

# The Imminence/Distance Of The Advent

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## Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Forum:

The last ENDTIME ISSUES dealt with "The Latest Attack Against the Sabbath." I shared with you an article that I wrote at the urgent request of ADVENTIST REVIEW. The article refutes the five major arguments used especially by former SDA pastors to negate the continuity and validity of the principle and practice of Sabbathkeeping for us today.

As you recall, in the article I mentioned the latest attack against the Sabbath launched by Richard Fredericks, a former Pastor of the Damascus SDA Church (600 members) in Maryland, who established his own independent Damascus Road Community Church. On February 4, Fredericks mailed a newsletter to the members of his congregation inviting them to attend four special evening sessions on March 9, 11, 16, and 18. At these sessions, Fredericks attempted to demonstrate that the essence of Sabbathkeeping is an existential reality of salvation and not the literal observance of the seventh day.

Since posting the last newsletter, I have been informed of another former Adventist pastor who has taken his stand against the Sabbath. His name is Harry Krueger who served with his wife Teresa (associate Pastor), as pastor of the Cloverdale SDA Church (570 members) in Boise, Idaho. Eleven months ago they left Cloverdale SDA Church in order to establish their own independent Church of the Cross Road, which consisted mostly of former SDA members. Surprisingly, on April 6, 1999, they announced in a newsletter that as of Monday, April 12, both were both resigning their positions as Senior Pastor and Associate Pastor of their newly found Church of the Cross Roads. The reason is that they no longer wished to continue to hold services on the Sabbath. In his newsletter Kruger writes: "We will begin to meet for a Sunday (not Saturday) morning fellowship, as we have done this past Easter."

It is evident that the so-called "New Covenant Theology" which reduces the Sabbath to an Old Covenant institution, terminated by Christ, and no longer binding upon Christians today, is making inroads even in our SDA Church. A major contributing factor to the abandonment of the Sabbath by an increasing number of Sabbatarians is their failure to experience the physical, mental, moral, and spiritual benefits of the Sabbath.

Those who experience the Sabbath as a day of gloomy frustration are apt to welcome a theology that releases them from such a depressing experience. The solution to the problem, however, is to be found not in fabricating a "New Covenant" theology that does away with the Sabbath Commandment, but in discovering the divine intent of the Sabbath as a blessing rather than a burden, as a day of joyful celebration, rather than a day of gloomy frustration.

This pastoral concern has motivated me to devote chapter 7 of THE SABBATH UNDER CROSSFIRE to a presentation of practical ways to make Sabbathkeeping a Christ-centered experience—an experience of the awareness of the Savior's presence, peace, and rest in our lives. I would urge you to read this chapter which suggests seven ways in which the Sabbath enables us to experience the Savior's rest in our restless lives. If you do not own the book yet, I would be glad to email you the chapter.

## COMMENTS ON THE SABBATH SCHOOL FOR APRIL 10-16 "Our Social Nature"

This week lesson focuses on the social aspect of our human nature, especially on the need for companionship within the marital relationship. Since I have examined this subject in my book *THE MARRIAGE COVENANT*, I will post here a couple of pages which relate specifically to Monday, April 12, lesson, where the question is asked: "Describe what the words LEAVE and CLEAVE mean in Genesis 2:24." Unfortunately no attempt is made in the lesson to explain the profound significance of these terms. Let us examine this beautiful passage.

### **The Need for Companionship.**

In the creation account, God repeatedly recognizes that His creation was good (Gen 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31). The only thing that God acknowledges to be "not good" is the incomplete creation of man as a single being: "Then God said: 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him'" (Gen 2:20).

At this point creation was still incomplete. With man alone there could be no procreation, and more important yet, no possibility for him to experience the kind of intimate relationship existing within the Godhead. To be human means more than to be male or female. It means to be able to enjoy an intimate rational and spiritual fellowship. To rectify the "not good" situation, God declares, "I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen 2:18).

**A Suitable Helper.** God designed woman to be man's suitable helper, or literally, "a helper agreeing to him." Eve was created to be Adam's other half approximating him in every point and making the marriage union a complete whole. She was not created to be man's slave, but rather his helper. The word "helper" ('ezer) is used in the Bible also for God as the helper of the needy (Ps 33:20; 146:5), thus it does not imply that woman is an inferior being. She is equal in nature and worth, reflecting the same divine image (Gen 1:27). Yet she is different in function, serving as a supportive helper. We shall consider in chapter 4 the importance of respecting the creational role distinctions to ensure harmonious relationships in the home and in the church.

Woman was created to be man's counterpart, agreeing with him mentally, physically and spiritually, making him a larger person than he would have been alone, bringing into his life a new feminine perspective he would not have known otherwise. The same holds true for man. He brings to his wife a masculine perspective that enlarges her life, making her a more complete person than she could be without him. Thus, a marriage union not only fills the need for companionship, but it enables a man and a woman to become fuller, more complete persons.

**The Single Life.** God's evaluation of the single life as "not good" (Gen 2:18) appears to be contradicted by Christ's statement that "there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it" (Matt 19:11-12). A similar thought is expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:7 where in speaking of his single lifestyle he says: "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another" (1 Cor 7:7).

