it, but the very first doctrine found in the New Testament is that of the human nature of Christ.

Matt. 1:1:
“The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

And then follows one of two lists of Jesus’ human ancestors found in the Gospels.

Have you ever wondered why the Bible contains these genealogies—the “begats,” as some call them?

Is it because the authors had nothing in particular to say at this point, so they just included this to take up space?

My friends, I believe the Lord wanted us, for a very specific reason, to take a long, hard look at His family tree.

Look at the some of the names here:

Rahab (Matt. 1:5)
Ruth (Matt. 1:5)
 Athaliah (Matt. 1:8)
 Ahaz (Matt. 1:9)
 Manasseh (Matt. 1:10)
 Jehoiakim (Matt. 1:11)

This helps explain why the apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:3:

Rom. 1:3:
“Concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David, according to the flesh.”

Perhaps we should ask what kind of person David was, “according to the flesh.”

Let’s turn to the book of Hebrews.

Heb. 2:14:
“Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same.”

Now this verse reminds us of another passage from Paul’s writings.

I Cor. 15:50:

“Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.”

Now let me ask you, When Paul says flesh and blood can't inherit the kingdom of God, is he talking about physical tissue?

Is Paul saying those with resurrected bodies will not have physical flesh and blood?

Obviously not, since Jesus said something very different to His disciples after His resurrection:

Luke 24:39:

“Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; handle Me, and see, for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see Me have.”

So it isn't physical tissue which Paul says isn't going to heaven.

Let's turn to Romans 8, and we'll get a clearer picture of the “flesh” Jesus partook of, and why Paul says this “flesh” isn't going to heaven:

Rom. 8:3-5,8-9,12-13:

“For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh,

“That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.”

Verses 5,8-9:

“For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh, but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. . . .

“So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

“But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. . . .”

Verses 12-13:

“Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh.

“For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die; but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.”

Now quite clearly, the “flesh” in these verses isn't talking about what covers our bones.

It's talking about a human nature which encourages us to disobey God.

And it is in this human nature that Jesus condemned sin, according to verse 3. He “condemned sin in the flesh.”

This is how it becomes so easy to resolve the old debate about “likeness” and “sameness” in this passage. Verse 3, of course, speaks of Jesus coming “in the likeness (*homoiomati*) of sinful flesh.” This word contains the prefix “homo,” which clearly means “same.”

But even without getting into the Greek, it is easy to figure out just from the context of this verse in Romans 8, what kind of fleshly nature the apostle is talking about.

Turning back to Hebrews, chapter 2, we see further evidence as to the kind of human nature Jesus took.

Heb. 2:16-17:

“For verily He took not on Him the nature of angels, but took on Him the seed of Abraham.

“Wherefore in all things it behooved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.”

In other words, what qualifies Jesus to be our High Priest in heaven, is the fact that He has been where we are in the struggle with evil.

Heb. 4:15:

“For we have not an High Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”

Brothers and sisters, this statement assumes a variety of temptation experiences on the part of Jesus. There are those who believe separation from God—in some larger relational sense—is really the only temptation there is.

This verse gives no credibility to this view. Nor does any other.

There are others who believe that the only, or perhaps the primary, parallel between Jesus’ struggle with temptation and ours, is that while you and I are tempted to illegitimately indulge our humanity, Jesus was tempted to illegitimately use His divinity.

Now of course no one is denying that Jesus was also tempted to use His divinity to work miracles on His own behalf, and thus break up the plan of salvation.

But you and I can no more relate to such a struggle than could the West Virginia coal miner relate to the financial vexations and challenges of the Kennedy family’s stock portfolio!

With apologies to Del Delker, you and I can't relate to the temptation to wipe out enemies with ten thousand angels!

Ellen White Evidence

Now we're going to look at statements from the writings of Ellen White on this subject.

But before we do so, I hope it is clear that the case for Jesus taking fallen (as distinct from unfallen) human nature is clear from the Bible.

