

## **HAVE WE DELAYED THE ADVENT?**

More than 14 decades have passed since William Miller predicted that Jesus would come in 1844, and many Adventists are wondering why He still has not come. On one hand, sobering signs point to the end. There is the nuclear threat, the AIDS epidemic that is decimating Africa and threatening the West, drugs, demonism, and the decay destroying our political institutions.

But on the other hand, some signs are not being fulfilled. Sunday laws are not an issue. The Religious Right speaks of them, but has lost credibility because of the PTL debacle. No Sabbath-keeper now sits in jail because he worked on Sunday. Many denominations have united, but their influence in the legislatures is small. The great challenge today is not religious fanaticism, but secularism and worldly unbelief.

The feeling that the church has lost its sense of the imminency of Christ's return is widespread, and many are making strenuous efforts to move the church off dead centre. Some are reapplying to the future a number of prophecies fulfilled in the past, believing that this will awaken God's people and lead to the final events. In 1980 one such expositor wrote a 1,400-page document predicting great things would happen in 1982 and 1983. Another is confident that the present pope will lead the world to enact Sunday laws. Some are sure that the judgment in heaven reached the cases of the living in 1986. Another predicted that probation would close for Adventists in July 1987, and for the rest of the world in August 1987. For some the ancient jubilee cycles lend special significance to the year 1987.

While no one is mentioning the day and the hour, many are speaking of the month and the year. These people generally say that the Lord is waiting for the church to repent of sin and accept the beliefs and lifestyle they promote. They are sure that the time of Christ's return depends on the readiness of His people.

Ellen White lived for seven decades after 1844- Her attitude toward the passing years can give us balanced guidance now.

### **HAS JESUS DELAYED HIS COMING?**

Many Seventh-day Adventists believe that Jesus has delayed His coming and refer to a statement Ellen White made in 1883. She said that if all Adventists had held fast their faith after the disappointment in 1844 and united in proclaiming the third angel's message, the Lord would have "wrought mightily with their efforts, the work would have been completed, and Christ would have come ere this to receive His people to their reward."

"It was not the will of God that the coming of Christ should be thus delayed," she continued, comparing the Advent believers to ancient Israel, who wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. The same sins unbelief, worldliness, lack of consecration, and strife had delayed the events both groups were anticipating.

In this statement, Ellen White also wrote that "the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional." The conditions she mentioned were that the people of God must purify their souls through obedience to the truth and proclaim the three angels' messages.

While this was the first time Ellen White spoke so fully of the delay, as the years passed she repeated these ideas many times. She said that just as soon as the people of God

were sealed in their foreheads and thus prepared for the shaking, Christ would come. At times she compared the believers to soldiers who had not done their duty, or plants that should have been bearing fruit. If they had been faithful, they would have quickly sown the world with the seed of the gospel, but because they had not done their duty the work was far behind where it should have been.

In 1892 Ellen White wrote that the final events are tied to the revelation of Christ's righteousness that began in 1888: "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."

Many have concluded from this latter statement that the time of Christ's return depends on this one condition the revelation of the righteousness of Christ. But this statement should be read in the context of the whole article, and in connection with everything else she wrote on the loud cry. In 1858, for instance, she wrote of the loud cry going to the poor slaves. In 1888 she connected the loud cry with the second and third angels' messages, with special emphasis on the Sabbath. And in 1909 she said that during the loud cry, love would triumph over race prejudice.

It is clear, then, that the 1892 statement is part of a larger picture and should not be taken by itself. We must remember that Ellen White wrote as if all the final events were either beginning or immediately impending. None of her statements can be used to set dates. In 1891 she preached a sermon entitled "It Is Not for You to Know the Times and the Seasons." In this sermon she said, "I have no specific time of which to speak when the outpouring of the Holy Spirit will take place, when the mighty angel will come down from heaven, and unite with the third angel in closing up the work for this world; my message is that our only safety is in being ready for the heavenly refreshing, having our lamps trimmed and burning."