These two texts (Matt 19:11-12; 1 Cor 7:7) suggest that God has singled out some people to lead lives of celibacy for the sake of His kingdom. How then can God give the gift of celibacy to some while affirming at the same time, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen 2:18)? The resolution to this apparent contradiction is to be found in recognizing that God has made an exception to His own general principle. Because of the social distortions and crises brought about by sin and because of the urgent demand upon the church to advance the cause of His kingdom, God has equipped some persons with the capacity of leading fulfilling single lives.

The exact nature of the gift of celibacy is never fully explained in the Scripture. Presumably it consists in the capacity to find companionship, though of a different kind, outside of marriage, by becoming deeply involved in the mission of the church in ways

married persons cannot (see 1 Cor 7:32-34). According to Christ, "He who is able to receive this, let him receive it" (Matt 19:12). Those who have been granted the special gift of single service for Christ's kingdom, must prepare for it and pursue it. To determine whether a person has the gift of leading a single life for Christ's kingdom, it is necessary to apply the two tests suggested by Matthew 19:12 and 1 Corinthians 7:8,9: (1) Am I able to contain my sexual urges? and (2) Do I find satisfaction and companionship in the work of God's kingdom?

Single Christians who have been granted the special gift of single service for Christ's kingdom ought not to be looked down upon nor neglected by married Christians. Rather, they ought to be honored for their willingness to accept God's call to make the advancement of His kingdom the primary purpose of their lives. After all, we do not look down on Paul for choosing a single life in order to be able to serve Christ more fully and more freely.

**The Provision of Woman.** The way God chose to create the first bride is most significant. Unlike the rest of creation and of man himself, God formed Eve not from "the dust of the ground" (Gen 2:7) but from the very man who was to become her husband, by utilizing one of his ribs (Gen 2:21). The significance of the manner of Eve's creation, though not explicitly expressed, can hardly be missed. Eve was not made out of Adam's head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be his equal, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be loved.

As Adam beheld with sleepy eyes the most beautiful creature of God's creation, he declared with ecstatic excitement: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Gen 2:23). Adam's rejoicing was motivated by the discovery of the person who completed his incompleteness. His hunger for wholeness stemmed from the fact that God made him a male with the need for a female companion. God made Adam incomplete without Eve from the beginning.

The manner in which God created Adam and Eve reveals God's design that there should be male and female. Each of them needs the other for self-fulfillment. Each of them should accept his or her sexual and functional roles as given by God. This means that efforts to promote sexual or functional role interchangeability between men and women represent a violation of the role distinctions established by God at creation. True completeness and self-realization can be found not by transcending our sexual or functional roles but rather by fulfilling our different and yet complementary roles.

**The Institution of Marriage.** After Adam expressed his excitement at the sight of Eve and exercised his authority by naming her, God united them in holy matrimony, saying: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). This foundational statement about marriage is repeated three times in the Bible: First, by Jesus in the context of His teachings on divorce (Matt 19:5; Mark 10:7,8) and then by Paul to illustrate the relationship of Christ to His church (Eph 5:31).

The very first description of the nature of marriage in the Bible, as consisting of leaving, cleaving and becoming one flesh (Gen 2:24), reveals the Biblical understanding of marriage as a covenant relationship. This meaning of marriage as a covenant of companionship is expressed more explicitly later in Scripture in such passages as Malachi 2:14: "The Lord was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant."<sup>1</sup> Being a sacred covenant, human marriage serves in the Old and New Testaments as the prism through which God reveals His covenant relationship with His people and Christ with His church.

To appreciate the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred covenant, it is helpful to distinguish between a contract and a covenant. Paul E. Palmer offers a helpful clarification of the difference between the two: "Contracts engage the services of people; covenants engage persons. Contracts are made for a stipulated period of time; covenants are forever. Contracts can be broken, with material loss to the contracting parties; covenants

cannot be broken, but if violated, they result in personal loss and broken hearts. . . . Contracts are witnessed by people with the state as guarantor; covenants are witnessed by God with God as guarantor."<sup>2</sup> In light of this understanding of a covenant as a permanent commitment, witnessed and guaranteed by God, let us examine the three components of the marriage covenant mentioned in Genesis 2:24: leaving, cleaving, and becoming one flesh.

**Leaving.** The first step in establishing a marriage covenant is leaving all other relationships, including the closest ones of father and mother: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother" (Gen 2:24). Of course, leaving does not mean the abandonment of one's parents. The responsibility to "Honor your father and mother" (Ex 20:12) is applied by Jesus to adults (Mark 7:6-13). We do not evade our responsibility toward our parents as they grow old. Jesus scorned the hypocrisy of those who gave to the Temple the money they had set aside for their parents (Mark 7:9-13). As adults, however, we assume responsibility for our parents rather than to them. The Bible never suggests that married couples should sever their ties with their parents, but that they must "let go" of their former lives as sons and daughters in order to cement their relationships as husbands and wives.

What "leaving" means is that all lesser relationships must give way to the newly formed marital relationship. A leaving must occur to cement a covenant relationship of husband and wife. This principle of leaving applies likewise to our covenant relationship with God. It is said of the disciples that "they left everything and followed Him" (Luke 5:11).<sup>3</sup>

**Leaving is not always easy.** It is often hard for a baby to leave his mother's womb. It may look cruel to see a doctor cut the umbilical cord which binds the baby to the mother. Yet, it is necessary for the growth and development of the baby. It is also hard for children to leave their parents and for parents to let their children go, for example, to a school away from home. Just as babies cannot grow physically unless they leave their mother's womb and just as children cannot receive an education unless they leave home to go to school, similarly a marriage cannot mature unless both partners are willing to leave their parents in order to cement a new marital relationship and establish a new family.