And Ellen White echoes this clarity in such statements as the following:

DA 49:

"It would have been an almost infinite humiliation for the Son of God to take man's nature, even when Adam stood in his innocence in Eden. But Jesus accepted humanity when the race had been weakened by four thousand years of sin. Like every child of Adam He accepted the results of the working of the great law of heredity. What these results were is shown in the history of His earthly ancestors. He came with such a heredity to share our sorrows and temptations, and to give us the example of a sinless life."

Notice very carefully, folks, the reason Jesus took our heredity.

Not merely so He wouldn't be as physically tall or as strong as the sinless Adam in Eden. Not merely so He could experience such benign weaknesses as hunger, thirst, weariness, and pain.

What did the statement say?

DA 49:

"He came with such a heredity to share our sorrows and temptations, and to give us the example of a sinless life."

In other words, He took the same heredity we inherit at birth, so He could be tempted like we are tempted.

And folks, I don't believe God gave us an impossible example. We're going to talk more about that as this series progresses.

DA 112:

"Notwithstanding that the sins of a guilty world were laid upon Christ, notwithstanding the humiliation of taking upon Himself our fallen nature, the voice from heaven declared Him to be the Son of the Eternal."

1SG 25:

“Jesus also told them (the angels) that they should have a part to act, to be with Him, and at different times to strengthen Him. That He should take man’s fallen nature, and His strength would not even be equal with theirs.”

RH Dec. 15, 1896:

“Clad in the vestments of humanity, the Son of God came down to the level of those He wished to save. In Him was no guile or sinfulness; He was ever pure and undefiled; yet He took upon Him our sinful nature.”

RH July 17, 1900:

“Christ did in reality unite the offending nature of man with His own sinless nature, because by this act of condescension He would be enabled to pour out His blessings on behalf of the fallen race.”

DA 117:

“For four thousand years the race had been decreasing in physical strength, in mental power, and in moral worth, and Christ took upon Him the infirmities of degenerate humanity.”

Notice the three levels of Jesus’ condescension:

Physical strength
Mental power
Moral worth

In contemporary Adventism, there is no argument about the first two. Everyone agrees Jesus was not as physically or mentally strong as the sinless Adam in Eden.

It is the last of these three that is controversial among us.

Did Jesus take a degenerate moral nature, as well as a degenerate mental and physical one?

Well quite obviously, in the above statement from *Desire of Ages*, Jesus took degenerate human nature at all three levels.

Let’s look at it again:

DA 117:

“For four thousand years the race had been decreasing in physical strength, in mental power, and in moral worth, and Christ took upon Him the infirmities of degenerate humanity.”

Notice how clearly Ellen White states this elsewhere:

2SOP 39:

“It was in the order of God that Christ should take upon Himself the form and nature of fallen man.”

Everyone in the present discussion agrees that Christ took the form of fallen man. The above statement says He took both the form and the nature of fallen man.

4BC 1147:

“He (Christ) took upon Himself fallen, suffering human nature, degraded and defiled by sin.”

BE & ST Dec. 1, 1892:

“His (the Christian’s) strongest temptations will come from within, for he must battle against the inclinations of the natural heart. The Lord knows our weaknesses.”

And how, according to Ellen White, does Jesus know our weaknesses?

DA 329:

“He knows by experience what are the weaknesses of humanity, what are our wants, and where lies the strength of our temptations, for He was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”

And where, according to the previous statement, does the strength of our temptations lie?

BE & ST Dec. 1, 1892:

“His (the Christian’s) strongest temptations will come from within.”

Some people react in horror at the thought of Jesus experiencing sexual temptation. Yet in a book specifically devoted to the issue of sexual immorality, listen to Ellen White’s words:

A Solemn Appeal, p. 78, quoted in OHC 337:

“All are accountable for their actions while upon probation in this world. All have power to control their actions. If they are weak in virtue and purity of thoughts and acts, they can obtain help from the Friend of the helpless. Jesus is acquainted with all the weaknesses of human nature, and if entreated, will give strength to overcome the most powerful temptations.”