In *Christ's Object Lessons*, we find the oft-quoted statement "When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own.

"It is the privilege of every Christian not only to look for but to hasten the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:12, margin). Were all who profess His name bearing fruit to His glory, how quickly the whole world would be sown with the seed of the gospel. Quickly the last great harvest would be ripened, and Christ would come to gather the precious grain."

Along similar lines, Ellen White said that if the young of the church were a well-trained army, the Lord would come soon; and that when the members do their work at home and abroad, the world will soon be warned and the Lord will come.

So Ellen White was very clear in saying that Jesus has delayed His coming, and that by holy living and diligent witnessing we can hasten it.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE DELAYED ADVENT**

But as the decades pass, questions come to our minds. Since God must know when Jesus will come, how can we speak of delay? How can we harmonize His sovereignty His control of the time of the Advent with our free will our part in hastening or delaying the Advent? How long will He allow us to hinder the climax of His plans?

If He is waiting for us to attain a level of holiness never seen before, will we ever meet that prerequisite? And as to preaching the gospel to all the world, how can we do it when people keep dying and giving birth? Is only Adventist preaching of the gospel acceptable?

We hear many answers to these questions. Some focus on repentance and righteousness by faith, particularly during this year's centennial anniversary of the 1888 General Conference. Others emphasize behavior and standards; and yet others point to the task to be done for the world.

Every reformer says, "I have the answer! Follow me, and the Lord will come!" While their answers vary, all seem to agree that translation righteousness is greater than resurrection-righteousness, and that Adventists must therefore do some thing never done before. Some are in despair because they do not see Adventists doing it. The Laodicean church is still the Laodicean church!

What would Ellen White say about all this? Did she intend to destroy our hope with her exhortations? Did she set up standards that God's people cannot meet? Did she blame faithful believers for others' unfaithfulness? Did she make the return of Christ contingent on holiness or the witness of His people?

The answer is that so far we have examined only one side of what she wrote on this question, and thus have drawn a skewed picture. Ellen White did say that Christ has delayed His coming, but that is not all she said. Let us consider the other side of her thought.

## **IS THE TIME OF JESUS' COMING FIXED?**

While Ellen White wrote often of delay, she mentioned even more frequently the certainty and nearness of Jesus' coming. In 1888 she indicated that though it seemed that Jesus was tarrying, He really wasn't. "We are not impatient. If the vision tarry, wait for it, for it will surely come, it will not tarry. Although disappointed, our faith has not failed, and we have not drawn back to perdition. The apparent tarrying is not so in reality, for at the appointed time our Lord will come."

God does have a day and hour. Ellen White heard it in her first vision, although the Lord did not allow her to reveal it. The same letter quoted above explains, "I have not the slightest knowledge as to the time spoken by the voice of God. I heard the hour proclaimed, but had no remembrance of that hour after I came out of vision."

In 1888 there was an attempt to get Congress to pass a national Sunday law. Adventists saw this attempt as fulfilling what they had been proclaiming for 40 years. The final crisis seemed to be at hand, but the church was not ready—neither in the members' personal experience nor in their work for the world. Ellen White urged Adventists to pray for a respite so they would have time to do their neglected work. She did not believe it was the right time for their liberties to be restricted. What she wrote in this chapter casts a different light upon the 1883 statements that suggest that the end will not come until the church has finished its work. In 1889 the final events seemed to have started even though the church had not done its work.

Another evidence of a fixed time for Christ's coming is found in Ellen White's view of God's sovereignty. The great prophecies of the Bible show His control over all things. "Like the stars in the vast circuit of their appointed path, God's purposes know no haste and no

delay." When God's great clock indicated the hour appointed in Daniel 9:24- 27, Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

In Ezekiel's vision of God's glory, Mrs. White saw symbols of God's power over earthly rulers. The hand under the wings of the cherubim showed that human events are under divine control. God works out His purposes through the movements of the nations.