**Aspects of Leaving.** There are men and women who fail to build strong covenant marriages because they are still "tied to their mother's apron strings," or they are not willing "to leave" their attachment to their parents, jobs, advanced education, sports, past lives, friends, or even church work, in order to establish strong marital relationships.

Leaving involves not only leaving behind our positions as dependent children, but also ending our financial dependence upon our parents. The couple who never learns to stand financially on its own feet will have difficulty in developing their future plans independently. We must also leave behind our parental authority. Possessive, interfering parents can threaten the best marriages. While parental counsel must always be respected, parents' efforts to interfere in the private lives of their married children must be firmly resisted.

Leaving also involves learning to abandon some of our parents' attitudes and influences. This is not always easy since we are largely the product of our upbringing. The process of adjustment to a new marital relationship requires that we learn to distinguish between what is fundamental and what is incidental to our past upbringing, being willing to leave behind the latter for the health and growth of our marriages.

Perhaps the most difficult things to leave behind are the inner wounds and hurts of our childhoods. We come to our marriages with the good and bad emotional experiences of the first two decades of our lives. Through the healing power of the Holy Spirit, we can be delivered from the past wounds that can infect our marital relationships. The love of Jesus and the encouragement of our spouse can set us free from our pasts and enable us to be the understanding partners God wants us to be. So the first principle we derive from the divine institution of marriage recorded in Genesis 2:24 is as follows: To establish

a thrilling "one flesh" marriage covenant, we must be willing to leave all lesser relationships.

**Cleaving.** The second essential component of a marriage covenant is cleaving: "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife" (Gen 2:24). A leaving must occur before a cleaving can take place. This process reveals divine wisdom. A man and a woman must leave all lesser relationships for the purpose of cleaving, that is, cementing their new relationship and establishing a new home.

"Cleaving" reflects the central concept of covenant-fidelity. The Hebrew word for "cleave" *dabaq*, suggests the idea of being permanently glued or joined together. It is one of the words frequently used to express the covenant commitment of the people to God: "You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve him and cleave to Him" (Deut 10:20; cf. 11:22; 13:4; 30:20). The word is used to describe Ruth's refusal to leave her mother-in-law Naomi: "Ruth clave unto her" (Ruth 1:14 AV).

In the sight of God, cleaving means wholehearted commitment which spills over to every area of our being. It means to be permanently glued together rather than temporarily taped together. You can separate two pieces of wood taped together, but you cannot separate without great damage two pieces of wood glued together. In fact, two pieces of wood glued together become not only inseparable, but also much stronger than if they were taped together.

Cleaving involves unswerving loyalty to one's marital partner. Note that man is to cleave to "his wife." This excludes marital unfaithfulness. A man cannot be glued to his wife and flirt or engage in sexual intercourse with another woman. The two are mutually exclusive.

In a marriage covenant, cleaving does not allow the "freedom to leave" when the relationship is no longer satisfying. If the "freedom to leave" is retained as a real option, it will hinder the total effort to develop a marital relationship characterized by covenant faithfulness. As marriage counselor Ed Wheat observes, "Keeping divorce as an escape clause indicates a flaw in your commitment to each other, even as a tiny crack that can be fatally widened by the many forces working to destroy homes and families."<sup>4</sup>

Accepting the Biblical standard of cleaving means asking ourselves when contemplating marriage: Am I prepared to make a lifetime commitment to my prospective spouse, for better or for worse till death do us part? Once married, cleaving means to ask ourselves: Will this action, word, decision, or attitude draw us closer together or further apart? Will it build up or tear down our relationship? For a Christian committed to living by the principles of God's word, any course of action which weakens the cleaving must be regarded as contrary to God's design for a marriage covenant.

Many today scorn the idea of developing a close dependent relationship between husband and wife. They claim that it restricts their freedom and stifles their personal growth. What they advocate can be characterized as a "married singles" lifestyle where both partners continue to follow their independent lives while sharing the same roof and bed. It is not surprising that such marriages often fail, since there is no willingness to leave selfish considerations in order to cleave to each other "for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health."

Summing up, we can state the second principle derived from the divine institution of marriage recorded in Genesis 2:24 as follows: To maintain a thrilling "one flesh" marriage covenant we must be willing to cleave to our marital partners, avoiding any thought, word, or action that could weaken our loyalty and commitment to them.

**Becoming One Flesh.** The third essential ingredient of a marriage covenant is that "they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). Note the progression: leaving, cleaving, becoming one flesh. As husband and wife leave lesser relationships and learn to cleave to one another, they become a new entity, "one flesh."

The phrase "one flesh" needs some explanation because it is frequently misunderstood to refer primarily to the sexual union. The phrase is closely parallel to our English compound word everybody. When we speak of everybody we do not think of bodies only. Rather, we mean every person. Or when God speaks of destroying all flesh (Gen 6:17; 7:21), obviously He does not mean all the flesh without the bones, but every person. Similarly, to become "one flesh" (Gen 2:24) means to become one functioning unit. H. C. Leupold explains that becoming one flesh "involves the complete identification of one personality with the other in a community of interests and pursuits, a union consummated in intercourse."<sup>5</sup>

No theologian or scientist has ever yet explained how two people are able to so interpenetrate one another's lives that they become "one flesh," that is, one functioning unit. Yet we know that it happens! Couples who have been married for many years start to think, act, and feel as one; they become one in mind, heart and spirit. This is why divorce is so devastating. It leaves not two persons, but two fractions of one.

The phrase "one flesh" does also refer to the physical or sexual aspect of marriage. Paul explicitly uses the phrase in this way when speaking of sexual intercourse between a man and a harlot (1 Cor 6:16). Sexual intercourse per se, however, does not automatically assure that a man and a woman become one in a mystical, emotional, and spiritual unity. Genital intercourse without spiritual communion often leaves people divided, alienated, and bitter toward each other. Thus, sexual intercourse itself does not bring about real oneness.

To achieve the Biblical "one flesh" union, sexual intercourse in marriage must be the natural fruit of love, the crowning act of marital union. If sex is not the expression of genuine love, respect, and commitment, then it offers only a physical contact while keeping the partners mentally and spiritually apart. Sexual desire must become the desire for the total union and oneness of body, soul, and spirit between marital partners.

**Gradual Process.** A man and a woman who come together in marriage do not automatically become "one flesh" when they exchange their marriage vows. Their personalities are still free, independent and desiring assertive of their respective wills. But as they live together as husband and wife, they realize that they must safeguard their individuality while striving to become one. They must not allow their differences to divide them but must learn to accept their differences, viewing them not as antagonistic but as complementary. They can still be themselves and yet come into unity. The husband learns to accept his wife as she is because he needs to be accepted as he is. Their differences contribute to achieving their oneness because they are accepted as being complementary and not contradictory.

The becoming of "one flesh" is beautifully exemplified in the children of a married couple. In their children, husband and wife are indissolubly united into one person. Our three children, Loretta, Daniel and Gianluca, possess both my features and those of my wife. There is no way I could retrieve my features from any of my children nor could my wife retrieve hers. They are my flesh and my wife's. Something marvelous and permanent happened when they were born: they became the sum total of what we both are. What happens biologically in children occurs psychologically in a husband/wife relationship as the two gradually become "one flesh," a new functioning unity. This is why extra-marital sexual relationships are not only immoral but also destructive to the one-flesh relationship.

**Continuity.** Becoming "one flesh" also implies continuity. We cannot become one flesh with a succession of husbands and wives. This is why the modern practice of serial monogamy must be rejected as immoral: it defeats the Biblical purpose of marriage which is to develop a permanent "one flesh" relationship. The "one flesh" principle excludes polygamy and extra-marital relationships of all kinds, because no man can become "one flesh" with more than one woman. The Old Testament persons who violated the "one flesh" principle by taking more than one wife paid the price for their

transgressions. Problems of all kinds developed in their families as their wives became jealous or felt exploited, degraded, or hated.

Summing up, the third principle we derive from the divine institution of marriage recorded in Genesis 2:24 is as follows: To become a "one flesh" functioning unit, husband and wife must learn to accept their differences as complementing their oneness and must reserve their sexual expressions exclusively for each other.

If you found the above comments insightful and wish to receive a copy of THE MARRIAGE COVENANT, feel free to contact me. We will gladly mail you immediately a copy of this timely book. Thousands of people from all over the world have informed me that this book has enriched their marriage and in some cases reconciled partners who were legally separated or divorced.

## **THE IMMINENCE/DISTANCE OF THE ADVENT**

In the Bible the expectation of the Second Advent is expressed in two different, seemingly contradictory perspectives: imminent and distant. The tension between these two perspectives has caused considerable confusion and has given rise to divergent schools of thought regarding the time of Christ's return. Let us note first of all how this tension is already present in the Old Testament.

### **I. Imminence/Distance of the Advent in the Old Testament**

**Amos.** One of the earliest prophets, Amos, announces the day of the Lord (Amos 5:18-20) in the context of imminent divine judgments upon Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Moab, Judah, and Israel (Amos 1:3 to 2:6). Jerusalem will be destroyed by fire (Amos 2:5) and Israel will be razed by Assyria and Egypt (Amos 3:9-11). Beyond this impending divine visitation, Amos sees a more distant (eschatological) Day of the Lord which he describes as a day of universal judgment (Amos 7:4; 8:8-9; 9:5), and a day of salvation and restoration (Amos 9:13-15).

**Zephaniah.** The same tension between the nearness and the distance of the Day of the Lord is found in the message of Zephaniah. The prophet announces that "the great day of the Lord is **near, near** and hastening fast" (Zeph 1:14).<sup>1</sup> This imminent divine visitation is associated with destruction at the hands of some unnamed foe to come upon several nations, including Judah (Zeph 2:1 to 3:7).

In the context of this impending historical judgment, Zephaniah urges the people to wait for the more distant day of the Lord: "Therefore wait for me," says the Lord, "for the day when I arise as a witness . . . to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation" (Zeph 3:8). The purpose of this final visitation is not only judgment but also salvation both for the Gentiles and for Israel (Zeph 3:9-20).

**Isaiah.** The prophet Isaiah announces the nearness of the Day of the Lord with reference to the destruction of Babylon by the Medes: "Wail, for the day of the Lord is **near**; as destruction from the Almighty it will come" (Is 13:6).<sup>2</sup> In the context of this impending historical judgment, Isaiah describes the final Day of the Lord which will be accompanied by the darkening of the sun, moon, and stars (Is 13:10) and which "will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity" (Is 13:11).

The sense of distance of this final Day of the Lord is sometimes expressed by Isaiah and other prophets by indefinite phrases such as "in the latter days," "in that day," "afterwards" (Is 2:2, 20; cf. Hos 3:5; Ezek 38:16; Jer 30:8; Joel 2:28-29).

### **II. Imminence and Distance of the Advent in the New Testament**

**Imminence.** The tension between the imminent expectation and the future realization of the Advent Hope is found even more explicitly in the New Testament. Besides the "imminence passages" examined in the previous chapter, numerous other verses underline the imminence of Christ's Return. We shall mention only a few

noteworthy examples. To the Romans Paul writes: "For salvation is **nearer** to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand: (Rom 13:11-12; cf. 1 Cor 7:29; Phil 4:5).<sup>3</sup>

James admonishes believers to "be patient" and not to grumble "for the coming of the Lord is at hand . . . the Judge is standing **at the doors**" (James 5:8-9). Similarly, Peter urges believers to "keep sane and sober" because "the end of all things is **at hand**:" (1 Pet 4:7; cf. Heb 10:25). The last book of the Bible opens by announcing "what must **soon** take place" (Rev 1:1) and closes by affirming, "Surely I am coming **soon**" (Rev 22:20).<sup>4</sup>

**Distance.** Accompanying these "imminence verses" there are other passages which place the Parousia in a more distant future. A sense of distance is suggested by the precursory Advent signs given by Christ. For example, in Matthew 24:14 Jesus says: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come." The time involved in reaching the whole world with the Gospel as well as the words "and then" imply the elapsing of considerable time before the Second Advent.

Distance is also implied by the time required for the fulfillment of the various pre-Advent conditions predicted, such as intensification of warfare, natural disasters, and increased wickedness. Distance is particularly emphasized by the statement that even after the fulfillment of these conditions "the end is not yet" (Mark 13:7; Matt 24:6).

Several of Christ's parables point to a long waiting time between His death and His Return. Matthew links the Olivet discourse directly with the parables of the faithful and the unfaithful servants, the Ten Virgins, and the Talents, which all suggest the elapsing of considerable time before the Lord's Return. The unfaithful servant said: "My master is **delayed**" (Matt 24:48) and began living immorally and intemperately.<sup>5</sup> The master rebuked the servant, not because of his awareness of the delay, but rather because of his irresponsible conduct during the delay.

In the parable of the Ten Virgins, "the bridegroom was **delayed**, [and] they all slumbered and slept" (Matt 25:5). The focus is on the conduct of the virgins during the delay of the bridegroom. The same point is made in the parable of the Talents, when it says: "Now **after a long time** the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them" (Matt 25:19).<sup>6</sup>

The similar parable of the Pounds, according to Luke was related by Christ "because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately" (Luke 19:11). To correct this misunderstanding, the parable speaks of a nobleman who went into a far country and then returned to settle accounts with his servants. The distant destination of the nobleman suggests that his return might have been a long way off in time.

A similar point is made in the parable of the Faithful and Wise Steward (Luke 12:41-48). The unfaithful servant's statement: "My master is **delayed** in coming" (v. 45) implies that there will indeed be a "delay" which will differentiate between the faithful and the unfaithful stewards.

Other parables found in Matthew 13, such as that of the Tares, the Mustard Seed, and the Leaven, also suggest the possibility of a long lapse of time before the End. The Tares, that is the unbelievers, are to coexist to the end side by side with believers; the Mustard Seed, that is the small band of Christ's followers, are to become an impressive group; the Leaven, that is the Kingdom of God, hidden initially, is to become manifest.

The elements of growth, development, and manifestation which are present in these parables suggest the passing of considerable time before Christ's Return. The conclusion that emerges is that, though Jesus proclaimed His Return as imminent, He also allowed for a considerable time to elapse before its occurrence.

The same tension between imminence and distance is found in Paul's writings. We noted earlier that in Romans 13:12 the Apostle speaks of the nearness of the end ("the night is far gone, the day is at hand"). Yet in the preceding chapters (9 to 11) Paul describes how the ingathering of the Gentiles will ultimately lead to the salvation of Israel (Rom 11:25-26). Obviously, the outworking of this process presupposes the elapse of considerable time before the End.

Similarly, in his letters to the Thessalonians Paul urges Christians to "keep awake and be sober" (1 Thess 5:6) because the day may come at any moment, yet he also begs the same believers "not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited" (2 Thess 2:2) because "that day will not come, unless" (v. 3) certain developments first occur.

As noted earlier, Revelation opens and closes announcing the soon-Coming of the Lord (Rev 1:1; 22:20; cf. 3:11). Yet throughout the book there is expressed a sense of long waiting before the Parousia. The martyrs cry: "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, **how long** before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood?" (Rev 6:10).<sup>7</sup> The answer they receive is "to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete" (Rev 6:11).

