

GOD'S NEXT AGENDA FOR THE CHURCH

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What's before God's people is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit known as the "latter rain," and a glorious proclamation of the gospel known as "the loud cry." The seal of God will prepare His people for meeting the final test of the mark of the beast, and translation when Jesus comes. And all this may be very soon.

There is a fascinating Christmas story tucked away, hidden, in the most unlikely place: a book called *The Great Controversy*. It presents details that are not in the *Life of Christ* or *The Desire of Ages* (1898).

A special angel was appointed to visit the earth to find who was prepared to welcome the long-awaited Messiah. He visits the palaces of kings, the offices of philosophers, teachers, the rabbis, the synagogue elders, the leaders of the one true church on earth of that day with headquarters offices at Jerusalem, even the high priest's palace. Will the angel find anyone whose humble, contrite heart is longing for the coming of the long-awaited world's Redeemer? If he finds such a person, he will give him the glad news that He is about to be born! But sadly, he finds no one, and is about to return to heaven with the shameful news when he spots a group of lowly shepherds camping in the fields. They love to think and talk about the prophecies. They are not discussing politics, buying

presents for each other, worldly possessions, or pleasures; they express their longing for the coming of the world's Redeemer.

The angel cannot contain his exuberance! He tells them the glad news and directs them to "the wretched hovel prepared for cattle" in Bethlehem where they will find the One who "unto you is born this day . . . a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk. 2:11).

As that angel encircles the earth today, visiting the homes, schools, churches of the people who claim to be God's one true people, does he find anyone talking about the coming of the long-awaited "latter rain" of the Holy Spirit? Does anyone care that it has been delayed a century and more? Does anyone wonder why? Does anyone long for its return? Or is there a secret fear that if and when the blessing comes, a lot of worldly "fun" will come to an end? Yes, it's true: the path to Bethlehem will lead on to a cross, which anyone who follows Jesus will also bear.

Probably millions of people around the world are longing for the second coming of Christ. They realize that this world is the Titanic facing an iceberg. "Lord, save us!" is the cry of many.

But few realize what must happen before Christ can return. Jesus' words (in Matt. 24:14) remind us that God is fair and merciful; it would not be just for Jesus to return until all have had the privilege of hearing the gospel message that alone can prepare them for His coming: "This gospel of the kingdom shall be proclaimed in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come." And

Rev. 14:6-12 tells of three angels who proclaim the “everlasting gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue and people,” symbolizing the work of the church to whom Christ has entrusted the mission of proclaiming the good news of His salvation.

Rev. 18 describes the work of “another angel,” a fourth, who joins the three “with great power, and the earth was lightened with his glory.” Then will come the final warning, the final proclamation of the gospel that will make possible a final judgment, so that Jesus can return. But before the church can be empowered to proclaim such a message, there must come the blessing of the latter rain outpouring of the Holy Spirit (“and when He is come, He will reprove the world of sin,” John 16:8). He will give the final gift of repentance.

But as it was when Christ was born in Bethlehem, few are concerned about the coming (or the delay!) of the latter rain. But there are some like the aged Simeon, to whom “it was revealed . . . that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 2:26). And there was old Anna “who looked for redemption” and was concerned for it more than for worldly wealth and pleasure (vs. 37, 38). These two recognized in the Baby in Mary’s arms the long-awaited Saviour of the world! Are you and I concerned for the promised gift of the latter rain? The few who are so concerned will, like Simeon and Anna, recognize the gift! There could be no disaster worse than sleeping through that blessing.

The time of Christ’s second coming depends on His people getting ready, for He would not dare to

come if they are not ready (Heb. 12:29). Jesus likens their getting ready to a farmer’s crop growing up and maturing until it is ready for harvest (Mk. 4:26-29). The growing up makes it possible for Him to come the second time to “reap” the “harvest” (Rev. 14:14, 15). But the “crop” cannot become mature until “the latter rain” of the Holy Spirit’s outpouring comes (Joel 2:23, 24).

Every God-fearing heart cries out continually, “Even so, come Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20). If we had the authority, we would tell Him, “Come today!” Revelation 14:15, 16 tells us that this authority resides alone in somebody else, “another angel [who] comes out of the temple” who finally tells Christ, “Thrust in Thy sickle and reap, for the time has come for Thee to reap.” But what “event” can move that “other angel” to decide when to give Him the signal to “come”? The answer, “The harvest of the earth is ripe.” This simplest imaginable divinely-inspired illustration explains the delay in the return of Christ!

But this special farm “harvest” depends on the choice of the “grain.” An entire “crop” can selfishly refuse to let the Lord’s warm sunshine of the gospel and refreshing showers of “the latter rain” perform the ripening process. It’s a “harvest” process God cannot force upon the “field of grain.”

