

“Defend the Fatherless: Vindicate, Judge, and Govern”
Orphan and Vulnerable Children Sabbath Sermon Isaiah 1:17
by Stepan Avakov

Some time ago I was pondering on the current situation in the world and realized there was not a decade without war since the beginning of the 20th century, and that includes only large geopolitical conflicts that the entire world paid attention to. But how many additional regional wars and conflicts were there, too? How many civil wars and infightings? I can hardly imagine how many people were involved in these conflicts, how many of them suffered, how many of them had to relocate and immigrate to other countries to find a quieter place to live.

Well, all of these wars were open conflicts with all the parties involved in them acknowledging their participation. However all this time – and up until now – there is another war and this was is unannounced. This is a war against the ultimate underdog who should never be involved in any conflict. Moreover, this opponent does not even know it is involved in war. I am talking about children. Today there are more than 153 million orphans in the world. The number of vulnerable children living in crisis is countless, including those suffering in a permanent family, civil crises, and personal crisis. How many children suffered innocently as a result of wars? How many of them have been kidnapped and involved in the modern day slavery? How many lives have been irrevocably warped and destroyed?

As people of the 21st century, we focus on technology, but we often forget about the basic values – the value of a child’s life or a value of building up a person. These are the values that have been reflected in the Holy Scriptures.

Let us read a passage from the book of prophet Isaiah, chapter 1:17, “Learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.”

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Isaiah wrote these words at the very dawn of his prophetic ministry that started at about 745 BC and ended somewhere around 686 BC. This means Isaiah continued to serve as a prophet for about 60 years. All these years he eye-witnessed a permanent struggle for the pure faith of Judea, for its genuine righteousness, for social justice based on the Word of God... The world of Isaiah's days – just like ours – was filled with wars. Assyrian kings were building their massive empire as they constantly threatened Judea and had wiped Israel off the face of the Earth together with 10 of its tribes. Isaiah lived and served during the reigns of 4 Judean and 5 Assyrian kings. All this time war engulfed Judea on all levels including the spiritual level as the enemy of human souls dreamed of destroying God's people or at least the knowledge of God.

Please note the verbs Isaiah chose to show the relevance of the battle for those who needed the protection:

- Learn to do good
- Seek justice
- Rebuke the oppressor
- Plead for the widow

All these verbs reflect the intensity to which the prophet called his readers, urging them to make every effort to correct the situation among the Lord's people when social justice, mercy, and virtue stopped being a common goal.

But let's give special attention to the phrase, “Defend the fatherless”? What does this mean? (**judge**, **govern**, **vindicate** (שָׁפַט shaphat)).

Let's talk about what the prophet of God could mean by this phrase. What lessons we can take from it that are important for our ministry today's orphans and vulnerable children?

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Well, number one is that an orphan, especially the one living at an orphanage or a shelter, is a person left without a loving protector. Today most of the countries in the world constituted various institutions to protect the rights of orphans. The idea is to provide them with opportunities to get a good education, a good vocation or a skill, and to have clothes, food, and a roof over their heads. However the life shows – and this is proved by various scientific research – that physical protection alone does not solve an orphan’s problem.

Human brain chemistry is made so that a psychological trauma that was caused to a human being can hamper or even stop the development of the brain functions and neuron wiring in it resulting in slowing down a child’s general growth. The prefrontal cortex suffers most. This is the area of the brain that controls a human’s ability to analyze and make conscious and critical decisions. As a principle, the entire body suffers – a child develops psychic and somatic dysfunctions that can provoke serious diseases.

Story #1 Serge & Little Dannie

Little Dannie was 3 years old, when together with his older brother Serge, he was taken away from his family. Dannie’s mother drank alcohol with her friends and did a lot of bad things with them. She never cared for her little kids. They were always hungry and shivering of cold. Their pet dog would protect them from their mother’s unacceptable friends. However several times they beat the kids or humiliated and bullied them horribly.

Because of all of this, little Dannie could not develop well. He slowed down intellectually. After 2 years at an orphanage the gap between him and other kids grew wider. When Dannie was 5, a

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Christian family adopted him and his older brother Serge. There were three more kids in that family as well. The foster parents started helping Dannie immediately.

He had troubles understanding simple things. To him, any type of plant was ‘a grass’; any fruit was ‘an apple’; anything that grew out of ground was food. Both boys enjoyed eating regular lawn grass or tulip bulbs.