God is also sovereign in the church. He guarantees that the church will be successful in its mission to the world: "The cause of present truth ... is destined to triumph gloriously." In the last generation the parable of the mustard seed will reach "a signal and triumphant fulfilment," and the warning message will go to all the world to "take out of them a people for his name (Acts 15:14)."

Reformers who are discouraged at the state of the church can take heart from Ellen White's faith in God's power: "It is divine power that gives success. Those whom God employs as His messengers are not to feel that His work is dependent on them. Finite beings are not left to carry this burden of responsibility. He who slumbers not, who is continually at work for the accomplishment of His designs, will carry forward His work."

So the sovereignty of God is our assurance. If necessary, He will finish His work Himself. But if we think only of His sovereignty, we may sink into sinful apathy. If God has a schedule and we can neither hasten nor delay it, why should we do anything at all? Thus taking either stream of Ellen White's thought by itself poses dangers.

## **HARMONIZING DELAY AND NEARNESS**

How could Ellen White write of delay in 1883 but say it was "not so in reality" in 1888? How can we harmonize delay and nearness?

Here we have two ways of looking at the same event. From our viewpoint, there has been a delay because we have not done the work we should have. But from God's viewpoint, there is no delay. He has not put His plans entirely in our hands. He is sovereign; He is in control; He has His "appointed time."

Ellen White certainly taught that Christ was coming soon. In 1888 she wrote: "The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional."

Here we see both nearness and delay. But we see something more. In the following paragraphs Sister White says more about conditions to be met than about time. She never refers to time as a bare piece of information. Delay takes second place to exhortations. She speaks of the third angel's message and Sabbath reform, and then calls God's people to purify their souls through obedience to the truth. She says it is the unbelief, worldliness, unconsecration, and strife among the Lord's professed people that have kept them in the world so many years.

The one who believes in the soon coming of Christ shows it by holy living and diligent witnessing. The one who believes His coming is delayed shows it by his sins. It is the wicked servant who says in his heart that the master is delayed.

Ellen White once rebuked a worker's wife: "I saw that for some time past, Sister J has had a rebellious spirit, has been self-willed. ... I saw that she did not bring the coming of the Lord as near as she should, and that her mind, instead of being at Rochester, should be all swallowed up in the work of God, and she should be seeking opportunities to help her husband, to hold up his hands, and to labour wherever there was an opportunity."

When Ellen White wrote of the true Advent spirit and of the woman who did not "bring the coming of the Lord as near as she should," she was speaking more about preparation than about time.

A people will be ready when the Lord comes. Their spots and stains will be removed beforehand pride, passion, slothfulness, envy, evil-surmisings, and evil-speaking. These "spots" bring all Ellen White's exhortations. She insisted that the work of overcoming sin must be done in this life: not one error of character will be removed when Christ comes.

When we turn to the "nearness" stream of Ellen White's writings, we find that here also the question of time took second place to exhortation. In fact, she complements her statements that unbelief and sin have delayed Christ's coming with statements that we must overcome unbelief and sin because He is coming soon. Whether we think of nearness or delay, our duties are the same: We should "live and act wholly in reference to the coming of the Son of man." We are to be so filled with the spirit of Christ's advent that whether we are found working in the field, building a house, or preaching the Word, we shall be ready for Him.

Those who expect Jesus to come soon will wait, watch, work, and pray. Waiting and watching show that we are strangers and pilgrims on earth; while others seek earthly treasure and live as though the time is long, we are seeking the better, heavenly country. Working means improving our talents for Christ and working for souls. By waiting, watching, praying, and working we cultivate heart-holiness.

While those Adventists who brood over last-day events rely heavily on Mrs. White's writings, she herself made no charts of the future. Such charts are usually based on compilations of quotations, and always vary with the compiler. They stir up excitement; they increase prayer meeting attendance but things may not work out as predicted. There is danger in crying "Wolf! Wolf!" too often. Ellen White did not say we should watch the signs of the times. Rather, she counselled us to watch for the least unholy promptings of our natures. We are to watch and pray as though each day were our last; we are to be sober, but "not to cherish sadness and gloom."

