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“My heart falters, fear makes me tremble” (Isaiah 21:4, NIV): Emotions and prophetic writings in the Bible

Emotions are an intricate part of what it means to be human. They are part of complex coping mechanisms installed by a Creator God whose own emotions are reflected in humanity’s creation in the *imago Dei*, the “image of God” (Gen. 1:27).¹ Joy, exuberance, anticipation, pleasure, delight, and happiness, must have all been part of God’s original make-up of humanity, for they characterize our existence today. We also experience, however, anger, sadness, sorrow, fear, depression, dejection, misery, and fury—emotions that became part of our emotive repertoire following the Fall in Genesis 3.²

Unfortunately, we have traditionally ignored the study of emotions in biblical research. As Paul Kruger puts it, “Emotions were for a long time regarded as part of the irrational, uncontrollable, and subjective aspects of humankind that do not justify serious study.”³

And yet, emotions are well worth a closer look. For, ultimately, they tell us about who we are, who God is, and how He deals with us. Let us take a look at this little-explored field of emotions by focusing on a special group of individuals, namely biblical prophets. We will use the biblical text and also

incorporate insights from cross-cultural psychology and the cognitive sciences as we explore the emotional world of biblical prophets.

God says “We are One”

As humans we were created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26, 27).⁴ So we can assume that our emotions in some way reflect God’s emotions, even though ours are subject to sin while His are not. We do not believe in the duality of human beings, separating a body from an independent soul. Instead, we argue for a wholistic⁵ view of humanity, where emotions are an integral part of our overall existence.⁶ From the outset it would be important to reiterate the obvious: *prophets are and were people like you and me and brought all of their personhood into their prophetic office*. Before looking at the emotional involvement of the prophets in their ministry and writings, let us try to find out what emotions, in fact, are.

How emotions work

Emotions are intrinsically interconnected with our general make-up as human beings; thus, it can be difficult to define them. To complicate matters further, we experience emotions and

then also express emotions in the form of facial expressions as well as linguistic expressions—in verbal or physical expressions and in written forms.

Klaus Scherer provides a good working definition when he says an emotion is “an episode of interrelated, synchronized changes in the states of all or most of the five organismic subsystems in response to the evaluation of an external or internal stimulus event as relevant to major concerns of the organism.”⁷

Let us unpack this working definition. Emotions are normally triggered by stimulus events. Sometimes another emotion is triggered or amplified by our evaluation of the event afterward. Emotions are also generated by thoughts and memories; these then react upon the mind processes and strengthen or inhibit certain mental process.⁸ It is even possible to generate an emotion by imagined representations.⁹

Emotions serve in a certain sense as relevance detectors. We generally get emotional about people and things that we care about. Emotions are also the biggest influence on behavior; they can interrupt a behavioral sequence and serve as the trigger for setting new goals and plans.¹⁰

Emotions impact communication and social interaction. The physical appearance, often involuntary, of facial expressions will lead to a reaction in one's conversation partner. Subtle changes in nonverbal expressions may indicate dissonance from verbal expressions and communication.¹¹

At this point it is important to distinguish between a mood and an emotion. Generally speaking, emotions are thought of as high intensity responses to stimulus events, whereas moods are "characterized by a relative enduring predominance of certain types of subjective feelings that affect the experience and behavior of a person."¹² It is normally difficult to identify a particular trigger for a mood.¹³ Often, combinations of physiological and environmental factors lead to a certain mood.

Finally, an emotion becomes more than a feeling. Emotions, while elusive and hard to define, do produce measurable differences in the central nervous system.¹⁴ Considering the close relationship between mind and emotions, let us now look at how emotions interact with inspiration.

