

CHAPTER 1

The Biblical Evidence for Probation and Its Close

Every now and then I get a phone call from a woman I'll call Judy. She feels very sinful, and she's afraid that she isn't nearly good enough for God to accept her. She constantly monitors all of her choices, fearful that she might make a wrong one. And after she's made a decision, she questions whether it was the right one. She's always asking, "Is God angry with me? Will He reject me because I've made a wrong choice? Have I lost my salvation?"

I've assured Judy that, far from being angry with her, God loves her profoundly. He's very pleased with her desire to serve Him, and He isn't troubled by the fact that she isn't always able to live up to His ideal for her. For a while, then, Judy feels better. But a few months later she'll call again and pour out her fear that she isn't nearly good enough for God to accept her.

I don't hesitate to say that God doesn't want people to live in constant fear. Jesus told His disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27). As Joshua was preparing to lead the Israelites into the land of Canaan, God said to him, "Do not be afraid" (Joshua 1:9, NKJV). And of the twelve occurrences of the word *afraid* in Isaiah, ten say, "Do not [or don't] be afraid" or something very similar.*

Unfortunately, we, in our human brokenness, can turn even the best news into bad news. Judy is an example of that. The good news of salvation, which brings joy to most people, becomes bad news in her disturbed thinking. My heart goes out to people like Judy, and I try my best to lead them to a correct understanding so that they can experience the joy God so much wants them to have.

Several biblical doctrines can be misinterpreted in ways that make us fearful. Judy was afraid of God; she felt condemned by His holiness and threatened by His power, both of which, according to the doctrine that describes Him, are prime characteristics of His being. Some people are afraid of the Second Coming,

* Isaiah 10:24; 12:2; 17:2; 37:6; 40:9; 41:14; 43:5; 44:2, 8; 54:4, NIV.

especially the idea that it's near, because they fear that they won't be ready. The doctrine of the investigative judgment has also created a great amount of fear among some Adventists, because they think they'll be condemned.

Some people resolve their fear by rejecting the doctrine that prompts it. Fear of the doctrine of God leads some to become atheists. Those who are afraid of Christ's return persuade themselves that it's still a long way off. People who fear the doctrine of the investigative judgment say it's not scriptural, and many of them leave the church. Each of these fears has been generated by a doctrine that has its foundation in just one issue: the fear that "I'm not good enough" for God, for Christ's second coming, for the investigative judgment, and so forth.

The close of probation is an Adventist doctrine that, like the others I have mentioned, has created an immense amount of fear in many minds, and for the same reason—the fear that "I'm not good enough. If I'm supposed to be sinless after the close of probation, I'll never make it!" This is most unfortunate, because the close of probation doesn't have to be frightening at all. We need to be aware of it, and we need to prepare for it, but we *do not* need to be afraid of it. The purpose of this book is to help you understand probation and how to prepare for its close so you'll be relieved of any fears you may have about it.

As we begin this conversation, we need to understand what the word *probation* means as a spiritual and theological term.

What is probation?

My wife, Lois, and I have a weekly Bible study with a Baptist couple who have become very dear friends. On several occasions I mentioned that I was writing a book, and recently they asked me what I was writing about. When I told them I was writing about probation and the close of probation, they said, "What's that?" I explained that probation is the time God gives us to accept Jesus as our Savior, and the close of probation is God's withdrawal of the offer of salvation. My friends agreed that this made sense.

God offered salvation to Adam and Eve after they ate the forbidden fruit. The promise of salvation was implicit in His statement that the Seed of the woman would bruise the serpent's head (see Genesis 3:15). From that time to this, salvation has been available to all human beings. That's probation. Most people reject God's offer, but it's *available* to them.

So, when will this probationary time end? When will salvation no longer be

available? People have suggested several answers to these questions.

Universalism. Some Christians believe that God's offer of salvation will never end. This view is called "universalism" because of the idea that every human being will ultimately be saved. Universalists insist that even after Christ's second coming, wicked people will be able to accept Christ. They may suffer in hell for a while, but that suffering will persuade them that they need to accept Christ.

