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We have this hope

Not too long ago, I reviewed the minutes of the 1903 session of the General Conference (GC). It was an exciting read because, at that time, the rudimentary parts of the Advent movement were beginning to employ a more organized shape. There must have been delight in the hearts of the delegates at this GC session as churches were applying to become part of local conferences, and commensurately, unions comprising local conferences were organized and accepted into the body we call the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Surely the church leaders must have been moved by seeing this brand-new prophetic movement, through many missional endeavors, becoming a broad-based entity with congregations, educational and health care institutions, and publishing houses encompassing the globe. After all, we had, and still have, an urgent prophetic message, rooted in Daniel and Revelation, that Jesus is coming—not soon but very soon! What joy church members must have felt, knowing that collectively, we would be stronger and, thereby, more effective in heralding His soon appearing when banded together.

A closer people

Without the past to tell the story, it may seem that these entities were always part of the larger

whole. But the meeting minutes prove that was not the case. And as a result of the visionary decisions of yesteryear, today we are one of the most organized and effective organizations in the world. Many pastors and members of other churches, and even a health care CEO, have told me in various ways, “I wish our church [hospital] was organized like yours. You are much closer as a people and managed better institutionally.”

I share these vignettes from others because it is easy to take what we have for granted. While the grass may appear greener elsewhere, God devised our structure not to obstruct mission but to facilitate it. As one of my neighbors who traveled extensively for his job asserted, “Wherever I go in the world, I find Seventh-day Adventists!”

An advancing people

As a global body, our in-reach and outreach tools are becoming more refined. Today hundreds of churches are being planted, thousands of online Bible studies are completed every month, and people are being baptized faster than we can train leaders to lead them. Podcasts by our digital disciples are proliferating. Our congregations are now reaching the world with streaming ministries. And our legacy radio and TV media ministries are garnering an ever-larger share of listeners



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and viewers. Every day we are advancing in our understanding of how to better proclaim Jesus' soon return. And thanks to our educational institutions, many more young adults are being inspired by the Holy Spirit to leave their comfort zones to change the world for Christ!

Thank God our theology is global because we have an urgent message to proclaim "to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6). And because we are tightly joined together, the lessons learned in New Delhi might very well impact the way things are done in Detroit. Just think; at our inception, our earliest leaders resisted making the church organization highly structured. But thank God, through prayer and study, they realized that God is a God of order and is not glorified by chaos in His church.

A called people

The Great Commission compels us to present a Christ-centered message, teaching that to love Christ is to obey Him and long to be with Him! But our message is much broader than loving Jesus and longing for His appearing. We are called to have God's heart for the lost and answer the call of the Father as Jesus did—to say like Isaiah, "Here am I; send me!" (Isa. 6:8), to go near and far, sharing a message of hope that through Christ's

redeeming power, there is release from every addiction, especially the addiction to self-centeredness.

In keeping with our name *Adventist*, Matthew 24:14 asserts that Jesus will not return until the gospel of the kingdom is preached everywhere to everyone. As Moses stood before Pharaoh and declared on God's behalf, "Let my people go" (Exod. 5:1; 10:3), we, too, are called to bellow in no uncertain terms a similar plea to those who are captive to the kingdom of Babylon today, saying, "Come out of her, my people" (Rev. 18:4)!

The desire of God's heart is for everyone to be saved (2 Pet. 3:9); thus, He sent His Son to make the greatest sacrifice the universe has ever known—a plan crafted before the earth was formed in its Edenic symmetry and beauty, even before humankind was scooped from the ground to receive the breath of life.

I have reached a point in ministry where my love for Christ outweighs all this life has to offer. Only one consideration stands juxtaposed to that of seeing my Savior with my family there—everyone needs to know of Jesus' matchless love and soon appearing so that they, too, can daily experience His peace, share it with others, and be ready for His glorious return. *This* is the hope that burns within my heart! I hope it burns within your heart too. 📌



HOPE



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Jesus is coming soon are words that we seem to hear more and more with each passing day. I wholeheartedly agree that the return of Jesus Christ is soon, but recently I have wondered whether that imminence should be our primary source of hope when it concerns “the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).¹

and more rapid pace? Watch, and be ready. Those words form the basis of hope in hopeless times.

The word *watch*, in the original Greek, is γρηγορέω (*gragoreo*). It means “to stay awake, be watchful, to be in constant readiness, and to remain fully alive.”² The word appears 24 times in the New Testament. “‘Watch’ implies not only to keep looking but also to be prepared. Jesus stresses

in times of hopelessness

Matthew 24 provides the framework for what we often refer to as “the signs of the times.” Tucked away in that chapter are important admonitions signaling how we can find hope in these hopeless times.

Matthew 24 establishes one clear and overarching point: the day and hour of Jesus’ return are not known by any of us as humans or even the angels of heaven. Jesus emphasizes this point three times (vv. 36, 42, 44) in just eight verses. Undoubtedly, He is trying to capture the attention of each of His listeners. While much could be said about those verses, our particular focus is on what Jesus instructs each listener to do since we do not know when He is coming.

To watch

In verse 42, Jesus says, “‘Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.’” And then in verse 44, “‘Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.’” What are we to do in a world that seems to be spiraling out of control at a more

the deep division between those who are ready and those who are not. Their preparedness will mean either blessing at the coming of the Son of Man or judgment, so they must keep watch and be ready at all times.”³ In fact, the book of Revelation pronounces a blessing on those who watch: “‘Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame’” (Rev. 16:15). That blessing is happiness and hope in hopeless times.

While the word *watch* emphasizes “staying awake or being alive,” Jesus’ usage of the words *be ready* focuses on preparedness. Theologian Walter Grundmann states, “The clear meaning of this word group is preparation both in the active sense of ‘making ready’ and in the passive of ‘readiness,’ ‘ability’ or ‘resolution.’”⁴ Grundmann maintains, “In the NT readiness is demanded in three respects: readiness for good works . . . readiness to bear witness to the Gospel . . . and readiness for the return of the Lord. The last requirement Jesus put to His disciples with particular urgency.”⁵

We can find hope in times of hopelessness only by following Jesus' instruction to watch and be ready, not by abstract gazing at a cloudless sky but by meaningful involvement in a pain-filled world.

What is it then that we are to watch for, and how can we be ready? Jesus' instruction "to watch" first points back to what He taught in the previous 35 verses. There, He instructed His disciples (and now us today) that there will be signs of His return that we should be alert for.

Extensive studies have taken place on the specific topic of signs. We can best summarize them as signs in religion, politics, governmental affairs, culture, society, and nature. It only takes a perusal of the news to see that the words of Jesus seem to be increasingly fulfilled each and every day. But Jesus' instruction "to watch" also points forward. In Matthew 25:13, He essentially repeats His instruction from Matthew 24:42: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming." Such watchfulness leads to happiness and hope despite the upheaval in religion, government, culture, and nature. It tightly ties chapters 24 and 25 together.

The three parables of Matthew 25 provide the key to answering how to watch and be ready. They are the parables of the ten virgins, the ten talents, and the sheep and goats. While space does not allow for an extensive exegesis of each parable, we can extract key principles of how we might watch and be ready.

The Word and Holy Spirit

The parable of the ten virgins begins, "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom." A lamp in ancient times was vital because it provided light in the dark. The psalmist declares, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). The lamp represents the Word of God.

Yet, while all the virgins had lamps, there was a contrast among them. "Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their

lamps" (Matt. 25:3). This difference has been wonderfully outlined:

I doubt not that the right solution is to be found in regarding the oil as symbolical of the Holy Spirit, or the graces of God. . . . We should say that the ten virgins had so far alike taken and used the grace of God, but that they differed in this—that, while the wise maintained the supply of grace by constant recourse to the means thereof, the foolish were satisfied with their spiritual state once for all, and took no pains to keep their spiritual life healthful and active by the renewal of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. They retained the outward show and form of faith, but neglected the true inward life of faith; they had the appearance without the reality.⁶

How are we to watch? By living lives founded on God's Word and fulfilled through the power of the Holy Spirit working in our lives.

