

Jailed Adventist

By Seth Ferrell

Back in 1987, Sunday laws were enforced in Fiji. You may be wondering, How did it transpire? Let me explain: The population of the Fiji Islands was 57% Fijian (indigenous Fijians, a mixture of Melanesians and Polynesians), 37% Indian (from India), and 6% Other (primarily consisting of Europeans and Chinese). Over the years, there has been a persistent political struggle between the Fijians and the Indians. There were four coups to grasp the government by these two opposing nationalities. (Coup: a sudden, violent, and unlawful seizure of power from a government, also known as coup d'état. It's pronounced "coo day tah.") At the center of each coup was the tension between the ethnic Fijians and the Indian Fijians. Religion played a significant role because the majority of ethnic Fijians belonged to the Methodist Church while the majority of Indian Fijians were Hindu. When the Christian ethnic Fijians had power, they made Sunday laws in order to harass the Indians. These laws impacted the Seventh-day Adventists most severely, though they were bystanders.

During the enforcement of these Sunday laws in Fiji, my father (Vance) sent one of his employees to Fiji with the purpose of writing an article about the situation. That was almost 37 years ago. Though I was a child, I still remember that event.

Many years later, when I lived in California, I developed a very close friendship with a godly Fijian man. His name is Aisake, which means Isaac; but he goes by Sake Drekeni. He experienced imprisonment for Sabbathkeeping during the Sunday laws. I have interviewed him, and the following is his story: Sake was working as the general manager at a very large resort in Fiji. He was 32 years old at the time and had a wife and two children—a two-month-old and a one-year-old.

Sake gave me this summary: The Sunday law came from the president of the Methodist Church, who was working together with the Catholic Church. Parliament agreed that you could only go to church on Sunday, not on any other day.

On Sunday, all the stores had to be closed, and there was no public transportation on that day. If anyone went to church on the Sabbath, they would be taken to jail. That was back in the days of no internet, just TV and radio. Each police station issued the news that came from the parliament. The military and the police were united in order to make sure no one was going to church on Sabbath or working on Sunday. On Sundays, the military and police would head off into the villages and look for lawbreakers working in their gardens.

Here is Sake's full story: We read in the newspapers of many Adventists who had been jailed for their faith. I was an elder in the local SDA church; and, on the second Sabbath morning after the Sunday law was passed, the police came to our church. It was a beautiful morning; and, surprisingly, all the members were at church, even with the threat of possible imprisonment hanging over their heads. I was leading our opening song, "O Worship the Lord," when we heard the sirens in the distance speeding toward us.

They stopped right outside our church; and the soldiers and police suddenly burst through the door. Some members stopped singing, but many fearlessly continued to pour forth praises to God. I continued singing as they steadily walked toward me. Without saying a word, they proceeded to handcuff some of us. I had a small Bible in my bag, which I quickly grabbed and stuffed into my pocket.

I was peaceful as a lamb, unlike some of my other brothers in the church who argued and even fought with the police. Some of our members were champion boxers and wanted to show that they would not be easily taken. Sometimes we like to fight for the Lord, but we need to realize that this battle belongs to the Lord, and He will fight for us!

I was arrested because of my faith, but I had done nothing wrong. Our pastor, the other elders, and I were led out of the church. As they put us into the police vehicle, we could hear the other members still singing. Later, I learned that many

2 members stayed there all day and prayed for us and the other Adventists in Fiji.

I had never gone to jail before. As the police van entered the jail, I was a bit anxious about what was before me. When we arrived at our cell, it was too small. Many Adventists were already in the cell; so they released some, to make room for us. There was only a metal bench in our cell—no beds or blankets, just a concrete floor. The goal of the police was to lock up the prominent members. They knew that I managed the big resort; and, with me, there were schoolteachers, nurses, doctors, and lawyers. I could see all my brothers who were in that cell with me, and none of us seemed afraid. We knew that we stood for the truth. We began to sing and praise God; after a while, the police began bringing us food. Most of the time, we prayed while we were imprisoned. All fear had left us then, and death seemed like nothing because we rejoiced so much.

That night was cold, and it was not an easy thing to lie down on the concrete. It will surprise you, but I recall the concrete being as comfortable as a mattress. It was so soft, and we slept very well. We were not cold because the police had pity on us and brought us blankets. Who told them to go get us blankets? Right there in that dark, dank prison, I knew the battle belonged to the Lord.

When they opened our cell on Sunday morning, we were all asleep. We slept soundly, as if we were on plush mattresses. All the angels in heaven were watching and protecting God's children. The police or military did not mistreat or physically harm us, and I do not know of any other members who were mistreated, other than being imprisoned.

I was not raised as a Seventh-day Adventist. I was raised as a Methodist. I had already studied about the Sunday law, and I was filled with courage as I faced it. We have to eat the Word and fill ourselves with the Word! The more you eat the Word the stronger you grow. The Holy Spirit will give you the courage to endure and the proper words to say.