Emotions and inspiration

A Seventh-day Adventist understanding of inspiration is based on the biblical evidence that God reveals Himself in a special way to certain individuals, who in turn, communicate His messages to others (1 Sam. 3:21-4:1; Isa. 22:14; Joel 2:28, 29; Matt. 11:27; Eph. 3:3, 4; 2 Pet. 1:19-21).¹⁵ The process of "divine self-disclosure encompasses a wide variety of revelatory experiences, such as visions and dreams, verbal communication, and panoramic views present 'past, present, and future.'"¹⁶ Similarly, Peter van Bemmelen notes, "The biblical evidence . . . points to specific individuals, chosen by God, as the primary locus of the working of the Holy Spirit."¹⁷ Because we believe that the biblical authors were inspired (2 Pet. 1:20-21; 2 Tim. 3:16-17), the focus of the process of revelation and Inspiration is the prophet.¹⁸

Ellen White underlines this as well when she states that the prophet,

"under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, presents what is most forcibly impressed upon his own mind."¹⁹ Because of the close link between the mind and emotions, the emotions of a prophet play an important role in the inspirational process. Prophets are not passive mediums for the prophetic voice. They are emotionally involved in their calling and experience the full gamut of human emotions.

Expressions of emotions in the Bible

Although the Bible does not often directly address the thoughts and emo-

(Nah. 2:10, means literally "gathered paleness"); hair straightening (Job 4:14, 15); inability to move (Exod. 15:16); and inability to breathe (Dan. 10:17). Similarly, Kruger lists numerous metaphorical expressions involving anger, including the body as a container for anger (Isa. 30:27, Ezek. 38:18); increasing anger that produces steam (2 Sam. 22:9; Job 4:9); anger as fire (Isa. 30:27; Jer. 4:4; etc.); or anger as an opponent (Ps. 69:24) or a dangerous animal (Ezek. 43:8).²³ The positive emotion of joy can also be seen in distinct body parts. Joy makes a cheerful face (Prov. 15:13) and lights up the eyes (v. 30). Joy is also

When I do not care for my spiritual health, I am more easily discouraged and decreasingly optimistic about what God can accomplish. Pastors thrive on meaningful time rendered to the Lord.

tions of the prophets, their emotions are portrayed in a variety of ways. One of the most common ways of expressing emotions in the Bible is to speak of emotions as bodily occurrences.²⁰ Even in English, emotions are often talked of as "bodily" experiences. For example, we may say that on hearing bad news, "we went weak in the knees," or that a person's statement made "our blood boil."

Old Testament scholar Paul Kruger lists 19 physiological changes marking fear in the Hebrew Bible.²¹ They include physical agitation (such as "trembling"²² [Exod. 19:16]; "quivering" [Exod. 15:15]; "shaking" [Exod. 20:18]; or "quaking" [Exod. 15:14]); an increased heart rate (Ps. 38:10); blood leaving one's face

marked by a mouth filled with laughter (Job 8:21, Ps. 126:2).²⁴

Let us hone in and look at specific examples of how prophets reacted emotionally to their ministry by focusing on three distinct areas: (1) the divine call; (2) the divine message; and (3) the emotional involvement of the prophets in their messages.

Emotions and the call

Surprisingly, in most prophetic call stories in Scripture, the would-be prophet reacts negatively to God's call. Prophets normally felt unworthy, unprepared, or just plain afraid.

For example, when Isaiah sees God in vision, he uses the expression "Woe

to me!”—an expression of extreme negative emotion. Intriguingly, the participle *’ôy* is commonly used in laments and expressions of mourning (1 Sam. 4:7, 8). Isaiah seems to anticipate his own funeral when he considers God’s glorious appearance.²⁵ However, after having his lips touched in vision with a live coal from the altar (Isa. 6:6, 7), he seems to be animated, as he is the only prophet mentioned in Scripture to then volunteer for the job, saying, “Here am I! Send me.” (v. 8).

We see similarities in Jeremiah’s call (Jer. 1:4–10). Jeremiah does not feel up to the task and claims inability to speak because of his inexperience and youth (v. 6). God touches his mouth, and then the prophet participates in the vision of the almond tree and the boiling pot. However, unlike Isaiah, he still seems to be afraid—although more of delivering the message than of God, as we can see in God’s series of commands and warnings in Jeremiah 1:17–19.