So what does this involve? It’s a stupendous truth that most of the world still knows almost nothing about. It concerns what Jesus Christ is doing today. Most people have a vague idea that He is doing nothing—He finished His job here 2000 years ago and now He is resting up. But the Bible pictures

Him as working intensely in His job as “great High Priest” who “ever lives to make intercession” for every person who believes in Him (Heb. 7:25). “Intercession” is hard work, not to convince an unwilling Father to be nice to us (that’s totally unnecessary, He already is nice to us), and not to convince the devil to back off (he can’t be convinced)—but to convince us of His love and faithfulness. You say, “I’m already convinced! I don’t need such ‘intercession!’” Well, are you sure? Do you know your own heart?

The “former rain” fell at Pentecost at the beginning of the Christian dispensation; but the latter rain will close that dispensation. Therefore, nothing can be more important than for the church to seek the blessing of the latter rain (Zech. 10:1). And where is the good news? The latter rain is a message of “much more abounding grace,” a clearer view of what the Saviour of the world has done for us, a revelation of His love (*agape*) that “constrains” every honest-hearted soul to live unto Him and not unto self (2 Cor. 5:14, 15), so that (10) this truth can “lighten the earth with glory” (Rev. 18:1-4).

Can we who want it learn something from the history of the “early rain”?

After over three years of teaching, the disciples were finally ready to be “with one accord in one place” (2:1).

All their individual desires for promotion were finally laid aside.

Self was finally crucified with Christ so that sinful pride was humbled in the dust.

Not one was seeking the highest place in the early church; each was ready to wash the feet of others.

They were not praying for power so they could be vindicated before the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees, or to be self-exalted triumphantly; they were praying for something new—the gift of love (*agape*).

In fact, they had just begun to understand what love (*agape*) is! They had finally had received a sobering lesson—they had seen *agape* in the self-emptying sacrifice of Christ.

Like a burst of lightning on a dark night or the sun shining in full strength at midnight, they had come face to face with the reality of what it cost their Saviour to save them. The Lamb of God had died the world’s “wages of sin.” He had “poured out His soul unto death” (Isa. 53:12), which the apostles clearly understood was the world’s second death. Christ had suffered the horrors of hell in order to save us. And death and hell could not hold the Divine One who had made this supreme sacrifice of *agape*. Now self had to be crucified together with Christ! When they surveyed the wondrous cross on which they had seen the Prince of glory die, their richest gain they counted loss, and poured contempt on all their pride. Is there any lesson here?

The lesson for us who await “the latter rain” is sharply focused. The “early rain” wasn’t a miracle of elocution that wrought that great work in the hearts of thousands. Peter didn’t show off as a brilliant man. The miracle of “tongues” was only secondary to something greater than itself. If the apostles had

given lectures on Roman history miraculously in “tongues,” nobody would have been baptized. What was greater than the communication miracle was the depth of the message itself. What got through to thousands of human hearts that day was a truth they had never dreamed of: they were guilty of the body and blood of the divine Son of God! They had murdered the Messiah! They couldn’t blame the Romans and the chief priests. Now they had discovered their corporate guilt. Peter said, “Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). “Men of Israel, . . . you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life” (Acts 3:12-15).

Later, in chapter 10 Peter learned that the Gentiles shared the same corporate guilt. Paul taught that “all the world . . . [is] guilty before God” (Rom. 3:19). “All sinned” (3:23, the aorist of the verb form—at one time, at Calvary). In 2 Cor. 5:14 Paul saw that when Christ was murdered, “all died” with Him, overwhelmed with an ultimate guilt. Before His death Christ had promised that the Holy Spirit would “convict the world of sin” (John 16:8) but no one dreamed that the conviction would be so annihilating to human pride. The message of Pentecost brought the world face to face with its moment of truth. But side by side with the devastating conviction of sin came the conviction of Christ’s forgiveness. Here at the very beginning of the Christian church was “high fidelity” Christian

experience! Human hearts were melted, cleansed, reconciled at last to God. Is there a lesson for us?

Now luke-warmness is half-way between being cold in devotion to Christ and being hot. It is a spiritual disease in the last days’ church that is the most difficult problem God has ever had to deal with. It makes Christ nauseated, because He knows what it cost Him to save us. As the last-days’ church is positioned on the very verge of the final crisis in the controversy with Satan, for us to be blah in our response to Him is like someone being an adult with only the mind of a child. It’s like a bride coming to the wedding when her heart is divided about her love for the prospective bridegroom, “blah” about it, says “yes” half-heartedly. If the heavenly Bridegroom were to go on with “the marriage of the Lamb” with only that half-hearted “I do” from His people, that would be keen embarrassment for Him for eternity! So, what can He do?