Useful to God

The parable of the ten talents highlights our willingness to be useful to God. Of course, we all know the parable well. One received five talents, another two, and the last just one. A talent was both a weight measure and an amount of money. It is apparent that this parable has in mind a unit of money. I do not know about you, but I always felt bad for the man who received only one talent. That was, of course, until I understood the value of one talent. "A talent was about 6,000 days' wages."⁷ Let that sink in for just a moment. Just one talent was about 20 years' worth of wages (52 days off for Sabbath per year). The NIV Bible Commentary states, "All that we are—whether naturally endowed or Spirit-bestowed—must be employed in service of the kingdom of God. Not everyone is born with the same talents, and not everyone is endowed with the same gifts of the Spirit, yet each of us can be productive in our own unique ways. All of our service in the kingdom is inherently valuable. . . . Our responsibility is to plan for the long haul and use our giftedness to advance the kingdom of God."⁸ How are we to be ready? By allowing God to use us wherever and whenever He sees fit.

Caring for others

Matthew 25 concludes with the parable of the sheep and the goats. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* aptly points out the parable's emphasis: "In making the needs of others our responsibility we reflect this same aspect of the

divine character. When we reflect the character of Jesus perfectly we will feel as He does toward those in need, and through us He will be able to solace and succor others. The best evidence of love for God is love that leads us to bear 'one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.' . . . The best evidence that a person has become a son of God is that he does the works of God."⁹ How are we to be ready? By caring enough for the humanity God made that our hearts yearn for mission and sharing the message that none would be lost.

Make it a reality

Jesus is coming soon, but our focus can be so much on the future that we forget our present reality. We can find hope in times of hopelessness only by following Jesus' instruction to watch and be ready, not by abstract gazing at a cloudless sky but by meaningful involvement in a pain-filled world. May we, especially as pastors, find the blessing of God in being grounded in His Word, consecrated by His Spirit, used wherever He plants us, and caring to share the gospel in both word and deed.



- 1 Scripture in this article is from the New King James Version.
- 2 William F. Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 208.
- 3 Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 802.
- 4 Walter Grundmann, "Ἔτοιμος, Ἐτοιμάζω, Ἐτοιμασία, Προετοιμάζω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 704.
- 5 Grundman, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 706.
- 6 H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *St. Matthew*, vol. 2, The Pulpit Commentary (New York, NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909), 473.
- 7 Jon L. Dybdahl, ed., *Andrews Study Bible*, NKJV (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2010), 1286, note on Matthew 25:15.
- 8 Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary, 819.
- 9 Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1956), 512.

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Existential fear and existential hope:

Reading biblical apocalyptic in an age of anxiety

Even before COVID-19, the world had long been suffering a crisis of hope. Forces are at work, it seems, that we have no control over. Uncertainty—the sense that something has gone wrong worldwide—has brought about a general existential fear. Only 6 percent of people in the United States, 4 percent in Great Britain, and 3 percent in France think the world is getting better.¹

This current existential crisis should, therefore, have a significant impact on how biblical apocalyptic is preached. Its eschatological outlook provides an important resource for navigating this time of uncertainty because it answers the fundamental questions posed by the crises that we face.

Contemporary eschatological thinking

Secular culture, films, television, games, graphic novels, and literature reveal an interest in the end of the world. Not only is the threat of the end





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discussed, but it is also envisioned. After Hiroshima, the nuclear threat brought anxiety into our subconscious, and such existential threats as the fear of climate change are contemporary realities.² In spite of the warning signs, we are not radically altering our lifestyle. Hence the recent caution that human life “is in danger because it is no longer loved, affirmed, and accepted.”³

Polarization and fragmentation in society—hallmarks of the spirit of our age—pose further risks for our planet. Social upheavals, social injustice, and international terrorism are just some of the most visible expressions of this polarization. Despite scientific and technological progress, our era is crushed by a loss of trust, strongly fueled by social media. Institutions that once held society together are undermined, even derided.

Although every age has its dark sides and pathologies, ours seems so broken that we fear for the existence of humanity itself. In an age of fake news and manipulation, people are hungry for authenticity, solidarity, and justice. Driven by the need for moral imperatives, we are shocked by the evil that human beings are capable of. “Ironically, of course, though we live in a universe where we are in charge, all we see on the horizon is our end. This is dystopia.”⁴

In an age marked by dystopia, the practices of reading and preaching the gospel should be carried out differently now than in past times of optimism and hope of progress. The gospel should, first of all, make us aware that “there is a ‘big picture’ to life—not just a series of disconnected snapshots.”⁵ It must constantly remind us of the cosmic picture in which the culture of life overcomes evil.⁶ And above all, it should reassure us that there is a link between this world, even with its terrors, and the one to come, in which we have a place secured for us by God’s own provision for us.

The foundation of Christian hope

The Christian hope is not wishful thinking or blind optimism but is, instead, grounded in the faithfulness of the Creator, who acts in human history and

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will not let evil have the final word. This created reality is *His* world, which He never gave up on, despite human rebellion. On the contrary, He launched a plan for its restoration. It is the gospel, called “the good news” for a good reason.

Clearly, the focal point of God’s grand plan of salvation is the cross. That is why any discussion of hope needs to center firmly on the death and resurrection of Christ—the basis for what Christianity has to offer to a world steeped in hopelessness. Christ’s resurrection means that death has been defeated and the future is secure because social or economic progress is not its basis but God Himself, who, through Christ, has linked Himself to humanity with ties that can never be broken.

Biblical apocalyptic is a genre of revelatory insights (Dan. 8:19; Rev. 1:11) that the visionary receives from a heavenly intermediary. However, our interpretations of the visions should never overshadow the Source. God Himself is the primary theme of the apocalyptic. The fact that He, as Creator, acts in human history—according to a clear plan for our restoration—is proof of His faithfulness. Indeed, no better proof of this faithfulness is provided than the fact that He “loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope” (2 Thess. 2:16, NRSV).

Therefore, biblical apocalyptic is to be Christ centered, not beast centered, because the primary emphasis of this genre is the triumph of God’s purposes, not the deceptive agenda of dark and diabolical forces. When evil forces are unmasked, they show the sharp difference between the character of the One who is the Author of life—“the faithful witness,” “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered” (Rev. 1:5; 5:6, NRSV)—and the one who stands behind all evil: the “ancient serpent, . . . the deceiver of the whole world” (Rev. 12:9, NRSV).

The problem of distorted worldview

All human beings exist inside a “social imaginary”—the views and practices acquired from our families, communities, and wider society. These ideas and practices are deeply implanted into our being and form our worldview. The current dystopia in Western society reveals how vulnerable the anthropocentric, secular worldview is, rooted in individualism and instrumentalism (a mindset that measures success through maximum efficiency).⁷ Clearly, humanity is left on its own if the universe is perceived as godless and has no transcendent moral order.

Biblical apocalyptic is a valuable resource for a generation seeking a meaningful alternative to this hopeless scenario. It pictures reality through a theology of two cities, Babylon and Jerusalem, which embody two radically different systems of thought and two different views of human life (Dan. 1:1; Rev. 17; 21; 22). These two systems are based on different sets of values: sacrifice and serving versus violence and despotism.

Apocalyptic theology implies that humanity is caught in the conflict between these two worldviews, behind which two forces stand: the “one sitting on the throne” (Rev. 4:3, NLT; cf. Dan. 7:9) and the one who resists God’s plan by violence and deception (Rev. 12:9; cf. Dan. 10:13). The cosmic conflict motif, centered on the issue of power and human allegiance, provides a foundational framework for understanding reality.⁸ In our age of twisted values, fake news, and manipulation, an authentic revelation about the true character of God, in contrast to humanity’s deceiver, is of utmost importance.

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Practical dimensions of hope: Our place in the world

Apocalyptic tells us not only about who God is and what His intentions in human history are (communicated through the prophecies) but also about who we are and how we ought to live. God is revealed in the apocalyptic as the One who loves life and will not allow it to be extinguished. That is why apocalyptic theology intensively engages the problem of evil and suffering.⁹

Humanity is not perceived as a creation of a detached or semidetached cosmic ruler but as worthy of the Creator's own love and self-sacrifice—a creation whose restoration is in process, even now. Humanity's response to the divine work of restoration is of interest in biblical apocalyptic. That is why, in the heart of Revelation, we find the call to “fear God and give him glory” (Rev. 14:7, NRSV).