Ezekiel’s calling also comes loaded with extreme negative emotions. The prophet-to-be falls face down after seeing a vision of God (Ezek. 1:28). The biblical text notes that Ezekiel left his first vision “in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit” (3:14, NIV).²⁶ There is no specific explanation as to the reason of this strong reaction. Perhaps, similar to Jeremiah or Isaiah, Ezekiel felt overwhelmed by the weight of the assignment. The emotional effect of the vision was so great that Ezekiel sat for seven days—overwhelmed and obviously too afraid to share the vision (v. 15).

Emotional involvement in divine vision

For the prophet a vision was never a detached academic exercise. The biblical prophets not only observed events and places and object lessons in vision, they were often active in the vision and became emotionally involved in the scenes portrayed.

A prophet’s emotions were not put on hold during vision. While in vision, prophets felt a range of emotions. When catching a glimpse of God’s glory, they often experienced the sensation of fear

and awe. After seeing someone “like the Son of Man” (Rev. 1:13), John falls at his feet “as though dead” (v. 17, NIV). Daniel’s experience is similar (cf. Dan. 8 and 10).²⁷ In his vision Daniel notices a ram and a goat, and when he is trying to make sense of what he sees, Gabriel approaches him to explain the vision. Daniel reports that he was “terrified and fell prostrate” (Dan. 8:17, NIV).

Fear, however, is not the only emotion experienced in vision. John becomes so involved in the vision of the scroll with the seven seals that he “wept much” (Rev. 5:4) when no one was found worthy to open the scroll.

And not all emotions are negative either. Zechariah becomes so enthused that he begins to actively engage in his vision. After witnessing the showdown between the angel of the Lord and Satan over Joshua the high priest, he watches as Joshua’s filthy garments are being replaced with clean ones. Zechariah seems to forget himself and joins the process by ordering a new turban for Joshua (Zech. 3:5). Zechariah’s wish is a clear expression of the prophet’s excitement as he becomes emotionally involved in the vision.

Emotional response to a divine message and its proclamation

Emotions do not stop after a prophetic message from God has been delivered. After a message has been delivered, prophets often experience various emotions. At times they are frustrated, or even angry, when they see that God’s message has been met with indifference or hostility (1 Kings 18:21, 22:28, 2 Kings 13:19).

An interesting example is the story of Jonah. The whole book of Jonah seems to be a case study of a prophet who refuses to share in God’s emotions. The first chapter gives little clues to Jonah’s emotional state. By his action of running in the opposite direction, we are left to conclude only that Jonah does not feel positive toward his call. We find the whole first chapter marked by a notable lack of reported emotion on Jonah’s part. The fact that the

sailors are “afraid” and “cried out” (1:5), “exceedingly afraid” (v. 10), or “terrified” (NIV), and “feared the Lord exceedingly” (v. 16) stands in dramatic contrast to Jonah, who seems to be emotionally aloof. Faced with the penetrating questions of the terrified sailors, he declares dispassionately that he should be thrown into the raging seas. His lack of emotion borders on apathy and contrasted the sailors’ desperate intent to row to land (v. 13) in order to save his life. Once the crew realizes that escape is impossible, their emotional prayer pleading for divine forgiveness and recognition of the circumstances (v. 16) is countered by Jonah’s silence. Jonah does not seem to feel anything at this point as he faces sure death.

We see emotions coming to the fore only in his prayer in chapter 2, in the belly of the fish, when he refers to his “distress” (NIV) or “affliction” (v. 2).²⁸ After his dramatic rescue, he becomes willing to experience and convey certain emotions, namely, God’s wrath (Jon. 3:4), but is not willing to sympathize with God. The fact that God has “compassion” on the city (vv. 9, 10, NIV) evokes a surprising emotional response in Jonah: he was greatly displeased and became angry (Jon. 4:1). Jonah then explains his actions in fleeing to Tarshish as a reaction to God’s emotions of compassion and abounding love (v. 2). The reader usually expects that a prophet would be very happy when a message from God is accepted. But Jonah is reported to be “very happy” (v. 6, NIV) only when a shady vine grows. When it withers, he expresses extreme emotion, being “angry enough to die” (v. 9, AMP). The book of Jonah ends with God indirectly inviting Jonah to share his emotions (or “concern,” NIV) for the people and even animals of Nineveh (v. 11).