This process presupposes a waiting period which could be rather long. The same thought is conveyed in the vision of the Two Witnesses and the Woman, both of whom are promised a period of 1260 days during which the former were to prophesy and the latter was to be protected (Rev 11:3; 12:6).

In summary we might say that the New Testament presents the Second Coming of Christ in a seemingly paradoxical tension: imminent and yet possibly distant.

## **PART TWO: POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

How can this tension between the imminence and distance of the Advent Hope be resolved? The problem is not only hermeneutical, that is, how to interpret apparently contradictory texts, but also existential, that is, how to live in the consciousness of the nearness of Christ's Coming while accepting the possibility of a long waiting time.

### **1. A Crisis of Faith**

Some scholars explain the imminence/distance Advent-tension as being the result of a crisis of faith experienced by first-century Christians. This crisis was provoked by the fact that Christ did not return as expected within the lifetime of His generation. To explain away their disappointment, Christians recast their Advent Hope in an unknown and possibly distant future time.<sup>8</sup>

No Bitter Disappointment. No doubt there are traces in the New Testament of an early expectation of Christ's Coming. But there are no indications suggesting that Christians experienced a bitter disappointment which forced them to recast their hopes into a more distant future-fulfillment of the Advent Hope.

There is no chapter in the history of New Testament Christianity like that of the Millerite movement, which is called "The Great Disappointment." When Christ did not return as expected in 1844, the vast majority of Millerites gave up their Advent Hope. But no traces can be found in early Christianity of a mass apostasy due to Christ's failure to return before the passing away of the apostolic generation.

**No Crisis of Faith.** A crisis of the Advent Hope is to be expected if such hope is based upon the presumption of knowing the date of the Second Advent, rather than on the experience of salvation already provided by Christ's First Advent. The New Testament Church was reconciled to a possibly long waiting time, because she was already experiencing the "first fruits" (Rom 8:23) of the future Advent "harvest" of blessings.

As long as a believer experiences in the present the blessings of salvation already provided through Christ's death, resurrection, and heavenly ministry, any apparent "delay" of the Second Advent cannot lead to a crisis of faith. There are no traces in the New Testament Church of a crisis of faith regarding the Parousia. The Advent Hope of the earliest Christians was not shaken by any perception of an apparent "delay," because, as Paul eloquently puts it, "I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6).

## 2. The Existential Time of the Advent Hope

**Empirical Versus Existential Time.** Distinguishing between two notions of time can help us resolve the New Testament tension between the imminence and distance of Christ's Return. The first notion is empirical time which is measured by the clock. This is the common notion of time. The person who flies from Chicago to Los Angeles looks at the watch from time to time to see how many more hours or minutes still remain before the arrival. This empirical time is abstract, impersonal, and it can be fixed and measured with accuracy.

The second notion of time is existential time or perhaps "lover's time." This is the time which exists in the world of love and is measured not by the clock but by love and faith. In the world of love and hope time is real but it "flies."

The person who waits only for empirical, chronological time to pass finds such time to be unbearably slow. On the other hand, the person who experiences time in reference to a beloved person finds that time does in fact rush by. Of Jacob it is said that he "served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" (Gen 29:20).<sup>9</sup>

The notion of existential time experienced in a love-relationship can help us resolve the Biblical tension between the nearness and the remoteness of Christ's Return. This tension vanishes when the event expected is the Return of a beloved Person. "Beloved," write John, "we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). The Advent is the occasion to see "face to face" the One whom now "we see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor 13:12).

**Measuring Time by Faith.** The Christian eagerly awaits not an impersonal happening, but rather the Return of his beloved Lord. This faith enables the believer to live in the expectation of the imminent Coming of the Lord while conscious at the same time of the possibility of a long waiting period. Two persons who love one another have reason to hope to see one another soon, even if the separation is going to be chronologically rather long.

When I left my fiancé in Italy to come to the USA for my seminary training, we bade farewell to one another saying: "Time is going to pass quickly. Soon we are going to be together again." We knew that we would be separated for at least a year, but we were measuring time not by the calendar, but rather by our love and faith. Since our lives were illuminated by the certainty of our future reunion, we chose to live in the awareness not of the long months of waiting but of the imminent reunion. Thus "soon" for us meant primarily a certain reunion.

This notion of time experienced in a love relationship offers us an important clue to understand the Biblical tension between the imminence and the distance of the Advent Hope. When a love relationship exists between the believer and Christ, living in the joyful expectation of His imminent Return becomes a natural necessity. To accept the present salvation that Christ offers us, without believing in His imminent Return, would be like becoming engaged without ever hoping to get married (Titus 2:13).

**A Little While.** The existential time experienced in a love relationship enables us to understand the significance of such words of Jesus as those recorded in John

16:16: "A little while, and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me" (cf. John 14:18-19). By describing the time that would elapse before His Return as "a little while" (mikron), Christ was not giving His disciples some kind of time measurement to calculate the date of His Return, but rather He was assuring them of the certainty of their future Reunion. In other words, Christ was speaking not of clock time but of lover's time.

