

Chapter 1

How To Think About the End Time

Shortly before Jesus returned to heaven, His disciples came to Him with an urgent question: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

That question is pregnant with meaning for every Seventh-day Adventist who is serious about his Church’s foundational conviction - a conviction that has driven our movement’s global outreach for more than 150 years now - that the return of Jesus is near. For you see, in Christ’s time, as in our day, there was a widespread expectation that the time was near for the establishment of God’s eternal kingdom.

Of course, the Jews’ understanding of what that would entail was much different from ours. Indeed, we would think their view of the end time very strange. Nevertheless, let’s take a few moments to sketch their beliefs and their expectations to see what lessons they may hold for us.

To start with, there were the promises of the Old Testament prophets about Israel’s greatness. For example, Isaiah said:

In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob” (Isaiah 2:2, 3).

Israel will be the greatest among the nations! That’s what the text says, isn’t it? And that’s what they believed. It may have seemed difficult to believe this when their nation was under Rome’s thumb, but God’s people have always been willing to believe the impossible when prophecy declares it. They couldn’t conquer Rome, of course - though some tried awfully hard. But everyone knew that the Messiah, when He came, would lead

the Jews to victory over all their oppressors. Didn't the prophecies declare that too? Didn't Isaiah predict that "the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, to uphold Zion's cause" (Isaiah 34:8)? Didn't he declare that God was "angry with all nations," that His wrath was upon all their armies, and that He would totally destroy them (verse 2)? Didn't He foresee the day when, with vengeance in His heart, the Messiah would trample the nations in His anger (Isaiah 34:3,4)?

And now for the best news of all: The day of the Messiah's appearance was at hand! Daniel's seventy-week prophecy, with its beginning in the middle of the fifth century B.C., was about to reach its conclusion in the first century A.D. Not only that, they could hasten His arrival! For, according to a common notion circulating in Palestine at the time, the Messiah would come when all Jews lived in perfect harmony with the law for just one day. Naturally, obedience to the law became very important to the most zealous among them. In fact, one extreme group at Christ's time was called the "Zealots" because of their zeal for strict observance of the law. Eventually, some of these people banded into a party to fight the Romans, and in this role they became fanatical opponents of the Roman domination of Judea to the point of assassinating anyone who opposed them!

You and I, looking at first-century Judaism through the lens of twenty-first-century Adventism may smile, but that's only because, with the benefit of 2,000 years of history, we understand that they failed to achieve God's most basic purpose for their existence.

That was their mindset. Now let's come back to our Adventist mindset about the end time. I suggest that, while there are many differences between their views and ours, there are several interesting similarities.

Chief among these is the great anticipation, based on our prophetic interpretation, that "the end" is near. Another significant similarity is the shared conviction that the failure to live our religious beliefs faithfully is a major cause of the delay

in the return of Christ. And finally, there is the conviction that our group is special in God's eyes. We are His unique people. The Jews were "sons of Abraham." Our Church is "the remnant."

Jesus' disciples were steeped in these ideas. And given this background, imagine what it must have been like for them the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the crowds shouting His praises and singing "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Luke 19:38). The end was near! Jesus was about to establish His kingdom! All the prophecies pointing to Israel's greatness were about to reach their final fulfillment! The disciples' hopes soared to a fever pitch.

And each was assigning himself the role he would play in the coming kingdom. Of course, they each aspired to the coveted position of prime minister. And each probably assumed that Judas was the one to beat out of the job. In this competitive frame of mind, it's little wonder they came to the upper room so totally unprepared that Christ had to give them a living example of what it means to be a servant.

Please notice that their confused thinking about the end time combined with their innate human selfishness caused them to be spiritually unprepared for the institution of the preeminent sacrament of the next 2,000 years of Christian history.

A few hours later, a mob led by Judas came to arrest Jesus. Not to worry, though. Jesus was perfectly able to defend Himself. And at first that seemed to have happened. Ellen White says that "the angel who had lately ministered to Jesus moved between Him and the mob," and "the murderous throng ... staggered back. Priests, elders, soldiers, and even Judas, fell as dead men to the ground." But then Jesus allowed Himself to be arrested. That's when Peter decided it was time for action and whipped out his sword to defend his Master. But Jesus did the strangest thing. He ordered His disciple to put his sword back in its sheath. How totally incomprehensible that must have seemed to Peter!

