

Bible Studies for Adventists



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February 28–March 6, 2009

Commentary on “The Message of the Prophets”

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Day 1: Sabbath Afternoon, February 28, 2009

Today's study begins the week by establishing two premises. First, it asserts that SDA doctrines are “based solely on the Bible,” and that Ellen White's visions were not to replace Bible study. Secondly, Ellen White's visions are given to last-day believers for “affirming” and “clarifying” the doctrines of scripture. Five doctrines are laid out as foundational for the church: Righteousness by Faith, the Cleansing of the Heavenly Sanctuary, the Sabbath, the State of the Dead as Soul Sleep, and the Second Coming of Christ. Recommended reading from the Bible lists passages from Exodus 20, Leviticus 16, Matthew 24, Romans 3, and Hebrews 8 and 9.

To illustrate how the Adventist pioneers created their doctrinal framework for the church, the story is told that their small, dedicated group spent late nights of “praying for light and studying the Word.” When the group reached moments where they “could go no further,” answers sometimes came through Ellen White's visions. These visions were not to replace prayer, faith, and Bible study, it is emphasized; the doctrines stand on the Bible alone. Mrs. White did not initiate doctrinal formulation. The visions were helpful only in clarifying doctrine.

Problems

The premises that SDA doctrines are based solely on the Bible, and that Ellen White's visions were needed to “clarify” the Bible's doctrines, are incompatible. If the doctrines can be found in the Bible independent from additional revelation, why were the visions needed then? Is the Bible not clear? When the pioneers reached those moments where they could “go no further,” those answers were awaiting them in God's holy word, just as they always had for all believers since Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit 1800 years before. The Lesson Guide, however, is unable to explain (or give scriptural support for) how new revelations from Ellen White's writings are needed, when “in these last days he has spoken to us by his son.”

When the pioneers were engaged in their intense studies, they already had accepted Mrs. White's authenticity as God's messenger. When she spoke from her visions, all varying points of view were squelched by her overpowering presence.

“I am presenting to you that which the Lord has presented to me. I do not write one article in the paper expressing merely my own ideas. They are what God has opened before me in vision, the precious rays of light shining from the throne” (*Testimonies* 5 p. 67).

“In my books, the truth is stated, barricaded by a ‘Thus saith the Lord.’ The Holy Spirit traced these truths upon my heart and mind as indelibly as the law was traced by the finger of God upon the tables of stone.” *Letter* 90, 1906.

Even though she did not initiate doctrinal ideas, she settled them as an unquestionable (if not infallible) court of final appeal. Her authority invalidates any other test. Instead of the less inspired members testing her visions, she effectively tested everyone else.

When Ellen White's affirmations are required at any point to understand scripture, then we have abandoned a central principle that Adventists claim to hold, *sola scriptura*. This is a central pillar of the Reformation, that the Bible is the believer's only source of divine, special inspiration. The Holy Spirit's gift of spiritual vision is given to all believers, and scripture is sufficient to explain itself. This stood in opposition to the claims of the Roman Church, which held that special revelation was contained both by the Bible, and the traditions of the Church. Jesus told his disciples, "The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things."

(John 14:26) This was a promise for individual believers, and he made no mention of prophets to come after him. "All things" leaves no exceptions for traditions or additional interpreters. His word is founded on his revelation in Jesus Christ (John 1, Hebrews 1, Revelation 1), upon the testimony of the apostles, and stands forever.

Summary

- The dual claim is made that the foundational doctrines of the SDA church are based solely on the Bible, but that Ellen White's "clarifications" are needed for the remnant church. These two claims are contradictory, and violate the sufficiency of scripture. From the beginning of the SDA movement, acceptance of Ellen White's gift has never been optional within the SDA church. The doctrines, therefore, cannot be separated from this fleshly embodiment of the "Spirit of Prophecy." For Christians, the Bible as the testimony of Jesus Christ is the only special revelation that believers need in any age.

Day 2: Sunday, March 1, 2009

In today's lesson, the Lesson Guide looks at man's primary problem and its cure. The problem is sin, and this is demonstrated by man's lack of "happiness and peace of mind." Sin also destroys human life and health, and for this, there is no medical remedy. The only remedy is found in the Cross of Christ. Ellen White is quoted saying that it is impossible for fallen man to merit salvation through his own best good works.