If preached in an informed and sound manner, biblical apocalyptic has great potential for shaping the worldview of Christians and stimulating their commitment because it calls attention to the hidden dimensions of our reality and the tireless work of God behind the scenes. But it is to be preached in a way that life is affirmed against terror and threat since so much in our world denies it. It is to be preached in a way that the notion of hope overwrites despair and God triumphs over the chaos caused by the forces of death. While calamities take place around us in our age of dystopia, the gospel is to be heard as the “good news of the kingdom” (Matt. 24:14, NRSV), which will generate living hope that is so needed in our uncertain world.

The promised end

Our world is full of issues, seemingly unresolvable, that fuel this universal sense of hopelessness. On the other hand, biblical apocalyptic offers a big-picture solution. Though that solution is grounded in the death and resurrection of Christ, it reaches its ultimate fulfillment in the coming of the kingdom of God in its fullness, preceded by the eradication of evil. For this reason, the “stone . . . cut out, not by human hands” (NRSV) in Daniel 2:34, 35, 45 is a “stone of hope,”¹⁰ and the city of Revelation 21:9–22:5 is an embodiment of the newness brought by God's work of restoration.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is the foundational event from which God's work of a new creation has begun. God “became flesh and lived among us” temporarily (John 1:14, NRSV). At the end of human history, however, He “will dwell with” us permanently, and redeemed humanity

“will be his peoples” (Rev. 21:3, NRSV). In a world in which restoration through human work is incomprehensible, the gospel is about restoration through the work of God Himself. Existential fear is overwritten by existential hope—and the culture of terror and death is overcome by the culture of life.

Biblical apocalyptic is often preached like a Christian crystal ball for reading the future. The value of prophetic-revelatory insights into apocalyptic is not disputed, but in our age of anxiety, biblical apocalyptic should be taught and preached as a literature that inspires hope. This necessitates a Christocentric approach and close attention to the practical motifs of the heaven-offered promise of redemption. The apocalyptic prophecies will be heard more clearly if presented in ways that resonate with the existential needs of our age. Keep Jesus and His second coming in front of your people at all times.



- 1 See Max Roser, “Most of Us Are Wrong About How the World Has Changed (Especially Those Who Are Pessimistic About the Future),” *Our World in Data*, July 27, 2018, <https://ourworldindata.org/wrong-about-the-world>.
- 2 Philip Jenkins, *Climate, Catastrophe, and Faith: How Changes in Climate Drive Religious Upheaval* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- 3 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Hope: Theology for a World in Peril* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019), 4.
- 4 Robert Joustra and Alissa Wilkinson, *How to Survive the Apocalypse: Zombies, Cylons, Faith, and Politics at the End of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 5.
- 5 Alister McGrath, *The Christian Life and Hope*, Christian Belief for Everyone (London, UK: SPCK, 2015), viii.
- 6 On the “culture of life” as an alternative to the “culture of death” in our society, see Moltmann, *Spirit of Hope*, 3–14.
- 7 For an extensive discussion of this problem, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 8 On the cosmic-conflict motif, see Sigve K. Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation*, Library of New Testament Studies 337 (London, UK: T&T Clark International, 2006); Laszlo Gallusz, *The Throne Motif in the Book of Revelation*, Library of New Testament Studies 497 (London, UK: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014); Steven Grabiner, *Revelation's Hymns: Commentary on the Cosmic Conflict*, Library of New Testament Studies 511 (London, UK: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).
- 9 It perceives evil and suffering as related to one's choices and allegiances in the world rather than merely experiences called “natural evils” (natural disasters, diseases, or catastrophes). For a detailed treatment of Revelation as a theodicy, see Gregory Stevenson, *A Slaughtered Lamb: Revelation and the Apocalyptic Response to Evil and Suffering* (Mumbai, India: St. Pauls, 2013).
- 10 Timothy Keller, *Hope in Times of Fear* (New York, NY: Viking, 2021), x.

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He is coming— **for you**

It is hard for me now to believe that it happened four years ago, but I will never forget the day when I was taken on a drive by my boyfriend to a beautiful national park in California in the United States. We parked and walked alongside a gorgeous river, surrounded by majestic mountains and trees. Then he got down on one knee and asked me to be his bride. I said, “Yes!”

It was a very special moment, shared with no one else except the Lord, the angels—and a family swimming on the other side of the river! They had seen us arrive, watched the whole proposal, and when it was done, started shouting and waving for our attention. I gave a thumbs-up, and my fiancé joyfully shouted back, “She said, ‘Yes!’” At that point, the whole family (we have no idea who they were) started jumping up and down, rejoicing and clapping as if they had known us our whole lives!

I quickly discovered everyone gets excited about weddings. The Bible speaks of a wedding that heaven eagerly anticipates.

The language

One of the first passages of Scripture I ever committed to memory were the words of Jesus in John 14:1–3 when He said, “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, *I will come again* and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (emphasis added).¹ Here is Jesus’ personal, powerful promise to us that He will never forget us—that He is coming back for us. As ministers



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of the gospel, what a wonderful message God has committed to us to share with a dying world! What assurance and hope this has brought to the hearts of His friends down through time.

Yet years later, I was surprised to discover those words carried an even deeper significance than I had realized. In Jewish culture, when a man loved a woman and proposed to her, and she said yes, the young woman would return home, gather her wedding clothes, and pack her bags, only awaiting the happy day when her groom would come for her. Before she went back to her home, it was customary for the groom to say such words as, “I am going to prepare a place for you—but I will come again.”

After promising his future return, a Jewish groom would then go to his father’s home, where he would construct a place to share with his new bride as they began their lives together. When he had completed finishing this special place for her, the groom would joyfully come for his bride, take her to his father’s home, and there would be a great celebration. When Jesus spoke to His disciples in John 14, He was using wedding language—and they knew it!

The love

Jesus’ coming to our fallen world now takes on fresh significance.

We realize that the Bible is the greatest love story ever told, about the greatest Lover there ever was.

When Jesus came the first time, it was as though He arrived to offer the human family a “wedding

proposal.” Willingly, He yielded up His life for us on the cross, as if to say in the sacrifice of Himself, “This is how much I love you! This is how much I want to be with you! Will you be My bride?” There has never been and never will be a greater proposal or demonstration of commitment to love and faithfulness as Christ displayed to us on the cross. And then, when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, He told His followers that He was going to prepare a place for us, just like a Jewish groom. He promised that He would return to receive us to Himself in what Revelation describes as “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:9).

How good is our God! How deep is His love! Jesus is not sending someone else to bring us back, and He did not forget about us. No groom ever forgets to return for his bride! The second coming of Jesus, when seen against such a backdrop, is not merely a theological concept or doctrinal belief that pastors must teach—His coming is an intensely personal reality for those who love Him. It is the culmination of an amazing love story that spans the ages and will truly, really end with a “happily ever after” that actually lasts *forever*. And it has to be one of the great highlights of the gospel.

How many times do pastors find themselves counseling couples in crisis as life brings enormous challenges to the vows of commitment and faithfulness that two people make to each other in marriage? Unlike those relationships in crisis, however, Jesus is totally and eternally committed to us. He is coming back for *you* and *me*. It is not fake news but rather the truest news ever heard. All heaven is brimming with excitement as it anticipates the coming culmination of the romance between Christ and His people. When our heavenly Bridegroom arrives, it will be the most glorious, splendid, and amazing event of all time. He is coming with all the angels of heaven (Matt. 25:31). What a day that will be!

The preparation

However, it all begs one very important question: How do we ensure that we are ready to meet

our heavenly Bridegroom? How do we prepare our congregations to await a Groom like this?

Before I got married, while I was in the thick of wedding planning, I remember waking up in a cold sweat from a nightmare one night. I had dreamed it was the night before my wedding, and somehow in all the planning, I had forgotten to get a wedding dress. I woke up in a panic, only to catch my breath and realize that it was just a dream. But what would it be like for Jesus to come, and we are not ready to meet Him?