Now let’s summarize what these last three statements are saying about Jesus’ temptations and His knowledge of ours:

1. The Christian’s strongest temptations will come from within, from the inclinations of the natural heart.
2. Jesus knows our weaknesses.

3. The weaknesses here described are obviously weaknesses which incline toward sin, not merely the benign weaknesses of hunger, thirst, weariness, pain, etc.
4. Jesus knows by experience what are our weaknesses, and where lies the strength of our temptations.

Putting all these passages together, it becomes clear Jesus, like you and me, was tempted from within, through the desires, urges, clamorings, and hormones of a fallen human nature.

Did Jesus have to struggle with sinful thoughts?

IHP 78:

“Some realize their great weakness and sin, and become discouraged. Satan casts his dark shadow between them and the Lord Jesus, their atoning sacrifice. They say, it is useless for me to pray. My prayers are so mingled with evil thoughts that the Lord will not hear them.

“These suggestions are from Satan. In His humanity Christ met and resisted this temptation, and He knows how to succor those who are thus tempted.”

What temptation is she talking about here?

The temptation to believe that because your prayers are mingled with evil thoughts, the Lord won't hear them.

Now let's be as clear as possible about something. This statement isn't saying Jesus cherished or toyed with sinful thoughts. It does say that such thoughts occurred to Him.

Brothers and sisters, it is not sin for a sinful thought to come into your mind. It's only a sin to keep it there.

It's like the old saying, “You can't keep the crows from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair!”

Listen to what Scripture says:

James 1:14-15:

“Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.
“Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin.”

Ellen White agrees:

KH 140:

“There are thoughts and feelings suggested and aroused by Satan that annoy even the best of men; but if they are not cherished, if they are repulsed as hateful, the soul is not contaminated with guilt and no other is defiled by their influence.”

Consider these statements:

IHP 155:

“Though He (Christ) had all the strength of passion of humanity, never did He yield to temptation to do one single act which was not pure and elevating and ennobling.”

ST April 9, 1896:

“The words of Christ encourage parents to bring their little ones to Jesus. They may be wayward, and possess passions like those of humanity, but this should not deter us from bringing them to Christ. He blessed children that were possessed of passions like His own.”

Clarifying Other Statements—the Lower and Higher Natures

Now perhaps some of you are thinking:

Pastor Kevin, aren't there other inspired statements which say something different. Why don't you give us the other side?

And folks, we have to consider the statements that seem to point in the opposite direction—just like, when we study the Bible with non-Adventist Christians, we need to consider those verses which seem on the surface to teach:

1. That the Sabbath has been abolished.
2. That human beings go to heaven or hell at death.
3. That the lost will be tortured in hell throughout eternity, etc.

We need to consider two very important principles that we should always consider, whenever it seems that inspired statements differ with one another.

Rules for Reconciling Apparently Contradictory Inspired Passages:

1. Inspiration is its own interpreter.
2. God explains Himself.

In Ellen White's words:

1SM 42:

“The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture.”

And folks, just as there is no hope of bringing non-Adventist Christians to a positive decision for the truth unless we can show them how the entire Bible fits together in harmony, so there is no hope for bringing reconciliation within our church over the issues we are addressing in this series, unless we can demonstrate how the inspired writings fit together in total harmony.

Some will point us to the Bible verse that speaks of the soon-to-be-born Christ as:

Luke 1:35:
“that holy thing”

But what many who quote this verse forget is the following verse from the very next chapter which states, in a citation from the Old Testament:

Luke 2:23:
“Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord.”

Obviously this isn't saying these people have unfallen natures. It simply means they are consecrated to the Lord's service.

I'm not saying Jesus wasn't holy from His mother's womb, because most assuredly He was. But that doesn't mean He wasn't born with the same inherited nature as the rest of us. The inspired testimony is absolutely clear that He was born with just such a nature.