The writer then warns us of the twin extremes of cheap grace and legalism, where Christians often fall into either extreme. He urges us to find the "balanced Christian life," where we have both assurance of salvation and victory over sin in our lives.

"... the faith that saves is not alone; good works follow, even though those good works, even done under the unction of the Holy Spirit, never can justify us before God."

The author then offers hope for discouraged believers in acceptance by God, which is based only on what Christ has done, and not through our own victories over sin.

Problems

By only describing sin as a destroyer of happiness, peace of mind, and physical health, we entirely miss the core problems of sin as described in scripture. When Adam and Eve rebelled, they died the very same day, as promised by God. Their sin resulted in instant spiritual death, the state into which we are all born (Eph. 2:1,2). That is why we all are incapable, both Jews and Gentiles, of pleasing God. Our core problem is not our happiness, self-esteem, or behavior. Our problem is much worse than mental or physical illness. It is our dead human spirit which "lives in the passions of our flesh," making us an "object of wrath," deserving death by a holy Creator.

Because we are born spiritually dead, we are by nature objects of the wrath of God (Rom. 1 and 2, Eph. 2:3). It is notable that the wrath of God is not mentioned in this lesson, since for many Adventists, and Christians in general, this is considered a primitive, even "pagan" concept unworthy of the enlightened. Even so, it is central to the Bible's understanding of our dire condition.

Ellen White contrasts Christ's righteousness, as opposed to our "own best good works." The lesson does not give a definition of the phrase, "righteousness by faith." Is it entirely outside of us, as an "alien righteousness" completed 2000 years ago by Jesus Christ, or lived in us today? The author rejects those works done with the help of the Holy Spirit as justifying us before God. That is well and good, and if "alien righteousness" is what the author means, he stands opposed to many of Ellen White's statements.

In *Selected Messages* book 1, Mrs. White distinguishes between mere "justification," or pardoning of sin (6 BC 1070), and "righteousness by faith," which includes the bringing of Christ's righteousness into the heart and behavior of the believer, resulting in personal victory over sin. One must look at many EGW statements to understand her meanings, because she often appears to blend what *has been done outside* of us in Christ, and is being performed by the Spirit *now in our lives*, together as

one process. This brings confusion to many believers. Here is an example from Mrs. White where “righteousness by faith” means what God does in us now:

“Genuine faith appropriates the righteousness of Christ, and the sinner is made an overcomer with Christ.” (1SM 363)

“We can be fitted for heaven only through the work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart; for we must have Christ's righteousness as our credentials if we would find access to the Father.” (1SM 374)

Again, she applies the term to the process of sanctification, not to the finished work of Christ.

Plainly, she states that our access to God's presence derives from a righteousness working in our lives today by the Holy Spirit. Some of her statements give confidence, others will then take it away. Her theology agrees more closely with Roman Catholic teaching, where justification is a process that includes cleansing the soul by sanctifying grace. Access to God is based on a combination of our merits and his, working together. Even though Ellen White never called it “our merits,” she meant a righteousness that resides in us, and it relies on the quality of our repentance and will.

The book of Hebrews also speaks plainly why we can boldly enter God's presence. There you will find phrases such as, “once and for all,” or, “He sat down.” (More about that next lesson) So we have confidence, not because of our victories, but because “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” (Hebrews 10:14) It's all done, forever. So we are confident that God will finish the good work in us that he began at our New Birth, because he could finish the work for us in Christ's perfect life, death, and resurrection. If we rely on the incomplete work that's in us, even 1%, we will have reason to fear.

Much easier than trying to sort out the many nuances of Ellen White's statements, is to simply read Romans 3:21 for what it plainly says:

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”

This justifying righteousness gains us access to God, now and always. It is apart from law, meaning it is “alien;” it is safe in Heaven where we can't spoil it, and it does not rise or fall in value with our behavior.