Sometimes prophets struggled with making sense of what they had seen in vision and became so anguished as to even become physically ill. Following Daniel’s vision of the 2,300 evenings and mornings (Dan. 8:26), Daniel lay ill for several days. He was “appalled” by the vision because it was for him at that time “beyond understanding” (v. 27, NIV).

Elijah's story reflects the bandwidth of emotional responses—both his own as well as the response of leadership and general population. After God's demonstration of sovereignty and power on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), the emotional state of Elijah seems to move from a mountaintop experience of triumph and victory over Baal's prophets to terror at Jezebel's threat (1 Kings 19:2, 3). Following his hasty flight, his terror becomes a full-blown depression, ultimately leading the prophet to desire his own death (verse 4). God's patient dealing with the fragile emotive state of His messenger highlights God's understanding of emotional pain and His commitment to see His servants through the emotional shadowlands.

Prophets repeatedly made predictions of disaster and punishment for sin. Though these pronouncements were often met with indifference by the people, the prophet, as part of the group, knew that he, too, would suffer the results of the collective disobedience and was keenly aware of and afraid of the impending disaster. Jeremiah describes this poignantly in Jeremiah 4:19: "O my soul, my soul! I am pained in my very heart! My heart makes a noise in me; I cannot hold my peace, because you have heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war."²⁹ Mentally and emotionally he pre-lived the destruction of Jerusalem many times.³⁰

Conclusion

Our brief review of the emotional involvement of biblical prophets in their prophetic ministry demonstrates that prophets were not simply a conduit for God's words. Emotions were a part of the vision experience and are part and parcel of the process of inspiration.

Recognizing insights from cognitive science research and psychology can help us understand different ways in which emotions contributed to the prophetic experience.

In view of the fact that emotions are normally triggered by stimulus events, experiencing God in vision triggered emotions in the biblical prophets during

and after the vision. These emotions would have been reinforced with each subsequent retelling or remembering of the occurrence. This helped keep the vision vivid in the mind of the prophet as well as the audience.


Emotions serve as relevance detectors. Thus emotional expressions in the prophetic books can serve to highlight certain themes or sections of a vision. Daniel's reaction to the 2,300 evening and morning prophecy serves to heighten the importance, build tension, and underline the later explanation of this prophecy (cf. Dan. 8:27).³¹

In a highly emotional moment, individuals will recall details they are not normally capable of remembering. For example, most people can remember where they were and what they were doing on hearing of the 9/11/2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City. Emotion serves as a snapshot and helps the prophet focus, order, and remember details of a vision. This may be a possible explanation of the vivid, yet often varying, prophetic descriptions of God, heaven, or heavenly beings.

The fact that emotions are the biggest influence on behavior and can interrupt a behavioral sequence as well as serve as the trigger for setting new goals and plans seems to be reinforced throughout the prophetic books. The goal of many of the prophetic messages was to bring a sense of the sinfulness and consequences of sinful behavior and inspire the audience to set new goals and make new plans. This represents in essence the biblical concept of repentance or "turning around." This goal is reflected most clearly in the choice of language in all prophetic writings, which is calculated to shock, startle, get attention, and trigger an emotion in the audience.³²

The prophetic process underlines the fact that God not only has thoughts and plans but feelings too. God's emotions stand in contrast to human emotions as being dependable and continually flowing out from who God is. After all, "God is love" (1 John 4:16).