Revelation 19:7–9 says, “Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.’ And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

“Then he said to me, ‘Write: “Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!”’ And he said to me, ‘These are the true sayings of God.’”

Revelation mentions only two women, and it is not hard to know which one is the bride. She is ready and radiant and looks so beautiful in white. When the Bible describes the Lamb’s bride as being clothed in white garments, which are “the righteous acts of the saints,” God is communicating a powerful reality. Aristotle is often credited with the expression “Character is revealed through action.” But how does anyone manufacture a character like that of Jesus?

The gift

Essentially, the bride, God’s church, will have developed a *character* that is just like her Lord’s, and that is what makes her ready to meet Him. But how does one obtain the garment? How is it possible, especially in light of verses such as Isaiah 64:6, which state plainly that our best attempts at being righteous are embarrassing?

Revelation 19 offers an answer: “And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints” (v. 8). The Greek word translated as “granted” means “given.” The bride’s white wedding dress is not self-made or purchased in some specialty store. Instead, Jesus supplies this dress so fine, clean, and bright to His redeemed. Having paid the bride-price for us on the cross, He now prepares a place for us in His Father’s house, and He provides the wedding garment for us, too, so that we can be ready to meet Him when He comes. He is the One who presents us faultless

before “His glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 24). How does He do this wondrous work?

It was customary for a first-century Jewish groom to express the sincerity of his pledge to his newly betrothed bride by giving her a valuable gift. It would be the bride’s assurance that he would return for her. Has Jesus left to us a gift as a guarantee of His coming?

He has given to us the precious betrothal gift of the Holy Spirit (John 16). The Holy Spirit comes to empower, transform, and teach us how to live for Jesus.² He is the One who prepares us to be ready to meet our heavenly Bridegroom. Pastoral ministry, while it has definite challenges, is something the Holy Spirit strengthens us to do. Jesus never wanted us to feel abandoned or distressed in His absence, so He sent “the Comforter” (John 16:7, KJV) to us as an assurance of our future inheritance in Christ (Eph. 1:14).

The appeal

Revelation 19:8 says, “The fine linen is the righteous *acts* of the saints.” Christian character is not something that God expects us to produce—it is what He longs to manifest in us by a miracle of His grace and creative power. Daily we need a fresh baptism of the Holy Spirit in our lives, for when we are surrendered to Him, the fruit of the Spirit will appear in our lives. Pastors must preach this message today.

Ellen White states, “The church is the bride, the Lamb’s wife. She should keep herself pure, sanctified, holy. Never should she indulge in any foolishness; for she is the bride of a King. Yet she does not realize her exalted position. If she understood this, she would be all-glorious within.”³ Have you surrendered your heart to Jesus and allowed the Holy Spirit to do His work of transformation in your life? May God help you, as a minister of the everlasting gospel, to ensure that your heart and affections belong to heaven’s soon-coming King and Bridegroom today and every day until He comes.



- 1 Scripture in this article is from the New King James Version.
- 2 Greg Boyd, “What Does It Mean to Be Married to Christ?” *Reknew*, January 22, 2019, <https://reknew.org/2019/01/what-does-it-mean-to-be-married-to-christ/>.
- 3 Ellen G. White, Letter 177, 1901.

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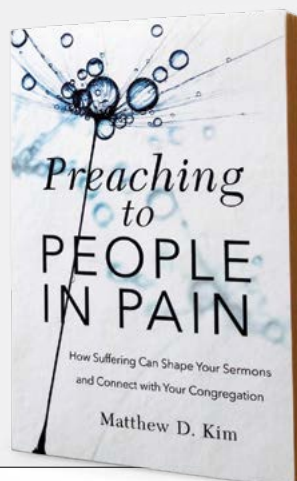


Preaching to People in Pain: How Suffering Can Shape Your Sermons and Connect With Your Congregations

by Matthew D. Kim, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021.

Although we all experience pain, most pastors fail to address this topic in their preaching. The dearth of sermons focusing on the universality of pain and suffering motivated Matthew D. Kim (the new professor of practical theology and the Hubert H. and Gladys S. Raborn chair of pastoral leadership at Baylor University) to pen this timely volume. This practical volume “encourage[s] pastors to preach less pain-free sermons and to preach more pain-full sermons where preachers disclose their own suffering and pain, which allows space to encourage listeners to identify and share their suffering in Christian community for the ultimate purpose of healing and transformation” (xii).

The book is divided into two parts. The first three chapters constitute part 1, “Naming the Pain.” In underscoring the benefits to be derived from preaching on pain, Kim reminds preachers that “sharing [their own] suffering from the pulpit—with wisdom and timeliness—may be the first step in helping to create a church culture of vulnerability, empathy, and healing” (20). He also provides a template for preaching with greater intentionality on pain. The section “Preparatory Questions to Preach on Pain” includes nine questions: (1) “Which Passage Will I Preach On?” (2) “What Type of Pain/Suffering Is Revealed in the Text?” (3) “How Does the Bible Character or Biblical Author Deal With the Pain?” (4)



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“How Does This Pain in the Text Relate to Our Listeners’ Pain?” (5) What Does This Pain Say About God and His Allowance of Pain?” (6) “How Does God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit Help Us in Our Suffering?” (7) “How Can Our Preaching Show Care and Empathy?” (8) “How Can We Share This Pain in a Christian Community?” and (9) “How Will God Use Our Suffering to Transform Us and Bring Himself Glory?” (36–41).

Part 2, “Preaching on Pain,” comprises the book’s last six chapters. Each chapter addresses one of the six types of pain with which most congregants grapple: (1) decisions, (2) finances, (3) health issues, (4) losses, (5) relationships, and (6) sin. The nine questions are applied to each type of pain. Each chapter concludes with discussion questions and a sample sermon focused on the kind of pain under study. Kim reminds readers that preaching about pain is “challenging, messy, perplexing, even heart-wrenching” (201). However, preachers should engage in this practice to reassure their listeners that they are never alone when they experience pain and suffering. God is present and always listening. Pastors must preach about pain because “Scripture exposes suffering and pain because God provides solutions for us and is the solution for the Christian” (9).

Kim makes it clear that he is “not arguing that every single sermon must address pain and suffering,” rather that “as a general rule of thumb, we can preach on pain and suffering when the sermon text addresses it” (35, 36). Additionally, preaching on pain should balance proclamation and a “loving, pastoral presence,” best exemplified through active participation and empathy (202).

It is no surprise that *Preaching to People in Pain* was selected as *Christianity Today’s* 2022 Book Award winner for Church and Pastoral Leadership. The book provides both homiletical and pastoral insights. Preachers with a vested interest in preaching sermons that address their pain and that of their congregants will find it an invaluable resource. 📖

There is one thing that lifts the human spirit and keeps us going despite the challenges we face. Called “hope,” it is that intangible quality that looks beyond life’s challenges to a better tomorrow. It leads us to live purposeful existences because we know a new day is coming. Anticipating the best in life even when we are facing the worst in life, hope looks beyond what now is to what will be. Hope keeps believing, trusting, anticipating, and expecting that out of today’s darkness, tomorrow’s light will shine more brightly.¹

The Roman statesman Pliny the Elder allegedly said, “Hope is the pillar that holds up the world.” He was right. Without hope, our world is on a collision course with disaster. Without hope, the foundations of society collapse. And without hope, we live our lives in silent despair.

The pagan’s hopeless despair

I have always been fascinated with the hopeless despair recorded in the inscriptions on the tombs along the Appian Way just outside of Rome. You will recall that the apostle Paul was led along the Appian Way when the Roman authorities brought him as a prisoner to Rome. He must have sensed the despair of the pagan populace of Rome as they lost hope about the future.²

Here are just a couple of the inscriptions:
 “I was not, I became, I am not, I care not.”
 “Eat, drink, enjoy yourself, then join me.”

In describing life, the skeptic Bertrand Russell put it this way: “We stand on the shore of an ocean, crying to the night and the emptiness; sometimes a voice answers out of the darkness. But it is the voice of one drowning; and in a moment the silence returns.”³

What hopelessness, what despair, what meaninglessness we may see around us, yet life in Christ offers us eternal hope.