On that day, the promises of God flooded into my mind. Here are two verses that I began sharing with my brothers: "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness." Lamentations 3:22-23. The faithfulness of God is so powerful because, if you stand on the holy ground of God, you will never be afraid; I know because I have been there. I was not afraid of being killed. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" Romans 8:31. These texts, and many more, came forcibly to mind. I had forgotten them; but,

on that day, I remembered them. I am telling you this because we should not be afraid to hear the tidings of the approaching crisis. We have been preparing ourselves for so long; so let it be.

Early in the morning, when we woke up, one of the police officers came over to us and tried to get us to deny our faith. He said, "You can't sleep like this; you have families." In a loving way, we told him, "We have known this God for so long; how can we deny our God in front of you?" My close friend was a very intelligent schoolteacher and studied the Bible very much. He told the officer, "I would like to talk with you. May I introduce myself to you?" Then he began to pour out the Word. This police officer with a gun in hand listened; and, a moment later, he put his gun away and kept listening as the youthful teacher unfolded Bible truths to him. He said, "Think about where the Sunday came from." After some time, the officer left; but, within 10 minutes, he came back with five friends. He then explained, "We would like to hear again what you said." We were all sitting on the concrete floor as the godly teacher instructed again. After some time, the interested officers left.

At about 12 noon, we heard voices again. After entering the cell, the chief police exclaimed, "We don't understand what wrongdoing you have done. We have seen you not complaining but rather praising God and praying. You have to go home now; we see nothing wrong with you guys, but we learned a lot this morning about Sunday." My wife and children were so excited when I arrived back home. It was a joyful reunion, and we quickly dropped to our knees to thank our kind and faithful Father for His deliverance. Truly we experienced the fulfillment of the promises of Jesus.

"Never is the tempest-trying soul more dearly loved by His Saviour than when he is suffering reproach for the truth's sake.... When for the truth's sake the believer stands at the bar of earthly tribunals, Christ stands by his side. When he is confined within prison walls, Christ manifests Himself to him and cheers his heart with His love. When he suffers death for Christ's sake, the Saviour says to him, They may kill the body, but they cannot hurt the soul."—*Acts of the Apostles*, 85.

Truly Jesus is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother, and nothing can separate us from the love of God!

"Though enemies may thrust them into prison, yet dungeon walls cannot cut off the commu-

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 nication between their souls and Christ. One who sees their every weakness, who is acquainted with every trial, is above all earthly powers; and angels will come to them in lonely cells, bringing light and peace from heaven. The prison will be as a palace; for the rich in faith dwell there, and the gloomy walls will be lighted up with heavenly light as when Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises at midnight in the Philippian dungeon.”—*Great Controversy*, 627.

One lesson we can learn from the Fijian Sunday laws: Harassing the Hindu Indians is an odd excuse to pass a Sunday law. Of course there are other reasons given for Sunday laws to exist. The writings of Ellen White and modern society give multiple reasons for these laws to be passed.

Calamities are here because Sunday is desecrated:

“Satan puts his interpretation upon events, and they think, as he would have them, that the calamities which fill the land are a result of Sundaybreaking. Thinking to appease the wrath of God these influential men make laws enforcing Sunday observance.”—*Last Day Events*, 129.

A Sunday Law is needed to get us back to God:

“This very class put forth the claim that the fast-spreading corruption is largely attributable to the desecration of the so-called “Christian sabbath” and that the enforcement of Sunday observance would greatly improve the morals of society. This claim is especially urged in America, where the doctrine of the true Sabbath has been most widely preached.”—*Great Controversy*, 587.

In 1896, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Johnson Field, praised the blue laws:

“The prohibition of secular business on Sunday is advocated on the ground that by it the general welfare is advanced, labor protected, and the moral and physical well-being of society promoted.” — *Hennington vs. Georgia*, 163 U.S. 299.

Professor Elesha Coffman, of Baylor University (a private university located in Waco, Texas), explains the effect of the removal of blue laws:

“Regarding culture, the impact of vanishing blue laws could be larger. A study in New Mexico, in 2006, found a sharp increase in drunken driving on Sundays after that state dropped its Sunday ban on packaged alcohol sales. A broader study, published by MIT and Notre Dame economists in 2008, found that the repeal of blue laws led to decreased church attendance, decreased donations

to churches, and increased alcohol and drug use among religious individuals. (MIT: Massachusetts Institute of Technology / Notra Dame: a Catholic cathedral in Paris, France) These wide-ranging effects cannot easily be pinpointed to specific causes, but one of the latter study’s authors, Daniel Hungerman, suggested, to *Christianity Today*, that blue laws might have been fulfilling their original intent, to keep people pious.”