Whip them into shape? That won’t work, any more than for a bridegroom to force his bride to say “I do.” Increase His offers of great reward? That would be like good looking young woman marrying an old “Millionaire.” Marrying a man for his money.—well, Jesus won’t stoop to encouraging that.

Fear of hell or hope of reward in heaven—these two motivations have failed. There is only one possible solution: win the heart-felt love of His people that will forever deliver them from luke-warmness. Appreciating His *agape*-love at His cross, realizing what it cost Him to save us—this

alone can heal this terrible disease of luke-warmness.

Satan will try to prevent such a revelation of *agape* as long as possible; but Zechariah 12:10-13:1 tells us that the revelation will come. The latter rain of the Holy Spirit, so long anticipated and prayed for, will be a repentance deeper than any other in history. Heaven will “pour upon the house of David [“the angel of the church of the Laodiceans”] and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem [the people] the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced” at the cross, and they shall experience the repentance that heals luke-warmness forever. Good News!

The latter rain will therefore be a gift of the Holy Spirit that will bring the true and ultimate conviction of sin that only He can bring to human hearts: the guilt of the crucifixion of Christ is *our* sin. But that is a truth that we don’t comprehend clearly, as yet. According to Zechariah 12:10-13:1, when God’s people do grasp that reality, there will come the greatest repentance of the ages. It will become the “final” experience of reconciliation with Christ, something known as “the final atonement.”

Jesus declares that the first work of the Holy Spirit is to discover or expose to one’s conscience an awareness of sin which has previously not been known. Does this work of the Holy Spirit come to an end when one is first converted? Without this *convicting* ministry of the Holy Spirit, no one can possibly know what lies deep within his heart.

Thus the Holy Spirit has the ability to make unknown sin become known to us. But at any moment that the converted person refuses this continued ministry, his conversion suddenly ends.

Is this a discouraging doctrine? Not if we welcome the continuing and blessed ministry of the Holy Spirit, whose work is to “convict of sin.” Not if we are concerned about preparing for the Lord’s return rather than merely for death.

This will make possible a movement, a second “Pentecost,” a message to be proclaimed worldwide that will “lighten the earth with glory,” and prepare a people for Christ’s return.

The “latter rain” *starts out* as a “dew”. The “latter rain” is received only by those who receive the message in its day of small beginnings. “The loud cry of the third angel has already begun in the revelation of the righteousness of Christ, the sin-pardoning Redeemer. This is the beginning of the light of the angel whose glory shall fill the whole earth.”¹ Again, “As the third *message* swells to a loud cry, and as great power and glory attend the closing work, the faithful people of God will partake of that glory. It is the *latter rain*.”²

“Be glad in your God.

He’s giving you a teacher

to train you how to live right—

Teaching, like rain out of heaven, showers of words

to refresh and nourish your soul, just as he used to do.

¹ *Selected Messages*, Vol. I, p. 363.

² *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 353.

And plenty of food for your body—silos full of grain,

casks of wine and barrels of olive oil.” (Joel 2:23, 24, *The Message*).

Joel 2:23 is an interesting reference because the objection to the 1888 message is often raised that the latter rain could not be a “message” since it refers to the Holy Spirit’s “power”. The “loud cry” is the message. However, if the alternative Hebrew rendering of this passage is accepted, the “latter rain” is a message of righteousness. Notice the comments on this in our Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary:

“Moderately. Heb. *Lisedaqah*, literally, “with respect to righteousness,” or, “for righteousness.” This word occurs throughout the OT but nowhere in the sense of “moderately”. The RSV reads, “the early rain for your vindication”; others, “rain for righteousness,” “rain for justification,” or “early rain as His righteousness prompts Him to give it.” If “teacher” be read instead of “former rain” then “righteousness” can be given its usual meaning and the clause may be rendered, “the teacher of righteousness.”³ The latter rain is the time of the “loud cry.” “The teacher of righteousness” is the message of the righteousness of Christ to be given at this time. “The message of Christ’s righteousness is to sound from one end of earth to the other to prepare the way of the Lord. This is the glory of God, which closes the work of the third angel.”⁴

³ SDA BC, Vol. 4, p. 945.

⁴ *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 6, p. 19.