Emotions generated in vision repeatedly lead to asking questions

and getting clarification from God. A prophet not only speaks for God but also often vicariously expresses the emotions of his audience. In a sense the prophet is called to incarnate the emotional responses of both the people and the Lord and use his (or her) emotions to better convey God's message. Part of the call of being a prophet is an invitation to view the world as God sees it and feel some of the emotions that God feels as He views human activity. Not only are God's words to be spoken by the prophet but God's emotions are to be felt and conveyed. 

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations have been taken from the New King James Version.
- 2 A significantly expanded version of this study has appeared as "My Heart Is Fainting in Me" (Jeremiah 8:18): Emotions and Prophetic Writings in the Bible," in *The Gift of Prophecy in Scripture and History*, eds. Alberto R. Timm and Dwain N. Esmond (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2015), 137–151.
- 3 Paul A. Kruger, "Depression in the Hebrew Bible: An Update," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 64 (2005), 187.
- 4 In earlier research it was argued that the capacity to speak and express complex emotions in language was part and parcel of having been created in the image of God. Cf. Gerald A. Klingbeil, "He Spoke and It Was: Human Language, Divine Creation, and the *imago Dei*," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 36, no. 1 (2014), 42–59, esp. 45–49.
- 5 Aecio E. Cairus, "The Doctrine of Man," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen; Commentary Reference Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2000), 212.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 205–232.
- 7 Klaus R. Scherer, "What Are Emotions? And How Can They Be Measured?" *Social Science Information* 44, no. 4 (2005), 697.
- 8 Elizabeth Phelps, "Hold That Thought," *Discover* (July–August 2014), 31.
- 9 Scherer, "What Are Emotions?" 700.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 701–702. Cf. Klaus R. Scherer, "Physiological Models of Emotion," in *The Neuropsychology of Emotion*, ed. Joan C. Borod; Series in Affective Science (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 138.
- 11 For facial expressions associated with certain emotions in the Old Testament, see Paul A. Kruger, "The Face and Emotions in the Hebrew Bible," *Old Testament Essays* 18 (2005), 651–662.
- 12 Scherer, "What Are Emotions?" 705.
- 13 For an intriguing discussion of one particular trigger, that is, phobias, and the role memory can play in the perpetuation or treatment of phobias, see Phelps, "Hold That Thought," 33.
- 14 Scherer, "What Are Emotions?" 709.
- 15 Note especially the important contribution of Fernando Canale, "Revelation and Inspiration," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid; Biblical Research Institute Studies 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute/General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists,