In the 1890s, as white settlers moved west into Texas, the Mexican Americans were seen as a nuisance. Sunday laws were instituted to deprive them of their heritage as much as their lands. These Sunday laws prohibited “noisy amusements” such as bullfights, cockfights, and other cultural gatherings common to Mexican American communities.

Other observations:

Even though Sake and his fellow believers knew about the edict, they faithfully went to church. This reminds us of Daniel hearing of the king’s decree not to pray to God, and yet he would not deviate from the clear duty that he knew God would have him do. It would have been far easier to just worship at home; that way, he would not risk imprisonment. But those Fijians did not give in to reason. How many of us, today, would easily choose the reasonable path, especially after Covid mandates tried to force us to worship at home? What would we do if we were faced with the exact circumstances the Fijian members dealt with? Would we go to church and find ourselves in jail or stay home for church and be great! What would you do?

Sake could easily have reasoned that, since he had small children that needed to be cared for by their mother, he could not risk imprisonment and a loss of employment. He must keep his job at all costs; after all, a man who does not provide for his family is worse than an infidel. Would he lose his salvation just because he worshiped at home instead of going to church and risking everything? Instead, he put himself in the window so he could speak by leading the singing up front.

Does the Bible, anywhere, tell us to go to church on Sabbath anyway? Why can’t we just rest at home? Do we need to worship with others on that day? God commanded, “Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the Sabbath of rest, an holy convocation; ye shall do no work therein: it is the Sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings.” Leviticus 23:3.

What does “a holy convocation” mean? Well, one use of the Hebrew word for holy is: “And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.” Exodus 3:5. This thought reminds

4 us of: "If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on My holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight,...then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth" 58:13-14. We are instructed that the Sabbath is God's holy time; we are not to trample it underfoot. Jesus revealed more about this holy time:

"Wherefore the Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath.' [See Mark 2:28.] These words are full of instruction and comfort. Because the Sabbath was made for man, it is the Lord's day. It belongs to Christ."—*Desire of Ages*, 288.

This day "belongs to Christ"; it is not our day to decide what we shall or shall not do during that sacred time. It is holy ground, not to be trampled on.

So to repeat the main points here:

- ◆ Holy means it is sacred and separate from other days. It is God's day, not ours.
- ◆ "Convocation" means assembly or gathering of the people.

God said that Sabbath is the day for "a holy convocation," which is a sacred assembly, His time when He calls us to gather together to worship Him.

We are also admonished: "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." Hebrews 10:25. Paul exhorts us to gather together; and, as a prophet, he predicts that these holy gatherings are more important as the last days creep up on us.

Why am I stressing this point? Well, I heard of an Adventist pastor who was speaking to a group of youth. He told them that nowhere in the Bible did God tell us that we needed to go to church on Sabbath—just rest, not work. As you can imagine, that is dangerous teaching, especially for young people who are generally not well-grounded in Bible truth nor particularly inclined to attend church.

This idea of "resting only" is incorrect. We have studied together where and when God says the Sabbath is "a holy convocation," a day when He expects us to gather to worship Him.

In a similar way, Daniel could have reasoned that praying in his closet was the most convenient way. Well, would it have been wrong for him to

worship God in that way? No! But we are called to be the light of the world. We are not to be closet Christians. It's high time for us to come out of the closet and be proud and boast of our Saviour's power!

In Fiji, it is interesting to note that all the members came to church, even though they knew it was illegal. Ellen White clearly explains that the church members will respond differently in the coming crisis. Some will show their connection with Christ by their actions, while the larger portion will show that they do not know Him. He had been knocking at the heart's door, but they had kept it shut.

"The time is not far distant, when the test will come to every soul.... In this time, the gold will be separated from the dross in the church. True godliness will be clearly distinguished from the appearance and tinsel of it. Many a star that we have admired for its brilliancy, will then go out in darkness. Chaff like a cloud will be borne away on the wind, even from places where we see only floors of rich wheat."—*5 Testimonies*, 81.

Sake explained that some argued and even tried to fight with the police. Those individuals seemed not to be trusting in God but rather in their own expertise and power to rescue them. I find it intriguing that they still came to church, knowing full well that they might be jailed for so doing. Maybe they had not considered what was involved in that crisis. Are we counting the cost ahead of time and preparing for what is slowly and continuously creeping up on us? What should we be doing? How should we be living our lives?

"Christians should be preparing for what is soon to break upon the world as an overwhelming surprise, and this preparation they should make by diligently studying the Word of God and striving to conform their lives to its precepts. The tremendous issues of eternity demand of us something besides an imaginary religion, a religion of words and forms, where truth is kept in the outer court."—*Conflict and Courage*, 260.

Sake always treasured his time spent in prayer and Bible study. He went through an experience that we may soon have to pass through. His courage should inspire us in through preparation and daily faithfulness. Let us be faithful. —*Seth Ferrell*