



Jo Ann Davidson*

My dad died a little over a year ago. His death came suddenly from complications following heart surgery. Since then, I have mused on the many times he told me that he had prayed to live until Jesus comes. I must admit that this is the yearning of my own heart. The profound belief in this event is expressed in the name of my church: *Seventh-day Adventist*. Since my dad's death and because of his disappointment, I've been pondering the "delay" of the Second Advent.

Let's face it: Time surely has continued longer than we've expected. So long, in fact, that in this modern era, some have thought it necessary to devise alternative understandings of what the second coming of Christ might be.

For example, some have suggested that Christ and his promised kingdom have already come through human action. They point to the great strides in science and technology as evidence that human genius will eventually solve all the problems of

"A Great Disappointment"

humanity. Others, have sought to resolve their dilemma by deciding that the New Testament reveals only a short time between Christ's resurrection and his second advent. And because of where we now find ourselves in history, it is obvious that the New Testament writers were mistaken. The end really came when Christ died and was resurrected, for at that time the Earth shook, rocks were split, and tombs opened (Matt. 27:51-53). This view seeks to be "consistent" with history and what seems to be taught in the New Testament.

Another position is called "timeless eschatology." In this interpretation, each person is seen as living in the "existential crisis" found in life itself, with each moment lived on the brink of God's eternity. We can be sure only of the present. Each person

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experiences the Second Coming individually within his or her own personal encounter with God.

But these suggestions all raise a crucial question: What does the Bible really teach about the second coming of Christ? Have the above alternative interpretations adequately dealt with biblical evidence in its entirety? For one thing, the Apostle Paul suggests a sequence of striking events that must take place before Christ returns to Earth (see 2 Thessalonians 2). By reminding the Thessalonians that God does indeed have a timetable in dealing with the problem of evil, the apostle seems to be trying to correct mistaken ideas about that day. Of course, New Testament believers were not strangers to the concept of divine "delay." Already in the Old Testament, fulfillment of God's promises frequently followed what humans might think of as a time lag:

1. Only after 120 years of preaching by Noah did the predicted rain bring a worldwide flood and God's signal judgment against wickedness.

2. Abraham waited his whole life for the fulfillment of God's promise for offspring as numerous as the stars in the heavens.

3. After the children of Israel were wrongly enslaved in Egypt and yearned for deliverance, they waited for hundreds of years for the Exodus.

4. Though we most often read the praise Psalms and those extolling

God's creation, about 75 percent of the Psalms are songs of pain and protest: "How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand. . .?" (Ps. 74:10,11, NRSV). The many "how longs" in the Psalms underscore the conviction that the waiting has been long enough. Psalms often addresses the tension between expectation and delay.

Turning to the New Testament, we find that the parable of the 10 virgins in a wedding also suggests the possibility of a delay, for the bridegroom didn't come when he was expected. Further, those who have come to incorrect conclusions about the delay of the Second Coming are featured in 2 Peter 3:3, 4: "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation" (NKJV). The scoffers no longer believe in or expect the promise of Christ. Their attitude is characterized by scorn and the haughty pomp of certainty in their supposedly irrefutable arguments. But believers are warned to beware of such conceit. In fact, arguments about the supposed unchangeableness of history lose all credence in the face of the already accomplished promises and judgments of God. The biblical position is clear:

"But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand

years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:8, 9, NRSV). This text conspicuously denies any notion that the promised second coming of Christ has failed. Nor is the continuity of time evidence of a slack, indecisive God. Instead, each believer is urged to anticipate this day with all earnestness and diligence.

Peter was rejecting an false understanding of history. He did not suggest that human experience of time is meaningless. Nor did his concept of eternity obscure attention to time. Rather, he insists the continuous duration of time must be explained in terms of the patience of God.

In the Book of Revelation, the "souls under the altar" also suggest evidence of a delay:

"And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be ful-

filled" (Rev. 6:9-11, KJV).

Moreover, the Book of Revelation as a whole reveals a divinely ordered succession of stages as God's purposes are fulfilled. And believers are called not to reckon but to constantly reckon with the coming of the Lord. Luke concurs:

"Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes" (Luke 12:35-37, RSV).

Luke makes it evident that the danger to those expecting Christ's return doesn't lie in not knowing the exact time of his return, but in not being prepared. The New Testament insists on both present salvation and future expectation. Yes, we are now in the period of the "not yet." However, our hope is grounded in the "already"—for we have been given the initial "endowment" of the promised kingdom through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

My dad rests until that glorious day of Christ's return. And on that day, his heart will be working right again. Mother will rejoice in her "R and R," which she describes not as "Rest and Relaxation" but as "Resurrection and Reunion."

Even so, Lord Jesus, come, quickly come!