Peter’s focused hope

In the face of scoffing and skepticism, the apostle Peter presents the all-consuming purpose of life. He reminds us that there is hope for today, tomorrow, and forever. In 2 Peter 3:1, 2, he states, “Beloved, I write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of

reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior.”⁴

Some people are always looking for some way to unlock the mystery of why Jesus has not yet returned. They try to discover some new prophetic time chart that will give them divine insight into the future. They have an insatiable desire for some novel discovery that they believe, if everyone would only understand, would somehow miraculously usher in the return of Jesus.

Here Peter says, in effect, that what we need is not so much new truth but a repetition of the eternal ones we are prone to forget. Certain biblical truths need to be repeated and never pushed into the background for the sake of anything else.

The Greeks spoke of “time which wipes things out,” as if the mind were a slate and time a sponge that passes across it with a certain erasing quality. Throughout Scripture, we find the great truths repeated. We do not need something new as much as we need to be reminded of the ancient truths of Scripture that give meaning and purpose to our lives.

Peter continues in verses 3, 4: “Knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.’”

The idea of the second coming of Christ in the last days will appear ridiculous to many people. It will be a subject of ridicule, skepticism, and mockery. They will cynically ask, “Where is the promise of His coming?” Second Peter 3 uses the word *promise* three times. It is also in verse 9, “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise,” and again in verse 13, “Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for a new heaven and a new earth.”

Thus, Peter employs *promise* three times to describe the certainty of our Lord’s return to the scattered believers throughout Asia.

Based on His promise

The second coming of Christ does not rest on idle speculation. It is not based on a desperate wish or human philosophy but rather on the

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Hope

that does not disappoint

unchangeable, reliable promises of God's Word. The second coming of Christ reveals the tremendous truth that all of history is heading toward one glorious climax, one final destiny. Life is going somewhere, and we are to meet Someone who has the ultimate answer to all of life's problems. Without this conviction, we have little left to live for.

A promise is a declaration, an assurance, that a person will do a particular thing or that a specific event will happen. It is a pledge and a commitment. Because a promise is as good as the one making it, there can be no greater promise maker than Jesus Himself.

Inspiration's testimony

The Bible mentions the second coming of Christ 1,500 times, once every 25 verses in the New Testament. For every prophecy on the first coming of Christ in the Old Testament, we find eight on the second coming of Christ. Here are just a few of the promises of Jesus' return in the Bible:

- Jude 14: "Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied . . . , saying, 'Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints.' "
- Psalm 50:3: David declares, "Our God shall come, and shall not keep silent."
- Isaiah 35:4:
Say to those who are fearful-hearted,
"Be strong, do not fear!
Behold, your God . . .
. . . will come and save you."
- Matthew 16:27: " 'For the Son of man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.' "
- First Thessalonians 4:16, 17: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout."

Standing head and shoulders above them all is Jesus, who gives His Word that He will return: " 'Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also' " (John 14:1-3).

The return of our Lord is not idle speculation but a reality. It is as certain as the promises of God's Word.

Peter continues his discussion of the return of our Lord in 2 Peter 3:4-7, describing three things all scoffers forget. Notice what they say:

" 'Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation' " (v. 4). In other words, there have occurred no significant changes in world history since the beginning. Things have continued on a uniform basis. Then Peter makes this stunning observation, "For this they willfully forget" (v. 5).

The King James Version puts it this way: "For this they willingly are ignorant of." It is one thing to be ignorant but quite another to be "willingly" ignorant. Those people had the facts before them, but they scoffed at the facts and denied the truthfulness of God's Word. Locked into their opinions, they refused to change. With their minds made up, they would not alter their opinions or long-cherished habits.

Peter then describes three actions by God that prove the scoffers wrong when they emphatically state that "all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation":

1. God created the world by His Word (v. 5).
2. God destroyed the world by His Word (v. 6).
3. God preserves our world by His Word (v. 7).

Then Peter proceeds to explain the reason for the delay of the return of Christ: "But beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (vv. 8, 9).

The apostle makes the key point that God's view of time and ours are dramatically different. For the Lord, time is always eternally present. The past and the future are as vividly real to Him as the present moment is to us. What seems long to us is but a microsecond to God (v. 8).

Peter then adds a glorious assurance: "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat. . . . Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be?" (vv. 10, 11). The latter is a fascinating expression. It literally means, "What country do you come from?" Thus, Peter is saying, "If you are a Christian, you are a citizen of heaven. You are a pilgrim and stranger on the earth. You are a child of the King. You are an ambassador for Christ, and you ought to act like a citizen of heaven."

The apostle then adds another significant insight in verse 12: “Looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God.” As author Ellen G. White affirms, “By giving the gospel to the world it is in our power to hasten our Lord’s return. We are not only to look for but to hasten the coming of the day of God. 2 Peter 3:12, margin. Had the church of Christ done her appointed work as the Lord ordained, the whole world would before this have been warned, and the Lord Jesus would have come to our earth in power and great glory.”⁵

Peter’s final appeal is an end-time call for holiness. He calls for us to live righteous, godly lives. But who is righteous enough to stand before a righteous God at His coming? The good news of the gospel is that we appear before God in Christ. He is our righteousness.

Everything we are not, He is.

All we need is found in Him.

Christ justifies us; in Him, we stand before God just as if we never sinned.

Christ sanctifies us. He is the only One who makes us holy.

Working in our hearts to change us, He makes us over again. In Christ, we who are accepted as His sons and daughters will daily grow in grace to be more and more like the One we admire. Thus, in Christ, we are secure, filled with a hope that does not disappoint until the day He comes, and we see Him face to face. This is good news—incredibly good news—and there can be no better news.



- 1 See Brigett Hyacinth, “Hope: The Cornerstone of Leadership,” Linked- In, November 30, 2016, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/hope-cornerstone-leadership-brigette-hyacinth>.
- 2 See Mark Finley, *Hope Beyond Tomorrow* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn.), 2018.
- 3 Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, reissued (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 194.
- 4 Scripture in this article is from the New King James Version.
- 5 Ellen G. White, *Maranatha* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1976), 19.

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THE SABBATH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

**Editors: Daniel Bediako
and Ekkehardt Mueller**

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Three signs of the times

War breaks out in Eastern Europe. Flooding sweeps away towns in the Philippines. An underwater earthquake triggers a tsunami that creates a nuclear catastrophe in Japan. Massive hurricanes devastate Florida. A heat wave triggers fires in California. A pandemic kills millions.

Are these tragedies a sign of Jesus' imminent second coming?

Strictly speaking, *no*.

Jesus speaks of such catastrophes as *what must happen*, what simply belongs to this fallen world: "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these

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things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows' ” (Matt. 24:6–8, NKJV).

Yet the end, Jesus says, “ ‘is not yet’ ” (v. 6). In fact, the events are only “ ‘the beginning of sorrows’ ” (v. 8).

These catastrophes do, however, have an eschatological character. Jesus told us about them in response to the question about what would precede His coming. So, these tragedies, although pointing us to His advent, do not tell us when the end will come. In contrast, Jesus mentions one sign that immediately precedes the end of the world and, to a degree, prepares the world for it. “ ‘This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come’ ” (Matt. 24:14, NKJV).

It is, therefore, not bad news (famines, wars, and pestilences) that bring the end. It is, instead, “good news” (the gospel) that does it. The end comes when everyone has heard of God’s love for humankind, as most powerfully expressed at the cross. This, though, is the first of three major signs of the end.

The first sign

It is striking that Jesus does not simply speak of the gospel but of “*this* gospel.” What Jesus expresses in Matthew 24:14 parallels the “everlasting gospel” of Revelation 14:6–13. Jesus has in mind the true gospel as opposed to false gospels.

Jesus, in Revelation 14:6, identifies His church as preaching “the everlasting gospel.” It is clear that through the passage of time, false gospels would arise. Paul recognized this when he said, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8). Gospels would be proclaimed, but only “this” one that Jesus speaks of, the “eternal,” unchanging, enduring one that John highlights, is the true gospel. And so, Revelation’s three angels’ messages are Heaven’s appeal to restore the true gospel.