Summary

- The human problem is neither physical nor behavioral. It is our dead spirits in rebellion against God.
- The spiritual cure needed is found in the completed life and righteousness of Christ, which can become ours now and forever, by faith.
- Many of us have been taught that “righteousness by faith” means sanctification, but they also know they are not “fitted for Heaven.” Our assurance is found in His word: “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.” John 6:37

Day 3: Monday, March 2, 2009

Today's lesson asks what we can learn about the plan of salvation from Moses, and about the ongoing work of salvation. It cites Hebrews 9:1-8, and answers that the sanctuary provided a graphic illustration for sinners of the “plan of salvation.” Several texts are used (Heb. 8:1,2; and Heb. 9:23) to show that Christ ministers in the heavenly sanctuary, and that the heavenly sanctuary needed cleansing. On the Day of Atonement, a day of judgment, the earthly tabernacle was cleansed. Likewise at the last judgment before Christ comes, the heavenly sanctuary must be cleansed. Because our final Day of Atonement features the blood of Christ to atone for us, we can be encouraged in facing this judgment.

The purpose of this pre-Advent judgment is to reveal “to the universe those who have professed Christ and are really His followers.” The records of heaven will become available for all the inhabited worlds to see that in every decision God was just and fair. This will vindicate his justice in saving his followers. God's reputation is at stake in the cosmic controversy between Christ and Satan, and we can join God's ranks to defeat the enemy of life.

Problems

Instead of making a comparison of two days of judgment, Hebrews 9 draws a stark contrast between the Old and New Covenants. In the old tabernacle, the priests had to offer sacrifices continually, over and over, without ever giving the worshipper a perfect conscience. “But when Christ appeared...He entered the holy places once for all, having obtained eternal

redemption.” Once for all and perfectly adequate is the unique sacrifice of Christ. The point of Hebrews 9 is not to draw a fine illustration of salvation from the old sanctuary. Rather, its services are weak and inadequate to cleanse the conscience and do away with sin. This is the grand theme of Hebrews, to draw such contrasts between the infinitely superior Christ and the weak, temporary Law of Moses. (Hebrews 8:13)

What is Jesus’ ministry in heaven? First, here is Ellen White’s description:

“For eighteen centuries this work of ministration continued in the first apartment of the sanctuary. The blood of Christ, pleaded in behalf of penitent believers, secured their pardon and acceptance with the Father, yet their sins still remained upon the books of record.” (GC88, 421)

Then according to Hebrews 8, 9, and 10: “We have such a high priest” who sits at God’s right hand. “Such,” is quite the loaded word! He is not standing, but is sitting as God’s equal, and because his work is finished. He can take us into God’s presence and anchor us there forever. There is no veil, we have total access (John saw no veil in Revelation). He has perfected us forever. His promises are better than those of Moses and the Law. His glory fills the universe, while the Old Covenant is growing old and becoming obsolete, and ready to vanish away.” (Heb. 8:13)

Hebrews 9:23 is a key proof text for the investigative judgment, for it seems to imply that there is defilement in heaven that needs cleansing. The verse makes sense when we look at the rest of the chapter. Verses 19-22 show that when the Mosaic Covenant was inaugurated, nearly everything was sprinkled with blood of the covenant. This included the tent, the vessels, even the scroll of the law. The scroll was not defiled with sin, yet it was sprinkled with blood.

When God made his covenant with Abraham, it was inaugurated with blood to show that its violation must be paid with bloodshed. When Jesus took the cup, he said, “This cup...is the new covenant in my blood.” So the heavenly things, the whole cosmos, are also brought under the New Covenant with blood, for Christ reconciled “to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” (Col. 1:20) There is nothing in Hebrews about our sins remaining on the “books of record,” as this would contradict the glorious message of Hebrews 10; “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified...I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.” Heb. 10:14, 17. Our sins do not remain on any books of record, nor do they defile heaven. They are no more.

