The Last Generation: How the Advent Hope Defines Us

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The last generation: *How the Advent hope defines us*

I hope to be among the last generation on earth when Jesus returns. As an Adventist Christian, I long to see Jesus; and I believe our Savior will physically return. