

# HAS THE BLESSED HOPE BECOME NAÏVE?

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September 12, 2009

*Has the “blessed hope” become naive?  
Can we go on forever excusing the “delay”?*

If our forefathers hadn't built the soon coming of Jesus into our very denominational name, we wouldn't be embarrassed by this century and a half of delay. As far back as 1850 Ellen White wrote that “time . . . is nearly finished, and that time can last but a very little longer.” “Time is almost finished.”<sup>1</sup> Again, in 1904 she said, “The Lord is coming very soon.”<sup>2</sup> Ever since, we have been nurtured on constant assurances that “the end is near.”

## **“Christ Is Coming Soon.”**

Adventist college students are perplexed: “We have mixed thoughts and feelings from hearing predictions that the Second Coming might happen in the next 10 years or that it might not happen in our lifetime at all?” “We are a generation of non-conviction when it comes to Jesus' second coming.” “I can't imagine it happening in my lifetime.”<sup>3</sup>

If such comments had been published in the Review a century ago, they would have evoked a storm of protest from readers. To them such non-conviction would destroy the church like termites burrowing from within.

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<sup>1</sup> *Early Writings*, pp. 58, 64.

<sup>2</sup> *Evangelism*, p. 624.

<sup>3</sup> *Adventist Review*, Jan. 2, 1992.

Nor can we today get off the hook by comfortably redefining “Adventism” as a nebulous belief in some “far-off divine event.” Webster’s New World Dictionary tells the world that Adventism means “the belief that Christ’s Second Coming to earth and the Last Judgment will soon occur” (emphasis added).

As the decades roll by it is only natural that thoughtful Adventists should explore ways to apologize for the long-extended “Great Disappointment?” In recent memory, a Sabbath School quarterly suggested that the Second Coming began at Pentecost and has been going on ever since. Voices within the church have that “the last days” began with Christ’s resurrection, casting doubt on the entire schema of the 1260 years followed by the “time of the end” in 1798. “Soon” has become so flexible that it might even mean centuries after the Lord’s messenger said that time is “nearly finished.” A Union College student admitted in the *Review* article, “I really don’t think we can have any idea of when He’ll come.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a logic of realism that forces itself on the thinking of youth. They know that parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents fully expected that “soon” meant soon, and that Christ would return in their lifetime. They saw all the “signs” that said so. In fact, the “signs” they saw made it seem nearer to them then than it does to us

Is it not vanity to talk about the Second Coming and not give heed to the message that was intended to prepare us for it?

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<sup>4</sup> A prominent Seventh-day Adventist editor published (with obvious approval) a letter from a reader suggesting that Ellen White’s oft-repeated “6000” years might be 6,400 years (which would be A. D. 2400; *Perspective Digest*, vol. 5, No. 2, 2000).

cross over the gulf between them. The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend. He clothed himself as a beggar and approached her cottage incognito, with a worn cloak fluttering loosely about him. He renounced the throne to win her hand.

The point is that Christ is also a Lover who has been rebuffed, rejected, by His true love, the supreme object of His regard on earth. His high hope was that, in union with His bride-to-be, He could lighten the earth with the glory of a message through which “all families of the earth [should] be blessed.”

Some dimensions of that divine disappointment can be grasped by considering the Laodicean message in the light of its true source, the Song of Solomon. In the poem, the true lover appeals to his sweetheart to let him in, for he is in need. He is out in the cold and the wet. But the girl is thinking only of her own comfort and ease and scorns his appeal. Finally she arouses herself to sense of concern for him that transcends her concern for herself. But when she at last opens the door, she finds he has gone.

But there is Good News. Christ’s grand sacrifice on His cross and His high priestly ministry will not in the end prove fruitless, because “an enlightened people” will surely understand how and why they have delayed His return, and will respond to His appeal for repentance.

now. Is there a solid basis for a genuine “Adventist” belief today that can make sense of this long delay? Can today’s youth genuinely recapture the “blessed hope” of our youthful pioneers? Or was it naive?