- 2005), 47–74. Canale has reminded Adventists that the theological models of verbal inspiration or thought inspiration carry inherent methodological shortcomings and thus should be replaced with a “biblical model of inspiration.”
- 16 Frank M. Hasel, “Revelation and Inspiration,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2013), 1088.
 - 17 Peter van Bemmelen, “Revelation and Inspiration,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2000), 39.
 - 18 See Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, bk. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1980), 21.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 26.
 - 20 Strong emotions can be measured physiologically. Elevated blood pressure, sweating, increased heartbeat, and muscle spasms, among other physical phenomena, can indicate bodily emotive responses.
 - 21 Paul A. Kruger, “A Cognitive Interpretation of the Emotion of Fear in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 27.2 (2001): 79–87.
 - 22 Translations in this paragraph are the authors’ translation of the original text.
 - 23 More examples can be found in Paul A. Kruger, “A Cognitive Interpretation of the Emotion of Anger in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 26.1 (2000): 181–193.
 - 24 The Psalms are an emotional hotbed, expressing the full range of human and divine emotions. The issue of the imprecatory psalms (for example, 5, 17, 28, 35, 40, 55, 59, 70, 71, 79, 80, 94, 129, 137, 139, 140) and their relationship to biblical theology and ethics has engendered numerous monograph-length studies. See, for example, recently John N. Day, “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (2002): 166–186; Nancy L. DeClaisse-Walford, “The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms,” in *Soundings in the Theology of Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf Jacobson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011), 77–92, 176–178; Brent A. Strawn, “Sanctified and Commercially Successful Curses: On Gangsta Rap and the Canonization of the Imprecatory Psalms,” *Theology Today* 69, no. 4 (2013): 403–417. Space limitations will not allow an appropriate discussion of these challenging expressions of emotions of revenge directed toward enemies and adversaries. Considering the wholistic nature of biblical theology and inspiration, the evangelical argument that these emotions are consistent with an Old Testament covenant but inconsistent with the New Covenant must be dismissed. The existence of a full range of human emotions in the Psalms is a good reminder of the fact that all emotions can be brought to God and expressed to Him. Furthermore, one of the key motifs of the imprecatory psalms involves divine justice. Their existence in the Psalter points toward God’s judgment day when true justice will prevail. In the face of ever-increasing injustice and human suffering, this is a good reminder of divine justice transcending all evil powers. This justice is rooted in God’s character, His law, and His grace.
 - 25 John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, Word Biblical Commentary 24 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 74.
 - 26 The Hebrew text reads here literally, “and I went in bitterness and in the heat [or wrath] of my spirit” (Ezek. 3:14). Leslie C. Allen notes that “the language used evokes preclassical prophetic experiences and characterizes Ezekiel with authoritative credentials as an old-world prophet of the status of Elijah. . . . The supernatural phenomenon had an effect on his [Ezekiel’s] mind as well as his body, an emotional excitement that gripped him as the subjective effect of Yahweh’s strong hand upon him.” *Ezekiel 1–19*, Word Biblical Commentary 28 (Dallas: Word, 1994), 43.
 - 27 G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 213, highlights the fourfold pattern involving observing a vision, falling on one’s face in fear, being strengthened by a heavenly being, and then receiving further revelation from that being.
 - 28 The Hebrew צָרָה, *zārā*, “distress, anxiety, need,” appears repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible and indicates affliction or distress caused by others (Gen. 42:21); it belongs to the standard vocabulary of the psalms (for example, Pss. 22:11; 78:49; 81:7; 91:15; etc.). Distress marks existential fears and anxieties.
 - 29 The literal translation of “oh my soul” would be, “oh my entrails (or belly).” The entrails were often considered to be the seat of all emotions. Cf. Barclay M. Newman Jr. and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on Jeremiah*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 2003), 136. The entire verse contains highly visual body part language that is difficult to translate into English.
 - 30 F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, New American Commentary 16 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 83.
 - 31 Note also John’s weeping in Revelation 5, which magnifies the importance of the eventual breaking of the seals and underlines the centrality and importance of the Lamb who is the only one worthy to break the seals.
 - 32 Choice of language is also closely associated with genre. For example, prophets often used laments (cf. Lamentations, Amos 5) or even a love song (Isa. 5), which would further trigger emotion. Some were even instructed to go further with acted object lessons (Ezek. 4:1–12; Jer. 13:1–11; 27:1–22; 28:10; 43:8–13; etc.).

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LETTERS

Continued from page 4



any new light, and at the end of the article I am trying to reconcile the two views, saying that, on one hand, we all are part of this world’s society, and, on the other, there are “little ones” scattered all around this world. After reading meticulously the statements from the *Sons and Daughters of God* you are referring to, I do not see how any of them contradict what I wrote. They say that there will be judgment of all nations based on works of mercy—did

I ever say anything different? Yes, those passages lack some details that can be found in my article, but I do not think Ellen White ever believed she had an ultimate and exclusive understanding of every text in the Bible or intended her writings to prevent us from going deeper into the Scripture.

Also, the proposed interpretation even more supports the “salvation by works” than the traditional one, because it allows a possibility for

“Gentiles” to inherit the Kingdom because of their deeds for the sake of God’s people. But I completely agree with your explanation regarding how “deeds” and change of heart are related. I think the message of the parable is vital not only to our salvation (that is, of Christians) but also to salvation of every person in this world.

Thank you so much for letting me think more deeply about these issues.

—Anton Petrishchev