Universalism is one of Satan's most subtle deceptions. That deception is illustrated by something a friend told me recently. He said he was acquainted with a man who claimed that he didn't think he had to live the Christian life now, because he would get a second chance—he would be able to obtain salvation after he died. And if he needed a third chance and a fourth, he'd get them too. Universalists claim that God is so loving that He doesn't want anyone to perish (see 2 Peter 3:9); therefore, no one will. Sooner or later, everyone will be saved.

Salvation during the millennium. Some people believe that salvation will continue to be available to the wicked during the millennium that follows Christ's second coming, and that God will withdraw this offer only at the termination of the millennium. The basis for this conclusion is the idea that Christ will establish His eternal kingdom on this earth at His second coming, and the righteous and the wicked will continue to live side by side throughout the millennium. It's only a short step beyond that to conclude that salvation will be available to the wicked during that time.

At Christ's second coming. A third concept, one that many Christians have, regarding the close of probation is that the opportunity to accept Christ will end at His second coming. Of the three non-Adventist ideas about the close of probation, this one strikes me as the most reasonable. After all, in several of His parables, Jesus made it clear that the righteous and the wicked won't be separated from each other until His second coming. (See the parables of the wheat and the tares, the good fish and the bad fish, and the sheep and the goats—Matthew 13:36–43; 47–52; and 25:31–33.) It's easy to assume this means that God's offer of salvation will end and probation will close at Christ's second coming.

Before Christ's return. Seventh-day Adventists suggest that the answer to the question of when probation will close has three parts. First, a few people close their probation by committing the unpardonable sin during their lifetime (see Matthew 12:31, 32). Second, probation ends for each human being when he or she dies. Whatever relationship a person has with God at the time of his or

her death is the relationship they have with Him for eternity. Third, Adventists believe that *probation will end shortly before Christ's second coming for all those who are living at that time.*

But is it biblical?

I used to think the Adventist idea that probation will close a short time before Christ's second coming was based only on Ellen White's comments, not on the Bible. This troubled me, because we claim that all of our major beliefs have a biblical foundation. Ellen White may elaborate beyond what the Bible says, as she often does, but the basic teaching must be scriptural. So I went looking for the close of probation in the Bible, and it didn't take me long to find it.

Revelation 14:9–11 tells of a time when God will inflict wrath unmixed with mercy upon all those who receive the mark of the beast. In chapter 16, this outpouring of wrath is graphically named the “seven last plagues.” A careful examination of the plagues and their context in Revelation 14 to 19 makes it evident that they will occur shortly *before* Christ's second coming.

In Revelation 15:1, John said, “I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God's wrath is completed.” This scene—and in fact all of chapter 15—takes place in heaven. This is significant, as we shall see in a moment. The other important point to note in verse 1 is that the seven last plagues will complete God's wrath. The falling of these plagues is the final event in earth's history prior to Christ's second coming.*

Revelation 15:2 pictures the redeemed standing beside a sea of glass, and the second part of verse 3 and all of verse 4 are the lyrics of a song that they sing as they stand before God's throne. Verse 5 is very significant because it shows God's temple being opened. At the time of Christ's death, the veil in the temple in Jerusalem was torn from top to bottom, exposing the Most Holy Place (see Mark 15:38). This torn veil indicated that the mediatorial ministry of the priests in that sanctuary had ended. Carrying the analogy from the type to the antitype, God's heavenly temple is the place where Christ carries out His mediatorial ministry as our High Priest. Thus, the opening of the temple in heaven is a clue that its

* The Second Coming itself is sometimes referred to as “the great day of [God's] wrath” (Revelation 6:17), and the death of the wicked in the lake of fire at the end of the millennium will also be a manifestation of His wrath, even though Revelation doesn't use the word *wrath* in that context.

services have ceased and Christ's mediatorial ministry has ended.

Revelation 15:7 shows one of the four beasts that surround God's throne giving the seven angels the seven bowls filled with God's wrath. The climax of the chapter comes in verse 8, which says, "The temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed."