There are several grand truths about Christ’s Second Coming that we need to consider

1. His character has not changed from what it was 2000 years ago. “This same Jesus . . . will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). But Paul says that “in flaming fire” He will “take vengeance” on His enemies (2 Thess. 1:8). Will He be a bloodthirsty tyrant with a celestial machine gun to mow down His enemies in hateful revenge? If “God is love” (1 John 4:8), no. Christ must still be love when He returns. James and John wanted to call down that same “fire . . . from heaven” to wipe out the unbelieving Samaritans, but Jesus said, No, “the Son of man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them” (Luke 9:54, 56).

2. Why the apparent change at the Second Coming? The reason is that God’s personal presence has to be a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29). Have you ever put a dish with a plastic spoon in a microwave oven? No problem. But if you leave in a metal spoon, the microwaves attack it and the sparks fly. The personal presence of God is not destruction to His people who have eschewed sin; but it has to be destruction to sin itself. Those who have made a final choice to cling to it are like the spoon in the microwave—the personal presence of *agape* has to destroy them because they have clung to sin like a vine to a tree until both are one.

They simply cannot endure to look into the face of Christ.<sup>5</sup> The point: doesn't it make sense to get rid of the sin now?

But someone may say, "Yes, I'd like to, but it is too deep within me, I don't see how I can ever overcome it." That problem is the reason why Jesus Christ is now serving as great High Priest in His final work in the heavenly sanctuary (see Heb. 2:17, 18; 4:14-16; 7:25). Heaven's total resources are ours for overcoming sin in this final Day of Atonement. Sin can be removed from the heart, from the character, no matter how deeply it is engrained within us. A mere forgiveness that excuses or pardons sin but leaves it intact is not good enough. When the Lord truly forgives a sin, He takes it away (that's the meaning of the Greek word). The essence of Adventism insists that there is a difference between the personal forgiveness of sin and the final corporate blotting out of sin, and the Good News is that He will blot it out if we let Him do so.

3. Therefore the only reason why the Second Coming has been delayed is because God's people are not ready to face His personal presence. Sin still in the heart would result in their destruction. The Lord loves them too much to subject them to such a test unless they are ready. Thus as Peter

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<sup>5</sup> The lost "tormented . . . in the presence of the . . . Lamb" (Rev. 14:10) does not mean that Christ enjoys the spectacle like medieval Inquisitors at an *auto-da fe*. The Greek word is *enopion*, literally, "before the eye or their torture is entirely self-inflicted, because in their unrepentant state they cannot endure to look into the eyes of the One they have crucified.

until we have an enlightened people."<sup>9</sup> It was in the 1888 message that our Lord sent the "enlightenment," and appealed to His bride-to-be to "grow up." This message was divinely intended to assuage forever the pain of our Great Disappointment of 1844. The message was specifically sent of heaven to prepare a people for the Second Coming. As Dwight Nelson once so aptly said, "1844 was our Great Disappointment, but 1888 was His."

There was a king who loved a humble maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all his opponents. And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his very kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist—no one dared resist him. But would she love him? She would say she loved him of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she left behind. Would she be happy at his side? How could he know? If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love

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<sup>9</sup> *Review and Herald*, July 21, 1896.

No individual or group of individuals can be the “bride” in this wedding. As the soon-to-be population of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, “the church is the bride” says Ellen White. “The church is the bride, the Lamb’s wife. . . . Never should she indulge in any foolishness; for she is the bride of a King. Yet she does not realize her exalted position.”<sup>8</sup> The church is a corporate body intricately fashioned cohesively of its many “members,” as the cells and organs of one’s body constitute a person. No one cell of the human body, or even organ or limb, matures on its own, apart from its corporate oneness with the body as a whole. “So also is Christ,” says Paul, “for the body is not one member but many” (1 Cor. 12:12, 14).

An individual preparation for the Second Coming is proper; but there has to be also a corporate preparation, or each individual will have to go into the grave as have countless others throughout the ages. If a body is sick, the whole must be healed. God’s people do not go to heaven individually at death, as other churches teach; they await a corporate resurrection, which in turn must await a corporate repentance on the part of the living saints.