But the worst of all was that Dannie could not study. All colors were green, all digits looked the same, and addition and subtraction principles were rocket science. His new mother Anna rolled up her sleeves and taught him in a foretaste of his upcoming school lessons.

Her love, patience, and compassion exemplified her Christian faith. Her openness and faithful following of God’s will brought surprising results. In his first year at school, the boy became equal to all his classmates, and due to his tireless hours with his mother his fine motor skills (or manual dexterity, as physiologists call it) developed so well that Dannie was the best in his class in writing. This wonderful story is still in progress, and it’s still bringing a lot of joy to the family, and Dannie continues to grow in love as he experiences great support from both his foster parents and his siblings.

You see, the relationship of trust that was built between a child and a significant adult plays an important role. It is extremely important that a child should experience love and trust from an adult, that a child feels safe on a physical level as much as on a psychological and social level. Such safety can only come from the one who loves the child.

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Let's read a statement from Job, the Patriarch. “Or eaten my morsel by myself, so that the fatherless could not eat of it (But from my youth I reared him as a father, And from my mother's womb I guided *the widow*)” (Job 31:17-18).

The level of care that Job showed to orphans was equal to the care he showed to his own children. This is the love that creates a safe environment for a child. Only under conditions like this, a child's brain deactivates its survival mode and starts functioning to build up the child's personality.

This way, the first aspect of orphan protection comes from an actively operating love for the orphan that cancels their self-defense mode and focuses on the child's personality development and growth. This is connected to the biblical meaning of the Hebrew word ‘shaphat’ meaning ‘vindicate’.

The second point is that the most of the orphans have no appreciation for boundaries, neither their personal ones nor anybody else's. They cannot understand that some things don't belong to them. This problem is especially developed with those who live permanently at orphanages or shelters. We conducted research that showed that these children's conscience had deviations of some sort that affected the rating of their terminal and instrumental values. They do not appreciate the values of their personal health or personal growth; they have no understanding of the values of time or patience. In spite of being – as a rule – very kind and prone to compassion, having no understanding of personal boundaries, they always create awkward and sometimes dangerous situations in relationships. These children need someone to protect them from themselves, show them justice in the relationship, and help them build the relationship in such a way that they can learn to bring value to themselves and those around them.

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Story #2 Yury

Yury was a 15-year-old orphan raised by his grandmother when he went to shake down (rip off) passers-by in a company of teens like him. It was a joyful adventure until the police arrested him after their 5th episode. Yury was taken to the police station. After a short conversation it turned out that his friends told the police Yury organized the gang and was in charge of all robbing episodes. The police put electronic handcuffs on Yury and placed him under home confinement until the court hearings. That was the time when Yury met Nikolay. Nikolay was one of Adoption Support Center volunteers and he really wanted to serve delinquent teens. He went through a lot of difficulties but he found salvation through accepting Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and he wanted to bring light to the life of this lost teenager. Long meetings and conversations brought about their fruit – Yury repented and accepted Jesus. He was very sorry for his deeds and he apologized to everyone he wronged. He brought back everything he stole from these people and he told the police he was ready for any punishment. During the hearings, all 5 victims of his crimes recalled their claims and forgave Yury sincerely. The judge sentenced him to the shortest possible term of 4 years at a regular jail with an opportunity for an early parole in 2.5 years. Before he was sent to a jail, Yury asked Nikolay to pray for him and to wait until he was released so they could go to church together. In jail, Yury behaved and lived an exemplary life as he was willing to be honest and just, to keep God’s law, and to be a good Christian. The 2.5 years were recently over and Yury got his early parole. Unfortunately, his mentor, Nikolay, unexpectedly passed away due to double pneumonia. But this did not stop Yury and he still wants to live with the Lord. Olesya, Nikolay’s wife, continued mentoring Yury for the time being and promised to find him a male mentor who could help him build his life on the basis of the Holy Scriptures.

The Bible describes this type of relationship with a verb ‘judge’; in our case this is one of the possible meanings of ‘shaphat’. The protection of an orphan in this case includes lifting his value

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and pointing to the boundaries of his personality as well as other people’s personalities. We show that these boundaries can in no way be crossed. Other words, we support a just attitude to him and to other people that is based on understanding the worthiness of a human soul and its subordinate position regarding God. This aspect of orphan ‘protection’ is reflected in the meaning of the word ‘shaphat’ that can be translated as ‘judge’.