Heralds of these messages

shall build the old waste places;
... raise up the foundations of many
generations.
And ... shall be called the Repairer of the
Breach,
The Restorer. . . .
“If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath”
(Isa. 58:12, 13a, NKJV).

The message of the Creator God and His Creation memorial day, the Sabbath, and the message of the investigative judgment, which calls for the acceptance of the offered grace—these are the messages that “rebuild” the original gospel that has been proclaimed incompletely for so long but is now restored as the “everlasting gospel.” Only when “the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12, KJV) have been proclaimed to every person is the sign fulfilled that announces the imminent return of Christ.

When exactly this is fulfilled, however, is not easily recognizable. An earthquake, a tsunami, or a war are seen, visible, and easily recognized. But the personal, silent inquiry into biblical truth, the secret listening to a sermon on the three angels’ messages, the hidden reading of a book like *The Great Controversy*, or the unnoticed study of the Bible during the lunch break—who can measure these things?

One thing is certain: technology could allow us to spread the “everlasting gospel” to the whole world within the shortest possible time, ways being increasingly used all over the world.

The second sign

The second major sign is directly tied to the first. In Matthew 24:3–31, disasters and persecution are not Christ’s core message. Instead, His warning against apostasy is. His first statement refers to this danger, even before He speaks of any other sign: “ ‘See that no one deceives you’ ” (Matt. 24:4, NABRE). This warning appears three times in His speech: at the beginning (v. 4), in the middle (vv. 10–12), and at the end (vv. 23–28).

No other topic is emphasized so often or takes up as much space.

Consequently, when we speak about one of the major end-time signs, it must include apostasy: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8, NABRE). There is a concrete reason for this apostasy: “Because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold” (Matt. 24:12, ESV). All the problems that Jesus outlines, from hatred to persecution to killing, have their origin here. In His entire discourse, He does not give a single reason for these ills except for this one. Everything else is symptomatic of the underlying “disease,” which is the increasing “lawlessness” (*ἀνομία*) depicted in this one verse.

Jesus is not talking about general lawlessness in relation to society and state laws. Quite the contrary. Verse 10 indicates that Christians will betray one another and hand each other over to the authorities precisely because they hold the state laws in higher esteem than they do the law of God, which their (despised) brothers and sisters still keep. Verses 9 through 14 are about Christians alone, not about unbelieving society. Accordingly, it must also be the law of God, not that of the state, that is broken. It will be possible among many Christian groups to see some that will preach a strange gospel. Thus, while a faithful remnant will preach the everlasting gospel to the end (vv. 13, 14), a significant portion of Christendom will preach a corrupted gospel, one that condones lawlessness, the breaking of God’s commandments, and will lead many astray.

This sad truth is also announced in 2 Thessalonians 2. Three times this key concept, *lawlessness*, is referred to as the basis of apostasy. The “man of lawlessness” (v. 3, ESV) establishes the “mystery of lawlessness” (v. 7, NKJV) and appears as “the lawless one” (v. 8, NKJV), with signs and wonders in the power of Satan. Note that “mystery” (*μυστήριον*) is almost invariably the code for “gospel” in the New Testament (cf. Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10; Rom. 16:25, 26; 1 Cor. 2:1, 7; 4:1; Eph. 1:9, 10; 3:3–11; Col. 1:26, 27; 2:2, 3; 4:3). The true gospel, “the eternal gospel,” is supplanted by a man-made “gospel of lawlessness” and supported by the miracle-working power of Satan, which leads to the deception of almost all humanity (cf. Rev. 13:13, 14).

Whether Satan’s deceptions and seductions are successful is determined, then, by one’s attitude toward the law. If people deny and openly break it, their love for God must inevitably grow cold (Matt. 24:12), and Satan—through

false prophets, false teachers, and miracles—gets room to work powerfully in them. “Because they have not accepted the love of truth. . . . Therefore, God is sending them a deceiving power, so that they may believe the lie” (2 Thess. 2:10, 11, NABRE). In other words, one’s fate is greatly determined by one’s love for (or lack of) the truth, which certainly includes God’s law, His Ten Commandments (Rev. 14:12). Without that love for the truth, deception follows.

It is exactly this problem that marks the last epoch of church history with the stain of lukewarmness. Laodicea (Rev. 3:15–17) lacks the fiery love for the truth; many are even growing cold. Although at the same time, the remnant emphasizes the commandments—to keep and preserve them (Rev. 12:17; 14:12)—the mixture of the “hot” and “cold” brethren leads to an overall “lukewarm” atmosphere where tares and wheat grow together (Matt. 13:30).

The third sign

The third key sign of the times is, therefore, *polarization*. While some are driven by love for God’s truth and His commandments and proclaim the eternal gospel of Jesus in all the world, other “Christians” listen to false teachers—allowing themselves to be ensnared by miracles—and then not only hinder the gospel proclamation but also betray those who proclaim it.

It is, then, not the anxious observation of world events or the spreading of fear in emerging crises or the meticulous examination of conspiracy theories that prepares the church for Jesus’ return. Rather, it is the accurate knowledge of the Scriptures, which includes the law of God, that keeps the love for God alive in our hearts and makes us sincere followers of Christ. Jesus prayed for unity, making it a clear sign for His people and a sign for the world (John 17:23). It is not political upheavals, the mechanization of life, or economic and political globalization that bring about the end. It is divisiveness within the church and the world and the lack of love, reflected in the abandonment of God’s commandments, that brings God’s patience to its final limit (Isa. 24:5, 6).

It is ironic that many Christians, unfortunately including some Seventh-day Adventists, see the preaching of the law as an obstacle to strengthening one’s love for God. Law or grace, commandments or love—these have become alternative opposites. It is, supposedly, one or the other. The one who looks to the law will become cold and unloving, even fall “away from grace”

(Gal. 5:4, ESV); such is the widespread attitude. Yet, according to the Bible, we show our love for God by keeping the law, not as the means to salvation but as the sign of true love. Far from contradicting each other, love for God and obedience to His commandments only reinforce one another (John 15:10; 2 John 6). If we want to prepare ourselves and our church for the Second Coming, it is precisely this truth, the law and the gospel together (Rev. 14:12), that must be proclaimed.

“As I have loved you”

It is not crucial to know exactly when Jesus will return; if it were, He would have told us the exact time. Jesus calls His followers not to respond to the calamities of this world with fear and doom. “On the earth [there will be] distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. . . . Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:25, 26, 28, ESV).

It is good to know what is going on in the world, but it is more important that the church stand with

truth, resisting all temptations to lawlessness and Laodicea’s lack of love. Selfless love for each other and sacrificial love for the world will usher in the second coming of Jesus.

“The love of the Redeemer will draw hearts together in unity. . . .

“And when His parting words are fulfilled, ‘Love one another, as I have loved you’ (John 15:12); when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven.”¹

And three major signs—the “everlasting gospel” to all the world, apostasy, and Laodicea—tell us, indeed, just how near that redemption really is.



1 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 641.

Share your thoughts on this article by writing to ministrymagazine@gc.adventist.org.



LETTERS

Reservation

Thanks for the good news segment, “Native American Camp Meeting Seeks to Bridge a Gap,” in the October 2022 issue, highlighting recent efforts to bring Adventist workers and members across the Navajo Nation together in coordinated evangelism and nurture for the largest Native American reservation in the North American Division.

The Navajo Nation is spread across portions of three states, with an area as large as the state of West Virginia. It is served by a total of six

Adventist pastoral districts, comprising 10 small congregations. However, those six districts are divided among four local conferences within three union conferences.

This has made it difficult to develop a coherent reservation-wide strategy for meeting the specific needs of this still mostly unreached people group.

Just a small correction: the first sentence should read, “The Arizona Conference’s ministry to the Navajo Nation comprises three pastoral teams” rather than “The North American Division’s Native American Ministries comprises three pastoral teams.” There are many more than three pastoral teams serving

Native American people in North America!