Some will quote the text where the Bible describes Jesus as:

Heb. 7:26:
“holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners”

But Ellen White says this is exactly the condition God's people are to attain here on earth, through heaven's power:

IHP 160:
“Cherish those things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report; but put away whatever is unlike our Redeemer. . . . Every soul that gains eternal life must be like Christ, ‘holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners’ (Heb. 7:26).”

SD 102:
“The grace of Christ alone can change your heart and then you will reflect the image of the Lord's Jesus. God calls upon us to be like Him—pure, holy, and undefiled. We are to bear the divine image.”

Now let's look at some of the Ellen White statements that seem to point in the opposite direction from the evidence we have considered in this meeting, on the subject of Jesus' human nature.

Many of us are familiar with this one, from the famous Baker letter of 1895:

5BC 1128:

"Be careful, exceedingly careful, as to how you dwell upon the human nature of Christ. Do not set Him before the people as a man with the propensities of sin. . . . He could have sinned, He could have fallen, but not for one moment was there in Him an evil propensity."

Here are two others:

2T 201-202:

"He is a brother in our infirmities, but not in possessing like passions. As the Sinless One, His nature recoiled from evil."

2T 509:

"He was a mighty Petitioner, not possessing the passions of our human, fallen natures, but compassed with like infirmities, tempted in all points like as we are."

Now we're faced with a dilemma:

Do these statements contradict those we saw earlier, which clearly teach that Jesus had to wrestle with passions which tempted Him to do wrong?

Let's look at them again:

IHP 155:

"Though He (Christ) had all the strength of passion of humanity, never did He yield to temptation to do one single act which was not pure and elevating and ennobling."

ST April 9, 1896:

"The words of Christ encourage parents to bring their little ones to Jesus. They may be wayward, and possess passions like those of humanity, but this should not deter us from bringing them to Christ. He blessed children that were possessed of passions like His own."

Now it's obvious that both sets of statements are talking about passions and propensities which tempt us to sin.

We aren't talking here about the benign passions of the sinless Adam in the Garden of Eden.

So how do we harmonize these passages?

Remember what we talked about in our last meeting, regarding the distinction in the Bible and the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy between the lower and higher forces within human nature.

Remember these statements:

Matt. 26:41:

“The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

I Cor. 9:27:

“I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection.”

Now from Ellen White:

5T 513:

“The will is not the taste or the inclination, but it is the deciding power.”

Now we’re going to look at some Ellen White statements which speak of the need to *control* sinful passions and propensities:

MH 130:

“The body is to be brought into subjection. The higher powers of the being are to rule. The passions are to be controlled by the will, which is itself to be under the control of God”

4T 235:

“Our natural propensities must be controlled, or we can never overcome as Christ overcame.”

These references to passions and propensities to sin have to do with the lower, fleshly nature. And remember what we saw in our last meeting, where Ellen White speaks of this nature:

AH 127:

“The lower passions have their seat in the body and work through it. The words “flesh” or “fleshly” or “carnal lusts” embrace the lower, corrupt nature; the flesh of itself cannot act contrary to the will of God.”

But now we’re going to look at some Ellen White statements, some of which we saw in our last meeting, which speak of passions and propensities to sin taking possession of the higher nature—which is another way of talking about the will and the character:

DA 305:

“The only power that can create or perpetuate true peace is the grace of Christ. When this is implanted in the heart, it will cast out the evil passions that cause strife and dissension.”

TM 171-172:

“But although their evil propensities may seem to them as precious as the right hand or the right eye, they must be separated from the worker, or he cannot be acceptable before God.”

MYP42:

“Nonsense and amusement-loving propensities should be discarded, as out of place in the life and experience of those who are living by faith in the Son of God, eating His flesh and drinking His blood.”

7BC 943:

“We must realize that through belief in Him it is our privilege to be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. Then we are cleansed from all sin, all defects of character. We need not retain one sinful propensity.

