

# THE ADVENT HARVEST

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Most Christians believe that Christ's second coming is near. That is good, for it is very true, more so than we think. But who "loves" the thought that it is near? Aside from some old or sick people, or prison inmates, *who* really "want" Him to come soon?

During the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century many humble Christians came to cherish such a desire. Members of different denominations, they discovered in the symbolism of Daniel and Revelation a prophetic roadmap which had not previously been clearly understood.

All churches had assumed for many centuries that these books were "sealed." But to these discoverers of prophecy, Daniel and Revelation came alive to focus the conviction that mankind's weary journey in this world of sin was about at its end.

While a few individuals scattered through the centuries had always spoken of the second coming of Christ as possibly near, no significant movement had ever before risen which clearly understood how a connected series of coherent Bible prophecies demonstrated that it was near.

It was as though the church had been sleeping like Rip Van Winkle for nearly eighteen hundred years and suddenly awoke to a new experience—anticipating the imminent return of Jesus. This phenomenal new life followed the end of the prophetic period of 1260 years when "the time of

the end" began in 1798. This was great good news, and now these Christians began to share it.

You can imagine how these lovers of the Bible rejoiced to trace the "waymarks" on the prophetic road-map. The thought of His return and the setting up of His kingdom was to them greater than the joy of winning the sweepstakes would be to us. The personal return of the beloved Saviour in their lifetime was spoken of as the "blessed hope."

The reason why the news that a sinful world's journey was almost over was thrilling to them was not because they longed for relief from nineteenth century physical toil and privation, hard as that was, but because their hearts were in union with Christ. They cared about Him as a Person. They deeply appreciated His character of unselfish love. He was never dearer to them than any human relationship. This was worship.

For these people there was no self-centered concern to cloud the bright flame of that devotion. In the over-sweep of the centuries which the book of Revelation pictures, they can be identified as the movement symbolized by the first angel's message of chapter 14:6, 7. This world-wide movement called upon "those who dwell on the earth" to "fear God and give glory to Him and worship Him that made heaven and earth."

This 1840's movement was the first time since the era of the apostles that Jesus could find a "community" of believers on earth whose hearts were knit with His in joyful expectation of His soon return. It was something as special as a bride's feeling for the bridegroom differs from that of the

flower girl. They were among those of whom Jesus said, “Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

Devotion similar to that of the early Christians at Pentecost marked these pioneers. It leaped across the centuries like fire blown in the wind. One sea captain, Joseph Bates, spent his life savings spreading the message so that he came to face old age nearly penniless. A college graduate, Uriah Smith, gave up a promising career for the toil and privations of Adventist editing to spread the news. His sister Annie prematurely burned out the strength of her youth. Others sold farms and gave the proceeds to the cause. Young people such as the Loughboroughs and James and Ellen White threw themselves wholeheartedly into the movement. Some traveled overseas to endure hardship as pioneer missionaries, never thinking of personal reward. The taste of “the blessed hope” was in their “mouth sweet as honey.”<sup>1</sup>

The yellowed pages of their letters and journals testify to the joy they cherished in the “blessed hope.” Revelation likens a bride’s anticipation of union with her bridegroom to the thrill of the message that gave birth to the Great Second Advent Movement. The people who loved the message then were often ridiculed, but now many Christians profess to believe in the second advent (Rev. 19:6, 7).

Cold theology and prosaic mathematics that unraveled Daniel’s 2300 or 1290 “days” could never

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<sup>1</sup> See Rev. 10:9. This chapter describes the Advent experience.

stir human hearts and emotions like that message did. They were about to welcome a Loved One who had been absent a long, long time. It was not superficial emotionalism, but a gripping experience that people in those days called “heart-work,” the pure authentic joy of heart, the all-risking abandon, that some youth seek vainly in a drug-induced “high.” Today’s youth never attain it because they find only its jaded counterfeit. The Holy Spirit manifested His solemn presence in that Advent Movement, and the result was a sober, reasoned, life-long “high” for those who saw the message in the Word.

The youth who loved the thought of Christ’s return needed no chemical dependency, no alcohol, no love affairs, to relieve soul-boredom. They knew firsthand the thrill that inspired Charles Wesley to sing, “Jesus, Lover of My Soul.” They had rediscovered what the youthful Saul of Tarsus found on his way to Damascus, when a glorious light blinded his eyes and illuminated his soul forever after. Paul was never disobedient to the heavenly vision even until that day when he glimpsed sunlight for the last time as the headman’s axe fell. He bequeathed his joy “unto all them also that love His appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8).