—Dale Wolcott, coordinator, Arizona Native Ministries and Diné Adventist Radio, Chinle, Arizona, United States

Appreciation

I would like to express my appreciation for two recent *Ministry* articles. Ron Clouzet’s “A Plan to Mentor New Believers” (October 2022) was workable and meaningful, and probably well overdue! Derek Morris’s “Sons and Daughters of Encouragement” (September 2022) was a pearl of great value. May God bless you.

—Elizabeth Ostring, physician and theologian, New South Wales, Australia



New media facility shares message of hope

SILANG, CAVITE, PHILIPPINES

On November 8, 2022, the Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD) Media Center officially opened at the regional church campus in Silang, Cavite, Philippines. Church leaders said they expect the new center will produce online resources and content for distribution and broadcast to a broader public.

“This new facility will produce content intended to introduce Jesus and His character to its [target audiences],” said former SSD Communication director **Mamerto Guinguing II**, now elected SSD associate executive secretary. “It is designed to cater to video, audio, and social media requirements.”

SSD digital evangelism specialist **Anthony Stanyer** said he sees tremendous prospects in leveraging this medium to give the internet community a completely new watching experience for Christian programming. He emphasized the duty that God has placed in our hands to use this platform to share Jesus with all of the region’s nations, tribes, and resident groups.

“The Bible has all the answers to all their questions; we will have it available to them through this medium,” SSD president **Roger Caderma** said.

In a special message, Seventh-day Adventist General Conference executive secretary **Erton Köhler** thanked God for His guidance and providence throughout the process of building the new facility.

“This is the time when we need more facilities that will produce content for mission,” Köhler said. “This generation can be reached through this avenue, so let us utilize every means available to share the message of hope with the world.” [Edward Rodriguez, Southern Asia-Pacific Division and *Adventist Review*]



Photo: Alexis Mercado

Organization honors Adventist women leaders

LOMA LINDA, CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES

The Association of Adventist Women (AAW) honored six women from around the world as Women of the Year at its 40th annual awards banquet in Loma Linda, California, United States, on October 8, 2022. One man was awarded a Champion of Justice award.

Among the recipients was **Nandi Fleming**, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor in South Africa, who received the Woman of the Year for Church Life award. During the COVID-19 pandemic, her pastoral counseling practice was closed, so she

wrote and recorded Christian mental health podcasts called NCSA [Northern Conference of South Africa] Mental Health Devotions that helped fill the need for a Jesus-centered approach to well-being. The podcasts have since been published in book form and on video. Fleming has facilitated an online space for encouragement and support for female pastors worldwide.

Another recipient was **Carmela Monk Crawford**, a pastor’s daughter and the first woman and the first lay member to serve as the editor of *Message* magazine in its 120-year history. She was awarded the Woman of the Year award for Outstanding Achievement. In her law practice, Monk Crawford advocated for children and families caught in destructive cycles of abuse

and neglect. Striving to make *Message* relevant, she has highlighted how people can work to make God's kingdom come on Earth as it is in heaven. Armed with compelling stories of police abuse, human trafficking, domestic violence, and social justice, she has sought to change the conversation in communities and in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

Included in the honors was Loma Linda University Church's senior pastor, **Randy Roberts**, awarded the AAW Champion of Justice for his dedication to sharing stories of God's Spirit working through women in ministry both in the Bible and in current women pastors. A dedicated church leader, author, and pastor, Roberts also serves as vice president for Spiritual Life and Mission for Loma Linda University Health.

AAW is an independent supporting organization, striving to advocate for the participation of women in all leadership roles in Seventh-day Adventist organizations, congregations, and communities around the world.

[Priscilla Walters, AAW and *Adventist Review*]



Carmela Monk Crawford

Photo: Association of Adventist Women

Baptism of a centenarian

AMPAHANA, ANTALAHA, MADAGASCAR

It is never too late for one to accept Jesus Christ as personal Savior. As part of the church's strategic plan "I Will Go," pastors and church members in the Indian Ocean Union Conference, a union in the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, are reaching out to their families, neighbors, and communities, sharing the love and the good news of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

For decades, a woman from the rural community of Ampahana, Antalaha, in the northern part of Madagascar, had been practicing witchcraft. **Mrs. Makoa**, as she is called, was greatly feared by the community because of the evil she was participating in.

A young woman called **Soatiana**, passionate about evangelism, decided to study the Bible with her grandmother, Mrs. Makoa. Now a 100-year-old great-grandmother, Mrs. Makoa gave her life to Jesus.

Unable to walk anymore because of her age, this did not deter her desire to enter the

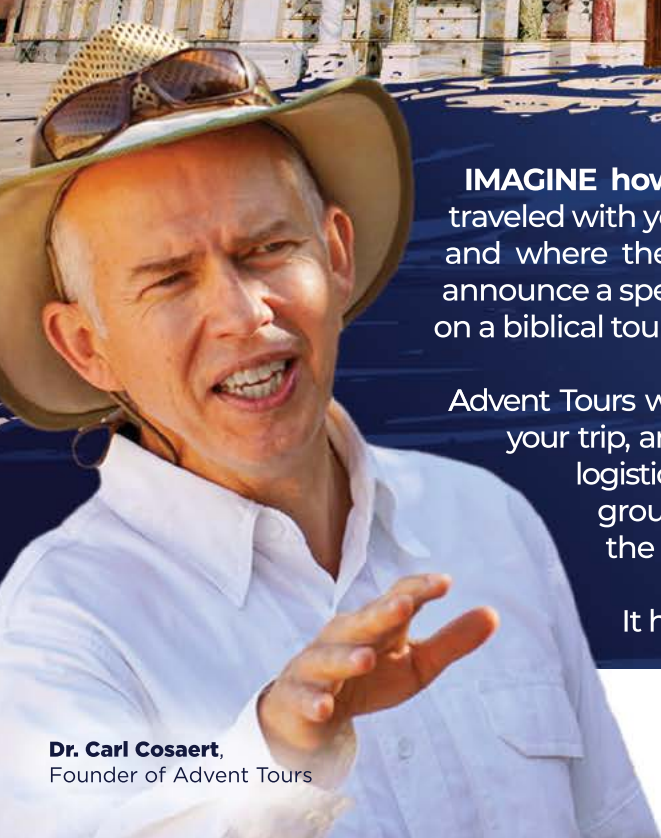
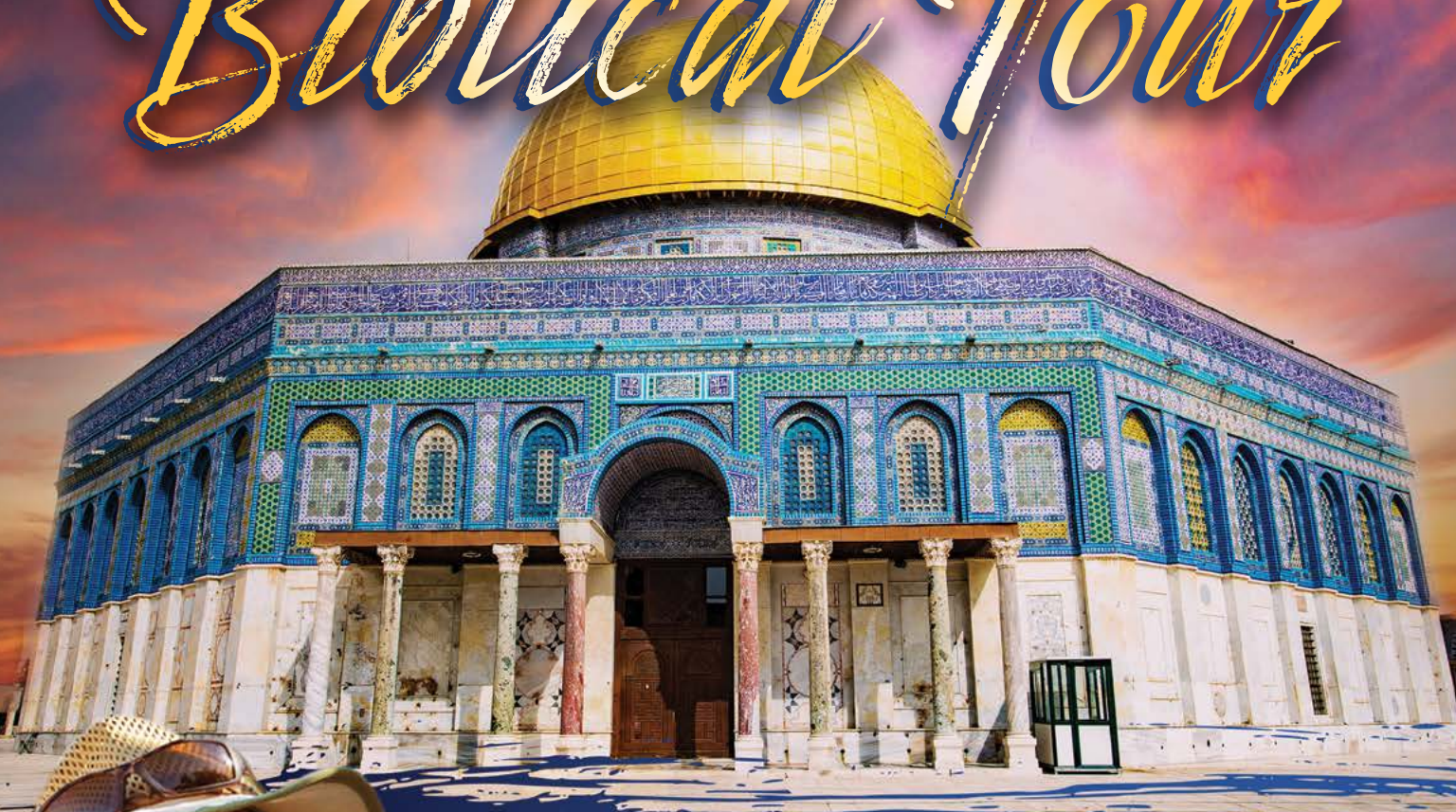
baptismal waters. Just like the story of the healing of the paralytic man in Capernaum by Jesus, the church members did the same by carrying her into the river. [Rado Rakotonandrasana and Noel Sibanda] 📷



