

How to Wait For the Second Coming

by Tom Dybdahl

The sky grew brighter and brighter. The earth seemed to shake, and people were rushing about wildly. I didn't know whether to run or stand still. And then it hit me: This was IT. This was the Second Coming of Jesus.

I wanted to be glad, but instead I was terribly afraid. The light got even brighter, until I could see nothing around me. I heard shouts of joy, but none of them were mine. I tried to speak, but I could make only a croaking sound. Then everything went black. And then I woke up.

This happened several times—with variations—when I was young. Only one aspect of the dreams was constant. I never knew whether I was saved or lost. I knew only uncertainty, fear, and then the waking.

Surprisingly—or perhaps not so surprising—everyone I have talked with who was raised as a Seventh-day Adventist has had dreams about the Second Coming. Some were very elaborate; some very simple. And these dreams had obviously left deep impressions. Nearly everyone could recall even the small details.

Seventh-day Adventists live with the Second Coming. It invades our sleeping as well as our waking. Perhaps you have looked up at a clear

sky and seen a small white cloud—is it the size of a man's hand?—and watched, wondering. What will it be like? Could this be it . . . Or, maybe driving on a day with heavy, dark clouds, you have seen shafts of sunlight stream through and thought: will it look like that? And along with the fascination has there not been at least a twinge of fear?

The one undisputable fact is that it hasn't happened yet. Jesus has not returned. Our grandparents thought they would never grow old, but they have. And now we are growing older. We have talked about it for so long with no results that people are beginning to wonder—and bolder ones are beginning to ask—if Jesus may not come for a long time.

Most of us are somewhere in the middle. We believe God's promise is true. We live in the hope of the Second Coming. We pray that it will be soon. But still we wait, and we cannot continue to simply ignore the questions and doubts.

In years past, several alternative explanations for the delay in Christ's coming have been popularly held by Adventists. Perhaps the weakest of these was that Christ could not come until the investigative judgment had been completed. Maybe it was only as children that we believed this—after all, there were an awful lot of books to get through. But surely God has a system far in advance of our own computer technology, so

bookkeeping difficulties cannot be the reason for the delay.

Then there were the signs. It was always easy to just say that they hadn't been sufficiently fulfilled as yet. But that didn't harmonize with our belief that the primary signs have already been fulfilled—that this was the Time of the End, that Christ's return was "just around the corner."

Others emphasized the necessity of evangelizing the world. The gospel, including the third angel's message, must be preached to "every creature." Every individual must be personally confronted with the need to decide for or against Christ. But as the days pass, that possibility becomes less and less likely. The figures become more discouraging and just suppose we could get a piece of literature into the hand of everyone, or they could tune in the Voice of Prophecy, would that do it? Some of us took years to decide for the Advent message.

But the most common Adventist explanation given today is summed up in one sentence from Ellen White: "When the character of Christ shall

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be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own."¹

This explanation, based on the parable of the blade and the ear, has been called the "harvest principle." Just as the farmer must wait for his crops to mature, so Christ must wait for His people to mature. When will He return? When His people perfectly reproduce His character. Why hasn't He returned yet? Because they haven't reproduced His character.

This harvest theology does not abandon the goal of reaching the world, but it stresses the importance of ripening and maturing the spiritual experience of those already within the

church. What we really need is not to reach more people, but to develop those we already have into a strain of super-Adventists who perfectly reproduce the character of Christ. Then the Latter Rain will be poured out and all those unredeemed millions will be easily reached.

But this view, too, leaves unanswered questions. Surely, the regular appeals to greater holiness and purity are good—who of us is perfect? Who can find fault with the sincere admonitions to "finish the work." But how can we be better Christians—more perfectly reproduce the characters of Christ—than our pioneers? They gave all they had to this work. And if our lives were more like Jesus, if we did have more dedication and commitment, would that bring in the Second Coming? Suppose this program or that project succeeds; will "the work" be finished?

So here we are in 1976. Nearer the end than yesterday, to be sure, but how near? Can our words of urgency convince even our own children, to say nothing of the "world outside?"

What is God waiting for? Just what will it take to complete our work here and claim our place in God's heavenly kingdom?

Perhaps we could begin an answer by going back to this parable of the blade and the ear. It is a straightforward parable:

So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground: and should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come. (Mark 4:26-29.)

This is not primarily a parable of the Second Coming. It is primarily a parable of the Christian life. It plainly teaches a maturing process. We are to grow and to produce fruit. But this process is not a one-time event at the close of history, it is for all Christians in all ages.