The all-too-common motivation of fear of judgment and hope of personal reward in heaven is a pathetic distortion of the gospel. These youthful pioneers knew something of the phenomenal faith that gripped the hearts of apostolic Christians. Long before his day, the martyrs in the Roman Empire could have sung Isaac Watts’ hymn:

When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss  
And pour contempt on all my pride.  
Were the whole realm of nature mine  
That were a tribute far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine  
Demands my heart, my life, my all.

For these sincere believers to be with Jesus was heaven enough because their hearts appreciated the love that led Him to His cross. No sacrifice in difficult economic conditions was too much sacrifice to make for truth. No missionary service, no exile of ministry in lonely “dark” foreign land, was too arduous a deprivation. Calls to service elicited no questions about the pay, the perks, the climate, housing, or terms of service. Medical or retirement “benefits” never crossed the minds. Jesus said, “Go ye!” and *fellowship with Him* was remuneration enough. Their faith was expressed by one of them:

“May 14, 1851, I saw the beauty and loveliness of Jesus. As I beheld His glory, the thought did not occur to me that I should ever be separated from His presence.”<sup>2</sup>

The thought of “the blessed hope” sustained them through trials that we find more difficult to endure as its nearness recedes from our modern vision. Our simplest conveniences and luxuries would have been unimaginable to them, yet the more we have, the less we seem to feel like consecrating to the Lord a portion of what we have.

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<sup>2</sup> *Early Writings*, p. 70.

For example, as early as 1859 Ellen White was saying:

“Some are looking too far off for the coming of the Lord. Time has continued a few years longer than they expected. . . . I saw that the time for Jesus to be in the most holy place was nearly finished, and that time can last but a very little longer.”<sup>3</sup>

One of her last appeals is unusually fervent:

“The coming of Christ is near, and hasteth greatly. The time in which to labor is short, and men and women are perishing. Said the angel, “Should not the men who have had great light co-operate with Him who sent His Son to the world to give light and salvation to men?”<sup>4</sup>

Why are our human hearts so shriveled up, like an orange left on the shelf a long time? Are we losing the hope of Jesus’ return? People everywhere are asking, “Can we continue forever saying that the coming of Christ is ‘soon’?” Why has time continued for so many decades after people began to realize that it “is near,” and that “time is short”? Is it because we do not really want Him to come?

There is a widespread idea that God has predetermined the time for Christ’s second coming as a fixed date. Heaven’s time-clock has its peg firmly inserted in place, and all we can do is to exploit this world while we watch until the celestial mechanism triggers the time and here comes Christ in the clouds of heaven. This would mean that there is nothing to those who follow Him by faith can do to hasten or to delay His coming. This idea is an

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 105 (1909).

outgrowth of Calvinism, the doctrine that emphasizes the sovereign predeterminism of God's will.

There are statements from Jesus that seem to indicate that the time of the second coming is "conditional," that is, its fulfillment depends on the faithfulness of God's people. For example, Jesus told this parable:

And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:26-29).

In telling this parable, Jesus obviously intended to comment on the time of His return, because the same symbol appears in the picture of His coming in Revelation. Something important happens that makes it possible for Him to come at last:

"And I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and on the cloud sat One like the Son of Man, having on His head a golden crown, and in His hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, 'Thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the time has come for You to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe'" (Rev. 14:14, 15).

According to these passages, the actual time of Christ's second coming depends on the "harvest" getting ripe, that is, on God's people being ready for

His coming. Obviously, He loves them too much to come if they are not ready! If He came when they were not ready, they would only be consumed by the brightness of His coming. (2 Thess. 2:8). The issue hinges on that readiness.

This explains why His coming has been so long delayed beyond the time when His people have expected Him. It makes very good sense. But it can also widen still further the gap of prophetic credibility. If the prophecies that declare the end to be near are conditional on the faithfulness of God's people, what will happen if God's people forever go on being unfaithful? Suppose they never really want to get ready? Will that doom the second coming?

This explanation, if not understood, can convey terribly bad news. So far, God's people have indeed been unfaithful. The history of ancient Israel, continually backsliding, has been repeated in modern Christian history. Because of our unbelief, time has continued far beyond what it should have. Will the end therefore never be truly near? How near is "near"?

Although Jesus tells us that no "angels which are in heaven" know the actual time of His second coming (Mk. 13:32), the Bible does declare emphatically that when the prophetic scenario shall unfold as pictured in Daniel and Revelation, in those "days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as He hath declared to His servants the prophets." There shall "be delay no longer" (Rev. 10:7, 6). Time cannot drag on and on indefinitely, or

the honor and credibility of God Himself will be ruined.

The factor that makes the difference is what the Bible speaks of as “the latter rain” outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Can we continue forever saying that the return of Christ is “soon”? Why has time continued for so many decades after the Lord's servant said that it “is near,” and “the time. . . is short”?