The Study Guide states that the purpose of the “pre-Advent judgment” is to reveal God’s justice to a watching universe, showing that his judgments are fair (The modern version departs from Ellen White, who stated that our characters must be perfect or we would fail the test). The first assumption here is that God is on trial in a great controversy between Christ and Satan. This doctrine elevates Satan to divine status, that he can oppose God’s purposes and force God to defend himself in a pitched battle of near equals. God finally wins, by a whisker. In the Bible, Satan is unable to thwart God’s purposes and words: “...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose.” (Isa. 55:11)

The second assumption is that there are countless myriads of alien, unfallen beings who are uncertain about God’s justice and require a demonstration of his character. Where is the evidence for these beings in scripture? There is no such evidence anywhere (you can read my discussion on this in Proclamation! Jan/Feb 2007). Without these beings existing, the audience for God’s “trial” is much smaller, Satan’s importance is reduced, and the great controversy no longer appears so great.

Summary

- Hebrews 9 draws a sharp contrast between the Mosaic and New covenants, showing Christ’s total superiority in obtaining for us an eternal redemption by his single sacrifice, while the Old Covenant is weak and ready to disappear.
- Jesus’ ministry in the sanctuary is to sit at God’s right hand as our substitute, hold us next to God’s presence, and keep his promises to never let us go. He has put away our sins forever so that he has no memory of them.
- There is no “great controversy” and there is no biblical evidence for space aliens who need a character demonstration from God. There is only Christ, who’s word will not return to him empty, and that is a promise.

Day 4: Tuesday, March 3, 2009

This lesson attempts to show how the Sabbath was ordained from creation to be the central institution of worship for Christians, that it is a particular object of attack by Satan, and that it measures our attitude towards God.

The author asks, what is it about the Sabbath commandment that stands out? He answers, it is a “test commandment” that reveals our spirituality. As a uniquely non-material entity, existing only as a span of time, it is ideal to measure our attitude towards God. It is also the only commandment that is acceptable to break in a Christian society such as ours. This is because it does not have any obvious logic to it, such as not stealing or murdering, and you don’t have to be a Christian to obey those rules. Keeping an apparently arbitrary Sabbath command reveals our willingness to obey God, as an act of faith.

Lastly, we should keep the Sabbath to commemorate Creation, and demonstrate to the world our assurance of Christ's salvation for us, "not just daily, but also in a special way each week." Sabbath keeping expresses our rest in Christ. The "Learning Cycle" section also mentions that controversies among Adventists over the practices of Sabbath-keeping can be informed by remembering the themes of creation and redemption.

Problems

The starting assumption for Sabbath-keeping requires an eternal, universal Ten Commandments that apply for all times and places. It is significant that in Genesis the seventh day is not called Sabbath, for only God observes that day without evening or morning. There is no Sabbath command given to Adam and Eve, and there is no record of anyone in Genesis observing it. It is not part of the covenant with Abraham. It is not commanded to humans until Exodus 16:23 when the manna was given. "The Lord **did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us...**(Deut. 5:2,3)." It arrived with the Sinai covenant, not before.

The Ten Commandments were the "words of the covenant (Ex. 34:28)." The Law and the Sinai covenant are one, and they began with Moses (Gal. 3:17). This covenant ended with Christ when he gave both Jews and gentiles a new covenant in his blood, along with a new sign to remember him (I Cor. 11:25). The Sabbath was therefore made at a specific time for a specific species (man), a certain race (the Jews), for the appointed time. It was "made for man;" not for angels, not for space aliens, only man. Its time ended at the death of the "Seed" (Gal. 3:19), who is the Sabbath's Lord, the real "bread from heaven." Therefore, it is not universal.

Where does it state in the Bible that the Sabbath is to reveal our spiritual condition? It is the word of God that reveals the "thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). Christians are judged by their acceptance of the free gift of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. There is nothing arbitrary about that. We cannot say we celebrate the Sabbath as a sign of our assurance of salvation, then remove that assurance by making the Sabbath a test of faith. We have assurance because there is but one test, faith in Christ's finished work.

The lesson cites Hebrews 4 as a source of rest and assurance, but it misses the main point. The chapter is not a call to return to the Law. Hebrews is a book of contrasts between the old and new covenants, and the new is always "better." We have a better revelation, better covenant, better sacrifice, better promises, and in Hebrews 4, a better Sabbath. The old covenant could not give rest, that is only found in a person who commanded us to come to him for rest.