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The disciples followed Jesus to the home of the high priest, then to the Sanhedrin, then to Pilate's judgment hall, then to Herod, and back to Pilate. All the while they waited with bated breath for Him to assert His power. "Just flash Your divinity, Jesus! Show Your power! Take over the armies of Israel and lead them to victory over the Romans!"

But He never did.

Instead, Jesus allowed Himself to be led away to Golgotha, where Roman soldiers nailed Him to a cross, and He died. He really, truly died! Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea took His body down and buried it in Joseph's tomb.

Do you understand a bit better now the anguished cry of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus?" "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21)? Talk about the great disappointment!

But then Jesus came back to life.

What a miracle! He had raised Lazarus from the dead, and now He had even raised Himself from the dead. What a military leader Jesus would make! The enemy couldn't possibly destroy Him or His army. So this was the plan! The disciples spent the next forty days waiting for Him to outline the steps in the establishment of His kingdom. But on that subject Jesus was strangely and totally silent. Finally, on what seemed to them a particularly auspicious occasion, they broached the subject again:" "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Old ideas do die hard.

Please notice that it was wrong thinking about the end time that caused the disciples so much confusion and grief. Do you begin to understand why it's so important that we understand how to think about the end time?

Join me some 1,800 years later. October 22, 1844. It's the end time again. Jesus is coming! He's coming today! The people gather in little groups, looking into the sky. Waiting for the flaming cloud. The trumpet call. The graves breaking open. The saints ascending to heaven. But midnight comes, and there's no flaming cloud, no trumpet call, no Jesus. Instead, to quote the anguished words of one who passed through that time, "Our

fondest hopes and expectations were blasted, and such a spirit of weeping came over us as I have never experienced before. ... We wept, and wept, till the day dawn.”

It was the second Great Disappointment.

And why? Because, again, God’s people misunderstood the prophecies. I realize that there’s a great difference between the first disappointment and the second one. Jesus warned His disciples repeatedly about His approaching trial and death, but they refused to listen. Thus, they brought their great disappointment on themselves. The situation was different during the Millerite movement of the 1830s and early 1840s. In the words of Ellen White, God’s hand “was over and hid a mistake in some of the figures, so that none could see it, until His hand was removed.” He “covered a mistake in the reckoning of the prophetic periods.” The point is that a misunderstanding of prophecy always leads to erroneous expectations, regardless of the cause.

Seventh-day Adventists today, together with many other Christians, believe that we truly do live in the end time. I share that conviction. The question that confronts us is this:

Will there be a third great disappointment?

I’d like to answer that question with the words of Jesus Himself:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:21-23).

Our ideas about the end of the world and the establishment God’s eternal kingdom are based on Bible prophecy, and for Seventh-day Adventists, the prophetic writings of Ellen White.

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It can't be any other way, unless we're prepared to accept the babblings of the psychics or the questionable predictions of the so-called apparitions of the Virgin Mary. Therefore, it's imperative that we have a correct understanding of the prophecies. Because if we don't, we will misunderstand the fulfillment of those prophecies even as we live through the events that fulfill them.

Satan was extremely successful at deceiving the Jews about Christ's first coming. He got them to believe that the Messiah's primary mission would be to deliver them from the Romans. He twisted their calling to be God's special people into the perversion that they were His exclusive people. He caused them to be so zealous for the law that they twisted it into an impossible burden. And because of these false beliefs and expectations, they rejected their own Messiah when He came.

I can assure you that Satan is also doing everything he can to introduce false beliefs and false expectations into our minds about the second coming of Jesus. And with many of us he will succeed, for Jesus warned that Satan will be so successful that even God's own elect will be in danger of succumbing to his deceptions, if that were possible (see Matthew 24:24). Those who are truly the elect won't be deceived. But many who think they are among the elect will be deceived. For Jesus also warned that "many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?'" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you" ' " (Matthew 7:22, 23).

False ideas and expectations about the end time will be among Satan's major deceptions in our day. That's why it's so important that we think correctly about the end time. For if our thinking is confused on that issue, at best the final crisis will be much more difficult for us as we're passing through it, and at the worst we will end up on the wrong side when it's over. That's why I invite you to consider with me in the remainder of this book:

How to Think About the End Time.