She said something at a conference of believers in Battle Creek in May, 1856 that has now become perplexing: “I was shown the company present at the Conference. Said the angel, “Some food for worms, some subjects of the seven last plagues, some will be alive and remain upon the earth to be translated at the coming of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

This statement is a stumbling-block to some because of the obvious fact that *all* who were “present at the Conference” in 1856 have become “food for worms,” and *none* are “alive and remain.” The question is often asked, Was Ellen White a false prophet?

In seeking to defend her credibility, it is common to say that such a prophecy is “conditional,” that is, its fulfillment depends on the faithfulness of God's people. But this explanation can also widen still further the gap of Ellen White's credibility. If the prophecies that declare the end to be near are “conditional” on the faithfulness of God's people, what will happen if God's people forever prove to be unfaithful? This explanation can convey terribly bad

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 131, 132.

news. So far, God's people have indeed been unfaithful. Because of our unbelief, time has continued far beyond what it should have. Will the end therefore never be truly near? How near is “near”?

This 1856 statement must be understood in its proper context. Ellen White's credibility is not at issue. She was merely reporting what she heard the “angel” say. She herself never offered her own personal prediction that people alive in 1856 would see the Lord come without tasting death. “The angel” said so.

Someone may object that this makes matters worse: now it appears that we cannot trust the angels. Not so. The angel was sincere and in his perfect right to make this statement in 1856 when the Laodicean message was first understood and accepted by God's remnant people. It was the influence of holy angels who brought to the hearts of those early Adventists the conviction that the loud cry would begin within the lifetime of people at the conference in 1856. And Jesus tells us that no “angels which are in heaven” know the actual time of His second coming.<sup>6</sup>

But even though he is not omniscient, the angel used good angelic judgment. From his knowledge of the holy prophecies and of the repentant faith of believers in 1856, he had every reason to expect the good news that in those “days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, as

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<sup>6</sup> “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).

he hath declared to his servants the prophets” (Rev. 10:7). The angels knew that the final cosmic Day of Atonement had begun, when the heavenly sanctuary should at last be cleansed. Something was to happen that had never happened in previous history.

In precise fulfillment of the 1856 vision, the Lord sent the “beginning” of the latter rain and the loud cry 32 years later, well within the lifetime of people who attended the 1856 Battle Creek conference. A marvelous event occurred at that humble gathering of Adventist leaders in the Minneapolis Seventh-day Adventist Church:

“The time of test is just upon us, for 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.”<sup>7</sup>

This had never happened before. Thoughtful church members were thrilled by a statement sent from Australia at the 1893 General Conference Session: “Sister White says that we have been in the time of the latter rain since the Minneapolis meeting.”<sup>8</sup>

Although Ellen White said several times that the end could have come at various times between 1844 and 1888 if God’s people had been faithful, she never said that it could have come without it. Therefore any statements that say the end could

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<sup>7</sup> *Review and Herald*, November 22, 1892; *Selected Messages*, Vol. I, p. 363.

<sup>8</sup> *General Conference Bulletin*, 1893, p. 377.

have come before 1888 must be understood as requiring that the latter rain and the proclamation of the loud cry message would have come first. Never at any time did Ellen White declare that such had begun in any message or revival prior to 1888.

There is a great difference between the early rain outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the latter rain. Jesus likens His church to a garden crop to be harvested (Mk. 4:26-29).

Does “the harvest” come when people die, or at the second coming of Christ? We find the answer in Revelation:

“So He who sat on the cloud thrust in His sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped” (Rev. 14:14-16, NKJV).

What a beautiful expressive symbol! The One who went to the cross for us, who poured out His soul unto death, who suffered unspeakable agonies for our redemption, looks upon the ripened “grain” as the hard-won fruit of all His sacrifice.

All of earth’s thousands of years of history have been the growing season preparatory to this moment of “harvest” when He personally returns. Out of earth’s billions of inhabitants of all ages there comes at last a remnant of precious souls who gladly receive the showers of the latter rain. Their mature faith has at last produced in a community of believers a reflection of the beauty of Christ’s character. Without fail, “the great, grand work of bringing out a people who will have Christ-like

characters, and who will be able to stand in the day of the Lord, is to be accomplished.”<sup>9</sup>

This is the “practical godliness” fruitage of the cleansing of the sanctuary. “Just as soon as the people of God are sealed in their foreheads—it is not any seal or mark that can be seen, but a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so they cannot be moved—just as soon as God’s people are sealed and prepared for the shaking, it will come.”<sup>10</sup> Tons of ore have at least yielded an ounce of purest gold. Heaven rejoices that the sacrifice of Christ is fully rewarded in a people whose mature faith has produced mature righteousness. At last, righteousness by faith has come into its own:

“Christ is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His church. When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own.”<sup>11</sup>

No one prepares himself or herself for “the harvest.” The latter rain causes the grain to ripen. Our part is to welcome that blessing, and not to fight it off and resist it.