And lastly, the orphan protection means showing them a way of life. Many orphans suffer from the fact they have never seen an example of good living, and example they could identify themselves with and imitate in their own lives. As a rule, they have been victimized by their parents’ perverted lifestyles that included using drugs or alcohol, living immoral lives, committing crimes, and being incarcerated. Unfortunately, these are the templates that their children perceived as the only possible lifestyles – and so now these orphaned children live exactly that way. How do we make a difference? How can we change their lives? It is possible by:

- a. Building significant relationship with them and winning their trust;
- b. Influencing their lives through mentoring (or discipling) based on the love to them and the patience necessary to impart in them new habits, new approaches to solving problems, and new attitudes to life itself.

Such influence is extremely effective if it lasts for not less than two years as it helps a child grow into a new social paradigm. Our research shows that if this is the case, then all key indicators of a child’s social integration are corrected so that the child can fit into the social environment on the same, or at least comparable, level with those children who were raised in their biological families without facing serious personal existential crises.

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Story #3 Daniel

Daniel found himself in an Adventist family by God’s providence. At that time, the family had already adopted a baby boy and never thought another son might be waiting for them.

Daniel was raised in the family of a drug dealer. The father showed up in the rare breaks between his jail sentences. His mother was a drug addict and an alcoholic. His grandparents never minded having a drink or two themselves. Daniel and his younger brother Maxim learned loneliness way too early. Maxim was fostered to a family while Daniel was sent to an orphanage. The orphanage principal knew an Adventist family and suggested they should consider fostering Daniel. This is how he ended up in Dmitry and Anna’s family.

It was not easy from the beginning. Habitually, Daniel mistrusted his new parents. However it began to change slowly. The first surprise Daniel had was when his family took him to a summer camp for foster and adoptive families run by Adoption Support Center on an annual basis. He met a lot of new friends there. He swam and played games. In the evenings they had wonderful worshiping services with beautiful songs and inspiring sermons. The second surprise was when Dmitry and Anna decided to foster his younger brother Maxim. The brothers could not hide their joy when they realized they would live together in the same home once again!

So slowly, step by step, Daniel learned to trust his new parents. He loved his new younger brother Dennis who was sick with a number of chronic diseases. The boy became attached to Daniel and never let go of him. Daniel was 17 when his foster parents helped him enter a technical school where he started studying automobile engineering, and later helped him start his studies at a university. Now Daniel is 21, he continues to study at a university, lives in his own apartment, works, and keeps in touch with Dmitry and Anna as he considers them his real parents.

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Maybe this is the type of influence that an inspired biblical author means when using the word ‘shaphat’ which in this specific sense may be translated as ‘govern’.

So let me sum up our reflection.

Orphans do need love, compassion, and mercy; they need justice and set boundaries and rules; they need good examples that they can follow throughout their entire life, and a wise and kind mentor who could govern their lives.

The Holy Scriptures say directly that God is the Father of fatherless. He is the One who loves them and is compassionate to them, who points them to the just rules of life, and becomes their wise and kind Mentor. Today He is calling out to you and me to follow His example and become His reflection for millions of orphans and vulnerable children in our world.

You can do this by starting a church-based ministry to orphans and vulnerable children. Please pray and ask God what He is promoting you to do in that regard. Even if you don’t know details, you can still find and partner an existing ministry to orphans and vulnerable children in your area who can provide you (personally or your entire church family) with a training to become foster care parents or volunteer in their projects or to become mentors.

There are many ways you and your church can serve the needy children. And finally, as our local church board meets, they can pray and plan for our local church to financially sponsor an orphan’s care and education by sending funds to Orphan and Vulnerable Children’s ministry (OVC) that is a member of Adventist-laymen’s Services & Industries (ASI).

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Are you ready and willing to stand up now and thus show your consent with the One Who never errs and join Him in the ministry to orphans?

Let us pray:

Dear Jesus,

You made this world for happiness and eternal delight in the riches of your love, but we, humans, turned it into a horrible pit of our sins and immorality. We rejected you and as a result we doomed millions of innocent children to suffering as a consequence of the rebellion and defiance of their parents. Today these children need your love and care desperately, and by your great mercy, You send us to this world so we can become the conduits of your love and care for these children.

Lord, we come to You for the power and the influence of Your Holy Spirit who can teach us and make us ready to show love and compassion to these children, to show them the genuine justice and the rules of a blessed life and become an example of a really happy person. We want to point at the Cross of Jesus for them through which they can find a new life and new relationships, new values and new goals. Lord we ask You to do it through us!

We come to You as the Father of fatherless – do Your will through us!

We ask you for this in the holy name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Amen!