The waiting time mentioned by Christ is "a little while," not because it consists of only a few years, but because during His absence we can live intensively in the reality of His love and the certainty of His Return. A short waiting time may seem like an eternity when one lives in the fear of uncertainty. On the other hand, years may seem like days when lived intensively and serenely in the certainty of the love of the expected person.

### 3. The Unity of the Advent Hope

A second important concept which helps us to resolve the imminence-distance tension of the Parousia is the essential unity which exists in the New Testament between the First and the Second Advents. This unity is expressed in several significant ways.

**Dual Meaning of Words.** One way already noticed is the dual meaning attached to the three terms Parousia, Revelation, and Appearing, which are used in the New Testament to designate both the past and the future Coming of Christ. This dual meaning indicates that for the New Testament believer the future Advent, though possibly distant, could be intensely felt as imminent, because it was conceptually and existentially linked to the reality of Christ's First Coming which inaugurated the End-time age.

**The End of the Age.** The unity of the Advent Hope is also expressed by such phrases as "the last days" and "the end of the age." Today, when we hear the expression "the end of the age" (Heb 9:26), we generally think not of the Incarnation but of the Parousia. In the New Testament, however, "the end of the age" is the age inaugurated by Christ when He came the first time "to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:26). Such age is also referred to as "the last days" (Acts 2:17), or "the end of times" (1 Pet 1:20). Christ inaugurated this final age by offering to believers the down payment of their future Advent inheritance.

The Second Advent is near because the believer already enjoys a foretaste of the blessings and privileges of the End-time. Having already experienced through the indwelling Spirit a taste of "the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (Heb 6:5), the believer lives in the expectancy of the imminent consummation of salvation. Thus, the chronological distance to the Coming of the Lord is shortened through the initial experience of the ultimate blessing of the Kingdom.

**The Lord's Prayer.** The Lord's Prayer provides another example of how the New Testament reconciles the tension between the nearness and distance of the Kingdom. The Prayer opens with the petition "Thy kingdom come" and closes with the doxology "For thine is the Kingdom" (Matt 6:10, 13).<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Kingdom inaugurated by the Advent is both future and present, far and near. The distance between the two, as Paul S. Minear notes, "is measured primarily not by space and time but by such specific concerns as the accomplishment of God's will, the gift of daily bread, the forgiveness of sin and the deliverance from the evil one."<sup>11</sup>

**The Lord's Supper.** The unity of the Advent Hope is expressed vividly through the symbolic significance of the Lord's Supper. The drinking of the cup and the partaking of the bread are viewed as a proclamation of "the Lord's death till he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). The distance between the Passion and the Parousia is shortened because the two events are seen as inseparable.

When partaking of the Lord's Supper, the believer accepts symbolically the present salvation which is both past and future, Passion and Parousia. Though the Parousia may be far away in terms of chronological time, yet it is near in terms of salvation time, because its reality is already a present certainty and experience.

There is an essential unity among the events of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Heavenly Ministration, and Parousia. This unity enables New Testament writers to reconcile the apparent tension between the imminence and the distance of the Second Advent, for it is the same expected Savior who has already appeared and who is presently appearing before the Father on our behalf, who ultimately "will appear a second time . . . to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (Heb 9:24-28).<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. Moral Urgency of the Advent Hope

A third important reconciling clue is the ethical purpose of the nearness-remoteness tension. If Christ's Return had been tied to specific signs which made it possible to calculate chronologically either the nearness or the remoteness of the Event, then any preparation would be conditioned by the date factor. Knowing the date would tempt some to postpone to tomorrow the preparation that should be done today.

**Preparation, not Calculation.** The tension between imminence and distance fulfills a vital ethical function. It discourages date-setting and it calls for constant watchfulness and readiness. In the famous Olivet Discourse we find two distinct emphases: nearness and remoteness. Nearness is suggested by the significance of the given signs, namely, "that he is near, at the very gates" (Mark 13:29). Remoteness is indicated by the time needed for the signs to be fulfilled and more explicitly by the statement that even when they occur "the end is not yet" (Mark 13:7).

The purpose of this tension is obviously ethical, namely, to discourage speculation and calculation of the date and to encourage constant preparation for the Lord's Return. Much of the Olivet Discourse is cast in the form of exhortation: "Take heed" (Mark 13:5, 9, 23, 33), "Do not be alarmed" (v. 7), "Do not be anxious" (v. 11), "Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house will come" (v. 35). These exhortations highlight the purpose of the time references, namely, to encourage preparation and endurance, not speculation.

The generic nature of the Advent signs provides another indication. Earthquakes, famines, political conflicts, and worldwide Gospel preaching are the kind of signs which can hardly be used to date the particular moment in history when Christ will come. They characterize the conditions existing between the First and the Second Advent. Their purpose, as the next chapter will show, is not to make date-calculations possible, but to nourish the hope of the imminent Return of the Lord, and thus to encourage constant readiness and watchfulness.

**Constant Readiness.** It is important to recognize the close link between the predictions of the Advent and the ethical concerns of Jesus and the New Testament writers. Like the Old Testament prophets, New Testament writers speak of nearness and delay, not to suggest a method for constructing a chronology, but to urge repentance and readiness. The "near" indicates that the Advent is not merely a futuristic possibility beyond our horizons, but a present, inescapable, and decisive challenge to live now in readiness for the Lord's Return.