This interesting imagery is drawn from a couple of Old Testament passages that describe the dedication of Solomon's temple. The Bible says that when the ark of the covenant was brought to the Most Holy Place, "The temple of the LORD was filled with a cloud, and *the priests could not perform their service* because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple of God" (2 Chronicles 5:13, 14; emphasis added). Again, following Solomon's dedicatory prayer, "the glory of the LORD filled the temple. *The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD* because the glory of the LORD filled it" (2 Chronicles 7:1, 2; emphasis added).

A comparison of these two Old Testament passages with the description in Revelation 15:8 makes it clear that Revelation is speaking of the close of probation:

Solomon's Temple

- Is filled with a cloud.
- Is filled with God's glory.
- The priests cannot enter the temple.
- The priests cannot serve.

God's Temple in Heaven

- Is filled with smoke.
- Is filled with God's glory.
- No one can enter the temple.

Just as the cloud and the glory of God prevented the priests in the Old Testament type from entering Solomon's temple to perform their service, so the smoke and glory of God will prevent Christ from performing His high priestly ministry in heaven's temple. That is what I understand is meant by the line "no one could enter the temple" in Revelation 15:8. At that point there will be no mediator in the heavenly sanctuary. And because this momentous event that takes place in heaven *precedes* the seven last plagues, it is evident that probation will close shortly *before* rather than *at* the second coming of Christ.

Ellen White

Ellen White clearly supports the view that probation will close and Christ's mediatorial ministry in the heavenly sanctuary will end just before the seven last

plagues are poured out. In her book *The Great Controversy*, at the very beginning of the chapter on the time of trouble, she said, “When the third angel’s message closes, mercy no longer pleads for the guilty inhabitants of the earth. . . . Jesus ceases His intercession in the sanctuary above. He lifts His hands, and with a loud voice says, ‘It is done;’ and all the angelic host lay off their crowns as He makes the solemn announcement: ‘He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still.’ Revelation 22:11. Every case has been decided for life or death” (GC 613).

On the next page of *The Great Controversy*, Ellen White said, “When [Jesus] leaves the sanctuary, . . . the righteous must live in the sight of a holy God without an intercessor.” And later in the same chapter, she said, “When Christ ceases His intercession in the sanctuary, the unmingled wrath threatened against those who worship the beast and his image and receive his mark, . . . will be poured out. The plagues upon Egypt when God was about to deliver Israel, were similar in character to those more terrible and extensive judgments which are to fall upon the world just before the final deliverance of God’s people” (GC 627, 628).

Now here’s the point: As long as Christ is our Intercessor in the heavenly sanctuary, probation is still open. When He ceases His intercessory ministry, probation will close.

Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that when there is no Intercessor in the heavenly sanctuary, sins can no longer be forgiven, so at that time God’s people must be absolutely, sinlessly perfect. People think, *I’m not sinless yet, so if probation were to close today, I wouldn’t be ready*. Some of those who believe this become obsessed with the need to overcome all of their sins lest they be found unprepared when they have to live without a mediator. Others just give up.*

Christ’s parables

Before I close this chapter, let’s return to the three parables Christ told that seem to suggest that God’s offer of salvation will remain open until the Second Coming. If they teach that, they would invalidate the Adventist teaching that probation will close shortly before Christ’s second coming. My analysis of the evidence in Revelation persuades me that the idea of a *pre-Advent* close of probation

* In chapters 20–22 of this book, I comment at length on the implication of having no mediator in the heavenly sanctuary after the close of probation and the degree of perfection we will need in order to live through that time.

is indeed biblical. So how do we reconcile this with Christ's parables?

It's actually very simple. Even a cursory examination indicates that the point these parables are making is that the righteous will be *separated* from the wicked at Christ's second coming. That is completely in harmony with the Adventist understanding that probation will close *prior* to the Second Coming. We have always believed that the righteous and the wicked will continue to live side by side after the close of probation and through the time of trouble. Only at Christ's second coming will the separation of the two take place. However, the evidence in Revelation 15 and 16 makes it clear that Christ's high priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary will end prior to His second coming.

With this introduction, let's get on to an examination of probation, its close, and what we must do in order to be ready. I will begin with a story about a young man named Caleb that illustrates the basic concept of probation. You'll probably recognize the story before you've read more than a paragraph or two.