Ever since early days, Adventists have looked forward to the miracle-working effects of the latter rain. As she saw it in vision Ellen White’s description of it quickens the pulse:

“I heard those clothed with the armor speak forth the truth with great power. It had effect. Many had

been bound; some wives by their husbands, and some children by their parents. The honest who had been prevented from hearing the truth now eagerly laid hold upon it. All fear of their relatives was gone, and the truth alone was exalted to them. . . . It was dearer and more precious than life. I asked what had made this great change. An angel answered, ‘It is the latter rain, the refreshing from the presence of the Lord, the loud cry of the third angel.’”<sup>12</sup>

The *early rain* fell at Pentecost, and has been received ever since through the past two thousand years as untold multitudes of human souls have prepared for death.

But there must come a change before Christ’s second coming. A people must be prepared, not for death, but for translation without seeing death. Another great outpouring of the Holy Spirit will accomplish a work that makes ready a church, a community of believers, for the coming of the Lord. It also empowers them to complete the great unfinished commission of proclaiming the everlasting gospel to all the world. This final outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the latter rain.

That picture of the harvest getting ripe so that Christ can thrust in His sickle to reap is a beautifully expressive symbol. The One who went to the cross for us, who poured out His soul unto death, who suffered unspeakable agonies for our redemption, looks upon that ripened “grain” as the hard-won fruitage of all His sacrifice. He deserves a reward!

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<sup>9</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 6, p. 129.

<sup>10</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 4, p. 1161.

<sup>11</sup> *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 69.

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<sup>12</sup> *Early Writings*, p. 271.

All of earth's thousands of years of history have been the growing season preparatory to this moment of harvest when He personally returns. Out of earth's billions of inhabitants of all ages there comes at last a remnant of precious souls who gladly receive the showers of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Only as that rain falls can the grain ripen. The mature faith of those who believe God's Word has at last produced in a community of believers a reflection of the beauty of Christ's character. That reproduction of His character is the fruit. Without fail, the great, grand work is to be accomplished of bringing out a people who will be able to stand in the day of the Lord.

This is the practical godliness aspect of that ripening grain. Nothing happening anywhere in the world today is as important as this! Out of earth's billions, there will be a remnant of faithful ones who will not be ashamed when they see Christ at His return, and who will genuinely welcome Him. Neither will He be ashamed of them. Tons of ore have at last yielded an ounce of purest gold. Heaven rejoices that the sacrifice of Christ is fully rewarded in a people whose mature faith, not in their sins. At last, the pure gospel of righteousness by faith has come into its own. The sacrifice on the cross and His High Priestly ministry have guaranteed this result.

Note that no one prepares himself or herself for the harvest. No grain can ever ripen by itself without being watered. Our part is to welcome that blessing, and not to fight it off and resist it. The latter rain of

the Holy Spirit's outpouring causes the grain to ripen.

The early rain fell at Pentecost, and has been received ever since through the past two thousand years as untold multitudes of human souls have prepared for death. The figure is drawn from the Palestinian barley crop where the annual early and latter rainy seasons were familiar to farmers. The early rain enables the grain to sprout and to grow, but not to ripen for the harvest. The ripening is a change that can only be produced by the latter rain.

There must also come a spiritual change before Christ's second coming. A people must be prepared, not for death, but for translation without seeing death, because the Bible differentiates between the multitudes who have died believing in Christ and those who are living when He comes:

"I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. . . . We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up. . . in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:13-17).

"I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. . . . And they sang as it were a new song

before the throne, . . . and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. . . . And in their mouth was found no guile, for they are without fault before the throne of God” (Rev. 14:1-6).

The Lord says He is ready to work with each one on earth who is willing. A great outpouring of the Holy Spirit will accomplish a work that makes ready a worldwide community of believers for the coming of the Lord. It also empowers them to complete the great unfinished commission of proclaiming the everlasting gospel to all the world. Only those who are humble in heart, who feel a need, who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” by faith, can discern and receive this special gift of the Holy Spirit (Cf. Matt. 5:6 and Rev. 3:14-19). All who feel arrogantly “rich and increased with goods” in their proud assumed possession of “salvation” will miss it. If you can imagine thirsty plants putting up umbrellas to keep off the rain, you can see the true attitude of Christians who don’t want to receive Heaven’s latter rain.

In the meantime, we can be sure that Christ is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His true people who love Him. When His character shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own.