The gospel promise of entering his rest was made to Israel in Moses' and Joshua's time, but they did not enter because of unbelief. They had been given the Sabbath, and later in Canaan "the Lord had given them rest on every side" (Joshua 21:43). The kind of rest offered in Hebrews 4 was not found in military strength or in a Sabbath day for they had both those things, and they had not entered. What they sought they did not find, for they only looked for a physical rest. They could stop work and travel, but they did not believe. They needed rest for their souls.

What eluded them is the "*Sabbatismos*," a unique word in the Bible meaning Sabbath-like rest, and it is far better than any offered by Moses, Joshua, or King David. So "again he appoints a certain day, Today...Today, if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts." (Hebrews 4:7) They did harden their hearts, so another day of opportunity was appointed. "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest (*Sabbatismos*) for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his." (Hebrews 4:8-10)

Summary

1. When we hear his voice in the gospel of Christ, we are given living faith to believe it, and made a new creation by the Holy Spirit.
2. Our beginning is no longer back in Eden on the 6th day. We have died to that history, it is finished. We have died to the Law on the Cross, and we serve in "new way of the Spirit" (Rom. 7:4).
3. For us Christians, the beginning of history is an empty tomb, and our Rest now sits at God's right hand.

Day 5: Wednesday, March 4, 2009

The lesson begins with the statement that God alone has immortality, and with that, Christians can agree. In him only is life, and all things are upheld by the word of his power. The lesson then makes a sharp departure from the rest of Christianity with the sweeping claim that any view of a non-physical existence after death, apart from the body, is a notion common to "primal, animistic, and polytheistic religions." The author calls this, "human immortality." The Greeks also held to a shadowy existence in Hades, the place where the souls of the dead lived, released from the prison of their bodies.

The lesson then jumps into the question of Hell: Do Matthew 25:46 and Revelation 14:9-11 teach eternal torment in Hell? The words, "everlasting," and "for ever" don't necessarily mean never ending. The Greek words *aion* and *aionios*

“express duration as long as the nature of the subject allows.” Examples are given in Jude, where Sodom and Gomorrah are punished with eternal fire. The same word is used to describe the lives of the redeemed in Heaven, in which case it means time without end. When it is used to describe to the punishment of the wicked, it means a limited time period.

Problems

God alone has immortality, and in the Bible, that word is used to describe resurrected bodies that have souls, not disembodied entities. A dead spirit does not have life, in that it has no communion with God, even though it is capable of sin.

The lesson makes a sweeping generalization that any notion of a non-material existence after death is primal, animistic, etc., and appears in Greek mythology. This “guilt by association” argument fails to acknowledge several realities. First, we can just as easily condemn the author’s materialistic view of man by finding unsavory associations with other Greek philosophers such as Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius (“Religion lies cast beneath our feet”), and in modern times, Marxism, atheism, most of the Western academy, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Materialism lowers the value of man to an animal, and has an idolatrous and bloody history.

The Bible freely uses the terms soul and spirit, and there are serious problems with the Adventist argument that spirit = breath. If we insert the word “breath” everywhere in the Bible where that spirit is translated, we have difficulty. In the Old Testament, the human spirit has feelings. Pharaoh has a dream, “It happened in the morning that his spirit was troubled” (Gen. 41:8). And in Exodus 6:9, “but they didn’t listen to Moses for anguish of spirit.”

The spirit of man includes his thoughts. Proverbs 20:27 says, “The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all the innermost parts of his being.” Try inserting “breath” into that sentence. This reminds us of Paul in I Cor. 2:11, “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so, the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.”

The story of Saul seeking Samuel’s spirit through the witch of Endor is only hard to explain if you have a materialist’s view of life after death. There is nothing in the story that indicates that this was a satanic deception. The spirit is called “Samuel,” and the character of the spirit is true to Samuel. Everything he told Saul was either true then, or a true prophecy for the future. None of that has Satan’s mark. It is true that consulting mediums was forbidden by God, but being sovereign over Satan, God could turn Saul’s folly to his own purposes. That spirit spoke the words of God, just as Samuel did in life.

Jesus himself made it plain that the new birth is an event that requires our possession of a non-material entity. He told Nicodemus, “that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Try inserting breath into that statement. If spirit is only breath, then the new birth is only some kind of physical transformation, and that flies in the face of the NT. Romans 8:5 tells us that there is nothing in our flesh that desires God, or can know him. Only if we have a spirit (Romans 8:16) can his Spirit bear witness to us that we are children of God. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned (I Cor. 2:14). That is why we must worship him in spirit and truth (John 4:24). God, as a spirit, does not commune with flesh.

Regarding Hades In the NT, Jesus uses this Greek term for the place of the dead, Hades, fully aware of how his listeners heard it. He described hell, where there is conscious, eternal torment.

It is a place of outer darkness where men will weep and gnash their teeth (Matt. 25:30). It is a place of eternal fire (Matt. 25:41). There is eternal punishment for wicked, and eternal life for the righteous, a clear parallel, giving a strong hint as to why an eternal hell is real. It is a place of unquenchable fire where the “worm does not die” (Mark 9:43, 48). Luke 16 tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar. Here is yet another story in the Bible that Adventists claim is not true, though there is no indication it is metaphor or symbolism. In this story, hell is a place of torment, and Jesus paints that picture deliberately.

If the lesson is right, in that *aion* and *aionios* “express duration as long as the nature of the subject allows,” then some are raised to everlasting destruction by God’s power. That would be their nature that God allows. A short, “merciful” time of punishment trivializes sin. Grudem points out that if a short punishment is enough to pay for the sins of the wicked, then afterward they should be permitted to enter heaven. The cost of sin is of such magnitude, only God could pay the penalty. (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1150)

Probably the strongest objections to an eternal hell are based on the justice and love of God. We can only trust in his infinite wisdom and mercy, knowing the horror of sin that God feels, to appreciate its necessary penalty. We can remember the sadness for the lost found in God: “...turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?” We are also reminded of the exceeding value of eternal life. Whatever our conclusions on this subject, we can take confidence that “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all” (I John 1:5).

Summary

- Jesus gave a promise to Martha when Lazarus died, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” That is the meaning of eternal life.
- We can have eternal life now (Jn. 5:24), and “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28).
- The question everyone must answer: “Do you believe this?”

Day 6: Thursday, March 4, 2009

Today's lesson looks at the manner of Christ's coming, why it is important, and what deceptions Jesus warned us about. The Adventist understanding of the Second Coming is "far different" from some accounts of end time events, such as the "Late Great Planet Earth," and the "Left Behind" series by Hal Lindsay. Adventists also believe in the nearness of His coming, it is part of their identity. What does the Bible teach? The reference texts are Matthew 24:5, 24-31, and Revelation 1:7.

A particular doctrine that concerns Adventists is the "secret rapture," introduced by John Darby in the 19th century. This doctrine separates the coming of Christ into two stages, where the first stage has the true Christians being caught up seven years before the public appearing of Christ. The author states that Adventists find no scriptural evidence for such a separation of events: the Second Coming is one event that is visible and audible. We are reminded of Jesus' warning about false interpretations and predictions.

Problems

Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!
Why would you have the day of the LORD?
It is darkness, and not light... Amos 5:18

Books and movies featuring end times have swept the Christian church today, and have helped to satisfy the hungry curiosity for details of the last events. There is tremendous speculation in these works to fill the knowledge gaps left by the words of Jesus. The author is right to point to the warning of Jesus about predicting details of his coming, "He is here, he is there!"

John Piper pointed out that when we construct a detailed pattern of end time events, and expect that pattern to unfold according to our expectations, we are setting up our hopes for failure, for a crisis of faith (John Piper, "Misgivings About Hal Lindsay's 'Planet Earth'", 1974). Many Christians today look to the news, intensely focused on political struggles and military conflicts, and find confirmation for their speculations there. But Jesus' warnings have a different focus, knowing him and caring for our neighbor.

There is a need for humility all around. We are reminded of a certain preacher back in the 1830's who constructed an elaborate chart of prophecy, replete with calculations and specific dates of Christ's arrival. The early Advent movement lived and breathed apocalyptic speculation, and when Jesus did not arrive on time, they reworked the calculations again and again, with more disappointments, stretching into the 1850's. They finally had to change the location of Christ's (invisible, inaudible) coming into a room in heaven. "He is here!" morphed into "He is there!"