“As we partake of the divine nature, hereditary and cultivated tendencies to wrong are cut away from the character, and we are made a living power for good.”

What are these propensities to sin cut away from? The character.

Not from the flesh. Like we said in our last meeting, these statements aren't teaching holy flesh.

They're teaching that we can have holy characters.

None of these statements are talking about what happens when Jesus comes. They're talking about what happens in the Christian life here and now, through repentance and sanctification.

The difference between these two sets of statements on passions and propensities to sin, is the difference between an urge resisted and an urge exhibited.

Jesus had the first. But He never had the second, because to exhibit a sinful urge means to yield to it.

Here's another Ellen White statement that helps us understand even better what she means when she says Jesus had no propensities to sin:

16MR 182:

“We must not become in our ideas common and earthly, and in our perverted ideas we must not think that the liability of Christ to Satan's temptations degraded His humanity and that He possessed the same sinful, corrupt propensities as man.”

Now if we stopped there, we might get the wrong idea. But she goes on to explain what sort of corruption she's talking about.

In the very next paragraph she writes:

16MR 182:

“Christ took our nature, fallen but not corrupted, and would not be corrupted unless He received the words of Satan in place of the words of God.”

Notice she doesn't say, His nature wouldn't be corrupted unless He had been born with the same nature as the rest of humanity. The corruption she is describing in this passage is the result of choice, not birth.

I hope the distinction between the lower and higher natures within humanity is clear, as well as the distinction between an urge resisted and an urge exhibited.

Once we understand this distinction, the modern Adventist Christology debate is settled.

Why It Matters

Some of you may be asking, Why, Pastor Kevin, does this matter? Why does this debate have such staying power in contemporary Adventism?

A few years ago, when Andrews University hosted a conference which noted the fifty years that had passed since the publication of the book *Questions on Doctrine*, which was primarily responsible for igniting this controversy in the Seventh-day Adventist Church,

One former church leader, who shall be nameless, observed that he couldn't imagine how any thoughtful man or woman in today's society would find any meaning in this discussion.

With all due respect to this man and to the office he then occupied, I truly don't know how anyone could say this.

I attended that conference at Andrews in the fall of 2007, and was interviewed by the student newspaper on campus, which asked for my reaction to the conference and to the issue in question. I responded that any student on this or any other campus can easily appreciate the relevance of this controversy, and for one simple reason:

If a fellow student were to offer to tutor you in a particularly difficult class, how much difference would it make—in your decision to hire that student as a tutor—whether or not the student had taken the class first.

I don't think that takes a theologian to figure out, do you?

Brothers and sisters, the relevance of this debate is heard every morning in the privacy of the predawn devotional hour, in which a young man pleads for strength to defeat the forces of lust, only to be comforted with the awareness that His Savior has been there, and has struggled with this urge victoriously.

Its importance is felt in the executive office and construction yard, as frustrations and irritations are met with the confidence that our Lord subdued these very feelings.

Its splendor breaks like sunshine in the heart of a teenage daughter whose family has a history of incest, when she realizes this was part of Jesus' family lineage also.

This is not, as some would have us believe, some abstract argument over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin! It is a question of supremely practical relevance. This is why, despite the sincere but misguided hopes of certain ones among us, this issue will not go away.

Finally, let us consider the following statement from the pen of God's servant:

DA 122-123:

"In our own strength it is impossible to deny the clamors of our fallen nature. Through this channel Satan will bring temptations upon us. Christ knew that the enemy would come to every human being, to take advantage of hereditary weakness, and by his false insinuations to ensnare all whose trust is not in God. And by passing over the ground which man must travel, our Lord has prepared the way for us to overcome. It is not His will that we should be placed at a disadvantage in the conflict with Satan. He would not have us intimidated and discouraged by the assaults of the serpent. 'Be of good cheer,' He says, 'I have overcome the world.' John 16:33."

And this afternoon we're going to talk about how you and I can overcome the world also, through His power and by His grace.