Photo: Soatiana

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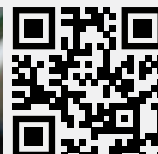
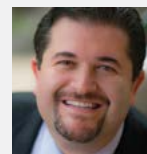
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The good thing about death

Imagine informing someone about the death of Queen Elizabeth II only to be questioned about who that might be. While the French king Louis XIV remains the longest-serving monarch in world history, Queen Elizabeth II is the longest-reigning monarch in British history. Her death is a wake-up call for each of us who refuses to face the eternal consequences of our own mortality. We have a future hope as we long for Jesus' second coming, when life after death becomes a reality, and we have a present hope as we strive for God's will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10, NKJV).

Dying as certainty

Many of us seldom confront death face to face. The more adept at postmodernism a society is, the less contact with death people experience. In many Western societies, death is a taboo subject, and people bottle up their grief. In African societies, death, though tragic, is recognized as part of the life cycle with extended and public periods of mourning, allowing for grief to be expressed.

Pastors will never be able to prepare people for the second coming of Christ unless they confront congregations and communities with the cold certainty of death. Theologian Paul Tillich said, "Do not deceive yourself about the seriousness of death—not death in general, not the death of somebody else, but your own death—by nice arguments for the immortality of the soul. The Christian message is more realistic than those arguments. It knows that *we, really we*, have to die; it is not just a part of us that has to die."¹ This fundamental truth of our mortality might be the beginning of our journey to freedom and, ultimately, hope.

Living as royalty

No one is perfect, regardless of position, function, or power. All fall short, all have sinned, and all die. Regardless of how many good deeds, regardless of what anyone would do, no one deserves eternal life. Nothing Queen Elizabeth II possessed and nothing she ever did, good or bad, through action or inaction, made her deserving of heaven. Her perceived devotion to Christ was perhaps her acknowledgment of that reality.

God considered the late queen and any one of us as equals, but perhaps not in the way you think. The book of Revelation describes the new earth as having only one social class—and it is not the working class. To God, we are all royalty, each furnished with our very own crown.

However, our royal status is not something that will happen only in the future. From the first story of the earth, as author N. T. Wright points out, God had created us as "kings and priests."² We serve as royalty in reflecting God's character as we rule the earth.

Judging as equality

For everyone who has passed, their destinies are sealed, but if you are reading this, your choices are not. "The hour of His judgment has come" (Rev. 14:7, NKJV), the hour when even the late queen will be judged. Our destinies are entwined with our care for the oppressed.

Ellen G. White declares, "Christ on the Mount of Olives pictured to His disciples the scene of the great judgment day. And He represented its decision as turning upon one point. When the nations are gathered before Him, there will be but two classes, and their eternal destiny will be determined by what they have done or have neglected to do for Him in the person of the poor and the suffering."³ Perhaps the inevitable death of the queen may awaken in you the reality of how your choices may define your eternal destiny and the destiny of your congregation and community.

Former British prime minister Theresa May ended her tribute to the late queen in line with biblical theology: "May she rest in peace and rise in glory." This is the hope of every Seventh-day Adventist in the world, as we believe death will not have the last word because everyone who sleeps in Jesus will also rise in glory (1 Thess. 4:13–18).



- 1 Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1948), 172; emphasis in the original.
- 2 Mike Bird, "N. T. Wright: The Church Continues the Revolution Jesus Started," *Christianity Today*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/october-web-only/n-t-wright-jesus-death-does-more-than-just-get-us-into-heav.html>.
- 3 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 637.



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A five-star church

What makes a desirable church? Is it the new carpet, perfect location, or great potlucks? People are searching for something. They do not always know how to articulate their quest but are nonetheless attempting to find something worth being part of. I have often brought “outsiders” in to evaluate churches. Usually, the leadership of the church has a higher rating of their church than the visitors. Is your church a five-star church?

When an individual goes to church, what do you think he or she is looking for? If you answered “God,” you are correct. When an individual walks into a church, they know within minutes whether or not God is present there.

What is the focus of your church? Is it self-centered or loving others? How does your congregation react to new faces? Do they even notice? Have you thought about asking friends to come to your church and test the waters for you? What would they say to you about the focus and mindset of your congregation and leadership?

A healthy church is not problem-free; rather, it knows how to handle its problems.

How often do people stand up front and use denominational terminologies that bewilder new people? What do people hear when you speak? Churched vocabulary may mean something different outside of your denominational walls and may confuse guests.

One day I decided to take a friend to church with me. We chose a church I had never attended since I was visiting in his area. The entire service my friend was asking me questions “What does ‘investment’ mean?” “Why would I want to fall on ‘the Rock?’” “How does the blood of a lamb cleanse me?” He had never been to a

church, and it was eye-opening for me to realize the church’s disconnect from church visitors.

Inclusive congregation

I was talking to a seminary student one day about her experiences with church. Her parents are known in the denomination, and her appearance is not that of a typical pastor. She was sharing how people silently judged her when she first walks into churches. As soon as they find out what she is studying or what her last name is, everything suddenly changes and she has lunch invitations from now friendly people. How do we treat people that look different? How intentional are you about reaching out to all ages, races, and lifestyles of people?

Harmonious community

Harmony does not mean everyone agrees with everything. Rather, it is about the feel of your church. When someone walks into your building, is there tension in the air, or is it a healthy and safe place to be? How does your church handle problems? Are questions and answers asked and given with defensiveness or love? A healthy church is not problem-free; rather, it knows how to handle its problems.

A man came to me one day, telling me that he and his family wanted to join my church because he felt “loved” and “safe” in the church. He said that he was so glad to finally find a church where he was able to communicate with people on an honest level, without being condemned. How loving and safe is your church?

Accessible church

How accessible are you physically and emotionally to your community? How often do you as a leader simply listen to people without a defensive nature? Walking through the community and listening to people is important to know what they are looking for. Is your church steeped consistently in prayer? How well do they listen to God’s will? Restaurants are rated on presentation, servers, taste, aesthetics, and location. Why should your spiritual meal be any different? How many stars does your church have? 🌟



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