Since that time, like many other Christians, many Adventists continue to watch the news for fulfillment of their detailed patterns of prophecy, and becoming excited by events such as both world wars, and the election of JFK, the Roman Catholic president. Each of these was to usher in the time of trouble. Many Christians have stopped looking for (or hoping for) positive events, and become obsessed with disasters and conflicts, while often neglecting the seeking of peace with all men (Rom. 12:18) and caring for their neighbors.

We Christians are often like Jonah, sitting outside the city, hoping for calamity to vindicate our predictions. Amos warned us about hoping for the disastrous day of darkness, the day of the Lord, "Why would you have the day of the LORD?" He called for his people, and us, to instead "establish justice in the gate" (Amos 5:15).

With the author of the lesson, I also find no solid scriptural support for a separate coming of Christ to take a select few. This doctrine does not parallel the intense longing of Christ to save "to the uttermost," until the very last second of earth's history. I also remember, as a young Adventist, the thrilling stories of running into the hills, just ahead of the guns and barking dogs of the Sunday keepers. There was much talk of preparation for that day. The passion to seek and save the lost evaporated.

Summary

- There are many real followers of Jesus who will disagree with a single stage coming, who have studied this much more than I have.
Where we can gather in fellowship is over the bread and the cup, remembering the blood and sacrifice for the lost and dangerous like us, and that he is with us "until the end of the world."
- We are not given a spirit of fear, but adoption.

Day 7: Friday, March 5, 2009

In the final lesson of the week we are directed to further study, beginning with righteousness by faith as taught in Adventist history. The author states that the early Adventist movement became “imbalanced” in its emphasis on law. Then, in 1888, Waggoner and Jones presented a “righteousness by faith” that can be obtained as a “real, personal experience,” not just “a dry theory.” This righteousness comes by faith in Christ’s sacrifice alone, and not from works. Apparently, the church’s understanding on salvation became properly balanced after that.

The author asks if there is any doctrine held by Adventists which is not based on the Bible alone, but on Ellen White. If they believe in the Bible alone, he asks, why is Mrs. White so helpful in understanding the Bible?

Problems

This lesson’s own statements can help us understand how Adventists became “unbalanced” in their understanding of salvation. The A.V. Olson statement speaks of righteousness by faith as a “real personal experience,” not a “dry theory.” In Lesson 2, we learned that when Ellen White spoke of righteousness by faith, she was referring to the believer receiving the righteousness of Christ into their lives in the form of overcoming sin, with the help of the Holy Spirit. This is not the “alien righteousness” which Christ lived for us 2000 years ago. It is not what Paul says is a righteousness apart from the law. It is the “real personal experience” of sanctification.

If Adventists want to understand how the confusion never seems to leave them over the roles of law and grace, they might look at statements like these:

“Those who are living upon the earth when the intercession of Christ shall cease in the sanctuary above, are to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator. Their robes must be spotless; their characters must be purified from sin by the blood of sprinkling. Through the grace of God and their own diligent effort, they must be conquerors in the battle with evil.” (GC p. 425)

This statement teaches that we must become less dependent on God’s grace and Christ’s finished work as we perfect our characters, for in the end, Christ will abandon us as high priest and mediator. Although we begin our journey of salvation “justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28), just before Christ comes, we need to be justified by God’s grace plus “diligent effort.”

Is there any Adventist teaching that is derived from Ellen White alone? This teaching that at some point, Christ will no longer serve as our high priest and mediator, comes only from Ellen White, and not from the Bible. In Hebrews, we learn that Jesus is our high priest because he has an unending life:

“The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Heb. 7:24, 25)

Summary

Once the Adventist realizes that his Savior is also his ever-living mediator that will never abandon him, especially at the end, he has reason to dance and shout. He may feel obligated to keep the Sabbath and eat vegetarian, but he now has that “steadfast anchor of the soul” that reaches through the heavens to within the veil, behind the inner curtain (Heb. 6:19). There is where we find our balanced perspective, not by carefully positioning ourselves halfway between God’s grace and our works. We wholly lean on Jesus’ name. Living works can only spring from the steadfast assurance that our God can save to the uttermost.