We need not look to some future time when we may become total Christians. "At every stage of development our life may be perfect," Ellen White comments, "yet if God's purpose for us is fulfilled, there will be continual advancement."²

This understanding of the parable does not

abandon the traditional call for the gospel to the world. Indeed, the call to reproduce the character of Christ is a call for fruit-bearing Christians. “The object of the Christian life is fruit-bearing—the reproduction of Christ’s character in the believer, that it may be reproduced in others.”³

What, then, does Mrs. White mean when she speaks about perfectly reproducing the character of Christ? She herself gives a straight-forward explanation:

If you have accepted Christ as a personal Savior, you are to forget yourself, and try to help others. Talk of the love of Christ, tell of His goodness. Do every duty that presents itself. Carry the burden of souls upon your heart, and by every means in your power seek to save the lost. As you receive the Spirit of Christ—the spirit of unselfish love and labor for others—you will grow and bring forth fruit.”⁴

This is not some unattainable ideal. Rather, it is a plain, simple declaration of daily Christian living. Nor does it describe some exalted state which only a few may reach at the end of time. It tells how we may all grow and produce fruit—now.

There is another parable that is particularly appropriate here—the story of the ten virgins. In this parable, Jesus specifically predicted a delay in His return. The ten virgins—representatives of professing Christians—went to meet the bridegroom. But he tarried, and while waiting, they all went to sleep.

Why are some of these called wise and others called foolish? The wise virgins were those who had extra oil—those who were prepared for a delay. They expected the bridegroom to come on time, but when he was late, they were equipped to handle the emergency.

The five foolish virgins were foolish precisely because they thought they *knew* that the bridegroom was coming soon. They thought they would not need any extra oil. They were not prepared for a delay. So they were unready when the bridegroom did come. (The “delay,” of course, is from our perspective. God knows and has always known the day and the hour of Christ’s coming.)

If we would understand the value and mean-

ing of the signs of Christ’s coming, we could continue to maintain their validity without embarrassment. The signs are not given to enable us to construct a chronological timetable of events preceding Christ’s Second Advent. If this were possible, it would only serve to insure that many of us would wait till the last possible minute to prepare. It is precisely because we think we have this kind of timetable already that we can grow apathetic in the face of signs. (After all, the Sunday laws must come first.)

The signs are not given to tell us the quantity of time that remains before Christ will come. They are given to warn us of the quality of the times we are living in. This is the end time. Current events are just the kinds of things Jesus said would be happening at the hour of His coming. It is not like a time bomb set to explode, it is like a tiger ready to spring. The situation is critical every moment.

This does not mean that last-day events will not follow the sequence generally outlined, not that the Sunday laws will not be passed. But it is a frightful kind of arrogance for us to demand

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that God follow our time schedule, or fit precisely into our understanding of things. He has plainly warned us that both His promises and threatenings are alike conditional.

If God, in His long-suffering love for all humanity, should see that after 132 years the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an institution was no longer fulfilling the purpose for which He had established it and should turn from it, could we blame Him? We hope, we pray, that this will not happen. But the Jews were God’s chosen people, and that choice was meant to last forever. Yet, when they failed to fulfil His purpose, God was forced to reject them as His

special messengers. We misunderstand God if we believe He will let the whole world continue on indefinitely with its pain and sadness and death simply because one group of people prove unfaithful to their trust.

Surely, this should be a warning to us. At the last great day, some of us may discover that we have been growing as tares, while all along we thought we were wheat. Just because we are members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in good and regular standing does not mean we have a reserved seat in God's kingdom. Not all those who say, "Lord, Lord" are written in the Lamb's book of life.

But all of this just brings us back to the basic question. We know that we are living in the end time. Yet, reaching every person with the gospel seems impossible. And to assume that we can be better Christians than any people who lived before us, or that God cannot reject the Seventh-day Adventist Church, is unwarranted pride. What does He require? What will it take for us to get things over with and be received into God's kingdom, where we belong?

First and most important—we can trust God. He has given us a "sure word of prophecy" that Jesus will return. His Word does not say: "You must make it happen." It says: "I will come again." The One whose mercy is everlasting, the One who is faithful although all men should prove faithless, will not let us down. God will bring to pass all that He has promised—in His own good time.

Secondly, we can remember that God expects

no more of us than He has expected of His followers in all generations. We are to love Him with all our hearts and minds and souls, and love our neighbors as ourselves. We are to do the duties around us, and carry a burden for the salvation of others. And then we are to leave the worrying to God. He will work in us both to "will and to do of His good pleasure." (Phil. 2:13.) He has made Himself responsible for the results of our honest efforts.

We need not be embarrassed by our insistent proclamation of Christ's soon coming. We are in good company—Paul, John, and Peter preached it almost 2,000 years ago. And for many people, the end will come today, or tomorrow, or next week. For the rest of us, it will come soon enough—at the very time God has planned.

What we do need to remember in our proclamations is that being able to predict just when Jesus will come is not the most important thing. The times and seasons are in God's hands. What is important is that we—like these saints of old—not waver in our trust; that we, like them, continue to look for a city whose builder and maker is God, though we see it only by faith.

The faithful servant is not the one who periodically gears himself up for superhuman efforts, and then lapses into depression when little happens. Nor is he the one who constantly berates himself that if he would just do a little more that would end it all. The faithful servant—and the one who is always prepared—is the one who daily does the work assigned him, trusting in His Lord's promise to return. He is the one who will hasten that day. And whenever it comes, he will be waiting—and ready.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 69.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 65

3. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 68.