The Elijah message [1888 truth] is forever linked with the “doctrine” of the Second Coming.

It is impossible otherwise to understand the “delay.” Said Ellen White almost a century ago: “The great outpouring of the Spirit of God, which lightens the whole earth with his glory, will not come

says, Christ delays, “not willing that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9).

4. Jesus Christ is a disappointed Bridegroom. Rightly understood, the entire Bible becomes a love story, with the climax near the end in Revelation 19. A wedding takes place because at last the bride “has made herself ready” (vs. 7). Christ has long desired that day to come, because His love for His church is likened to that of a bridegroom for his bride (Eph. 5:22-32). He placed the Song of Solomon in the Bible for a purpose—to arouse our hearts to sense the full meaning of His love for His church. The Second Coming will be to take His bride to Himself.

5. The Father therefore has not predetermined the time for Christ’s Second Coming. In His infinite foreknowledge He knows the time, but for Him to know is not the same as to predetermine. For example, He knows who will eventually be saved and who will be lost, but He does not predetermine salvation or damnation for anyone. And Jesus expressly says He Himself does not know the time of His coming: “But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father” (Mark 13:32).

The timing of the Second Coming is different than for the first. To confuse the two is to repeat the mistake of the ancient Jews who assumed that the prophecies of the two advents were the same. Daniel indeed foretold exactly when Christ should first appear as Messiah, and “like the stars in the vast circuit of their appointed path, God’s purposes

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<sup>8</sup> See *SDA Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7, p. 986.

know no haste and no delay” (see Daniel 9:24-27; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 32). But the love of God requires that the timing for the Second Coming is different; it must be dependent on a people getting ready.

Jesus explained this in His parable of the farmer who plants seed. When the crop is ripe, “immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come” (Mark 4:29). An angel finally tells Christ when that time has come: “thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the time has come for thee to reap” Why? Because the time-clock of heaven has triggered its predetermined alarm peg? No, “for the harvest of the earth is ripe” (Rev. 14:14, 15).

God’s people are not like ants on a log floating down the river, with no involvement in where they are going or when. They “sit with [Christ] on [His] throne,” sharing with Him the administration of the finale [denouement] of world history. He has left in their care the “ministry of reconciliation;” because in the time of the end they share His throne with Him (see Rev. 3:21; 2 Cor. 5:18, 19). They are intimately involved in His final work in the Most Holy Apartment.

More than this, “the ministry of reconciliation” assigned to them has a deep influence on world events. If they will faithfully proclaim the sealing message of Revelation 7:1-4, He promises to say “Hold!” to the “four angels . . . holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow.”<sup>6</sup> It must follow that it was not necessary that World Wars I

and II should wreak their havoc and agony. But our failure for many decades to proclaim the sealing message made it impossible for the “four angels” to “hold” the winds.

6. The Second Coming of Christ becomes a rescue mission. Led by the two-horned “beast” of Revelation 13, the people of the world will demonstrate a final rebellion against the Lamb by trying to rid the earth of His people (13:11-17; 14:9, 10). This will be a planned re-crucifixion of Christ, this time in the person of His saints. “The wrath of the Lamb” is a natural outcome. What bridegroom in his right mind would stand idly by while thugs seek to kill his bride?

7. In fact, the Second Coming of Christ is as “soon” as we truly want it to be. That doesn’t mean that a few individuals’ selfish desire to “go home to glory” will bring it. The heavenly Bridegroom will marry no “child-bride.” She must grow up “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” into maturity (Eph. 4:13). This means a concern for Him that transcends our natural-born concern for our own personal security.

Such maturity is intelligently, empathetically, entering into, identifying with, Christ’s yearnings, as a bride enters into her husband’s. This is Bible “perfection.” But we have a Bridegroom whose “disappointment . . . [at the delay] is beyond description,”<sup>7</sup> and a bride-to-be who so far seems content to remain a child at the wedding.

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<sup>6</sup> *Early Writings*, p. 38.

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<sup>7</sup> *Review and Herald*, Dec. 15, 1904.