There are references in the Spirit of Prophecy which link the Holy Spirit and latter rain with the imagery of the dew. “The *dew* and showers of grace from heaven which softened many hearts did not wet their souls.”⁵

“The latter rain is to fall upon the people of God. A mighty angel is to come down from heaven, and the whole earth is to be lighted with his glory. Are we ready to take part in the glorious work of the third angel? Are our vessels ready to receive the *heavenly dew*? Have we defilement and sin in the heart? If so, let us cleanse the soul temple, and prepare for the showers of the latter rain. The refreshing from the presence of the Lord will never come to hearts filled with impurity.”⁶

“Today you are to have your vessel purified that it may be ready for the *heavenly dew*, ready for the showers of the latter rain; for the latter rain will come, and the blessing of God will fill every soul that is purified from every defilement. It is our work to day to yield our souls to Christ, that we may be fitted for the time of refreshing from the presence of the Lord fitted for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. . . .”⁷

By the way, if the “latter rain” is a message indicted by the Holy Spirit, and we believe that it is, then the latter rain could be falling all around us like “dew” and we might not know it expecting a

⁵ *Review and Herald* (Dec. 11, 1888); *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, p. 360.

⁶ *Review and Herald* (April 21, 1891).

⁷ EGW Sermon (Sept. 5, 1891) *The EGW 1888 Materials*, pp. 958-960; RH 3-22-1892 & 4-5-1892.

thunderclap downpour. In other words, we may not like the message and hence hinder the latter rain from its work in our lives while others here and there are receiving it.

All the ten virgins slumbered and slept. But only five had oil when the Groom emerged from the sanctuary for the wedding. The other ten pled for the five to give them oil, but they could not provide it. The “oil-less” virgins went out to buy when it was too late. The sanctuary door had closed on the Most Holy. The five who had oil went into the wedding feast. That oil must be the “dew”-like message of the “latter rain” which a few are getting here and there.

Hence the warning, “Unless we are daily . . . we shall not recognize the manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the Latter rain. *It may be falling on hearts all around us*, but we shall not discern or receive it.”⁸ Again, “There is to be in the churches a wonderful manifestation of the power of God, but it will not move upon those who have not humbled themselves before the Lord, and opened the door of their heart by confession and repentance.”⁹

This is all the more serious for the Laodicean church. If we are not vigilant now regarding the preservation of the “oil”—the 1888 message—it is extremely difficult if not irreversible to recover it without a thorough-going repentance, even if we’re up to it, before the close of probation.

Don’t become a flash flood victim. While you are in desert canyons you have no way of knowing if

there is a storm brewing. It doesn’t have to rain where you are to flood. It might be a slight mist falling in a slot canyon, but up on the higher plateaus less than a half inch of rain can be funneled down into a tight river canyon, and anyone in its pathway can be swept away.

All the ten virgins slumbered and slept. Only those who receive the sanctuary truth of Jesus’ cross and love with hearts filled with repentance will understand the good news and be prepared for the final examination about the thorough meaning of the plan of salvation. Don’t be caught unprepared for “the final exam.”

The Jewish lad sat on the floor listening as his elders talked about solemn things. Why have the Jews been disappointed about the Messiah? as the great question. God promised Him, they wailed; but why has He never come?

One day, the name of Jesus of Nazareth came up. Little Joseph asked innocently, “Who was He?”

“A Jew of the greatest talent,” was the answer, “but He pretended to be the Messiah, so the Jewish tribunal sentenced Him to death.”

But the boy had questions. “Why is Jerusalem destroyed, and why are we [Jews] in captivity?”

This time his father answered: “Alas!” he said, “because the Jews murdered the prophets!”

Immediately “2 + 2 = 4” flashed through the boy’s mind: “*Perhaps Jesus was also a prophet, and the Jews killed Him when He was innocent.*” The child was forbidden to go to a Christian church, but this conviction was so strong that he would linger

⁸ *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 507.

⁹ *Review and Herald*, Dec. 23, 1890.

outside just to hear the preaching through the windows.

When he was only seven, he was boasting to a Christian neighbor of the future triumph of the Jews at the coming of the Messiah. The old man interrupted him: “Dear boy, the real Messiah was Jesus of Nazareth. But your ancestors rejected and crucified Him, as they did the prophets. Go home, read Isaiah 53, and you will see that Jesus is the Son of God.”

Joseph did so, young as he was. It fit perfectly; he saw the truth. He asked his father to explain the chapter.

But his father disliked even thinking about Isaiah 53; he was stern. Joseph never asked again, but truth moved him to grow up to be a Christian missionary proclaiming the second coming of Jesus. Steeped in Jewish unbelief, his father and the elders stayed behind.¹⁰

They kept on praying the God of Abraham to send their Messiah while they refused to see *He had already done so in Jesus*. Another thousand years of those prayers would still be in vain. If God has given us a “most precious” gift and we sinfully refuse to accept it, does heaven send it again? *The Jews will never get it unless they back up and receive the Gift heaven already sent them.*

¹⁰ See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 357, 358.