The servant who chose to live with reference to a distant return of his master, saying: "My master is delayed in coming" (Luke 12:45), is the servant who became unfaithful, irresponsible and immoral in his conduct. By contrast, the servant who lived in the constant expectation of his master's return was found faithfully discharging his duties.

These observations indicate, then, that the tension between imminence and distance is an essential ingredient of the Advent Hope. By discouraging date-setting, this tension challenges believers to constant readiness and to experience in the present the certainty of the future Coming of the Lord.

#### 5. The Prophetic Perspective of the Advent Hope

A fourth significant concept to understand the tension between the imminence and distance of the Advent Hope is provided by what has been called "prophetic perspective." This perspective enabled the prophets to hold the present and the future, the near and the far, in a dynamic relationship.

**Anticipation of the Future.** Isaiah 13, for example, as already noted, describes the distant Day of the Lord in the setting of the imminent destruction of Babylon (vv. 9-11). The Day of the Lord was near because present divine interventions were seen as an anticipation of the final divine visitation. Each judgment and each deliverance was seen by the prophets as a partial realization of the ultimate accomplishments of the Day of the Lord.

The same prophetic perspective is present in New Testament teaching. In Mark 13 the imminent destruction of Jerusalem (vv. 14-23) is presented in the immediate context of the Coming of the Son of Man (vv. 24-27). The first event is viewed as an anticipation of the final judgment to take place at the Parousia. As noted earlier, in Mark 9:1-3 the immediate ("after six days"-v. 2) glorious Transfiguration of Christ, is viewed as an anticipatory manifestation of the coming Kingdom.

**What or When?** It is difficult for us-trained to measure time quantitatively rather than qualitatively-to appreciate the prophetic perspective.<sup>13</sup> We measure time with our clocks and calendars in hours, days, months, and years in order to establish with accuracy when an event or action is to take place. In Biblical thought, however, the important question is often not "When?" but "What?"

The disciples asked Jesus "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?" (Mark 13:4). In His answer Christ offers no sign by which the "when" can be calculated. In fact, He emphatically affirms: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). What Christ explains is not the "when" but the "what," that will characterize the waiting time.

The characteristic is essentially conflict in the religious, political, social, and cosmic order. Amid this conflict, Christ's followers must proclaim to all nations the Good News of the Kingdom of God (Mark 13:10; Matt 24:14). Human history is not abandoned to evil, but is moving toward the day when the Son of Man will come to bring all conflicts to an end (Mark 13:26-27).

The triumphs of the Gospel, as well as the present conflicts, are signs that "he is near, at the very gates" (Mark 13:29), because they tell us that the ultimate conflict which will usher in the triumphant Kingdom of God is already transpiring in the present.

**Two Extremes.** The believer who sees the present conflicts and triumphs as signs that Christ is acting redemptively in the present to bring His future Kingdom to its consummation shares in the prophetic perspective which enables a person to maintain the present and future, the imminence and the distance of the Advent Hope in a balanced, dynamic tension.

The loss of this prophetic perspective results in two major opposite errors. Some are led to abandon the hope of a real future Coming of the Lord, in favor of a present existential realization of God's Kingdom. Others are led to ignore the present outworking of God's Kingdom in favor of speculations regarding dates and events related to the Day of the Advent.

To avoid these two extremes, we need to recover the prophetic perspective which enables us to shorten chronological time-spans by looking at the future through the transparency of the present outworkings of God. The Advent of the Lord, though still in the future, yet is near, because the same Lord who has acted and is presently acting redemptively to bring His Kingdom to its consummation on the Day of His Parousia.

## CONCLUSION

The New Testament speaks of the time of the Second Advent in seemingly contradictory terms: imminent and yet possibly distant. We have found that such a tension was not provoked by a crisis of faith when the Lord failed to return within the lifetime of His generation, but rather that it is an essential component of the Biblical Advent Hope.

Some of the significant functions of the imminence/distance tension are: (1) to help believers experience in the present the reality of the future; (2) to emphasize the unity among the past, present, and future salvation; (3) to urge not calculation but constant preparation; (4) to encourage a prophetic perspective by which the believer looks at the future through the transparency of the present Advent signs.

## ENDNOTES

1. Emphasis supplied.
2. Emphasis supplied.
3. Emphasis supplied.
4. All the emphasis in the paragraph is supplied.
5. Emphasis supplied.
6. All the emphasis in the paragraph is supplied.
7. Emphasis supplied.
8. An insightful discussion of this view is found in G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids, 1972), pp. 65-95.
9. Emphasis supplied
10. Emphasis supplied.
11. Paul S. Minear, *Christian Hope and the Second Coming* (Philadelphia, 1954), p. 100.
12. C. E. B. Cranfield acknowledges the relationship between the nearness of the End and the unity in Christ's acts: "The clue to the meaning of the nearness of the End is the realization of the essential unity of God's Saving Acts in Christ-the realization that the Events of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Parousia are in a real sense one Event. The foreshortening, by which the Old Testament sees as one divine intervention in the future that which from the viewpoint of the New Testament writers is both past and future, is not only a visual illusion; for the distance actually brings out an essential unity, which is not so apparent from a position in between the Ascension and the Parousia" ("St. Mark 13, "Scottish Journal of Theology, VI [1953], p. 288.
13. Emphasis supplied.

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