As to our duty to witness, we find Ellen White exhorting us to speak to everyone we meet because our time for work will soon be past; we have only a little while to urge the warfare. In 1904 she wrote that because the Lord will very soon arise to shake the earth, there is not time for trivial things.

Repeatedly she said that the end is near, but there is a great work to be done: how diligently we must do it! Vigilance and fidelity have always been required, but because the end is near, Ellen White urges us to double diligence. The message must be given: "We have warnings now which we may give, a work now which we may do; but soon it will be more difficult than we can imagine." (How truly this 1900 prediction has been fulfilled in this century!)

The nearness of Christ's coming is also the motivation underlying our publishing houses, sanitariums, schools, food factories, and restaurants. Institutions are long-range projects, but they give standing to the work and help proclaim the three angels' messages. We must work until the Lord bids us "make no further effort to build meeting-houses and establish schools, sanitariums, and publishing institutions. . . .

"[We must] increase the facilities that a great work may be done in a short time."

We must be constantly at our task until the Lord says it is done. We will not be ready for His coming if we are not. Ellen White emphasized doing the work and living the life rather than calculating the time. Only God knows when the end will be, but we must always work and live in the belief that it is near. To ask "When?" is to ask the wrong question; rather, we ought to ask how to be ready whenever it will be.

### **WHAT ABOUT END-TIME PERFECTION?**

Will the church ever reach the point where it will be without "spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing," ready "to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator"? This seems to imply sinless perfection. How is it to be done?

Ellen White never claimed to be perfect herself. Shortly before she died she said, "I do not say that I am perfect, but I am trying to be perfect. I do not expect others to be perfect; and if I could not associate with my brothers and sisters who are not perfect, I do not know what I should do.

"I try to treat the matter the best that I can, and am thankful that I have a spirit of uplifting and not a spirit of crushing down. . . . No one is perfect. If one were perfect, he would be prepared for heaven. As long as we are not perfect, we have a work to do to get ready to be perfect. We have a mighty Saviour. . . .

"I rejoice that I have that faith that takes hold of the promises of God that works by love and sanctifies the soul."

"We have a mighty Saviour." That is the secret of being ready for His coming. He is our righteousness, just as He was the righteousness of all our fathers who died in faith.

God's part in preparing me for translation is to forgive my sins and impute Christ's righteousness to me, and then to cause me to grow from grace to grace, from strength to strength, from character to character. My part is to believe His promises, confess my sins, give myself to Him, and will to serve Him. As I believe that I am cleansed, God supplies the fact Christ binds up my wounds and cleanses me from all impurity.

These blessings that give us our title and fitness for heaven are beautifully described in *Steps to Christ*, pages 50 and 51. There Ellen White says that we must will to serve Christ and believe His promise of forgiveness and cleansing "It is so if you believe it." It is His will to cleanse us from sin, to make us His children and enable us to live a holy life. "So we may ask for these blessings, and believe that we receive them, and thank God that we have received them."

We can summarize Ellen White's exhortations by likening her to someone running a race. In the Millerite movement of 1842-1844 she was a sprinter in a hundred-yard dash. She put everything she had into the revival—her money, her efforts, her prayers—everything.

After the Disappointment she found herself running a marathon rather than a sprint. Nevertheless, she always maintained the zeal, force, and dedication of the dash. She urged us to give sacrificially, to dedicate ourselves to the Lord as though each day were our last, to love Christ rather than the world, to make sure our sins are confessed before we go to bed every night, and, as the Advent believers did in 1844, to live in peace and harmony. In every way she urged us to continue the drive of the dash throughout the marathon. Christ's soon coming always urges us to holiness and witness.

In this way we live in preparation for the coming of Christ. This is how the apostles and, for that matter, how the Christians of all ages have lived. While the soon coming of Christ lends new urgency to Christian duties, the way of salvation is not different in these last days. Thank God, many have reached the standard in Christ and many are reaching it today. May we be among them!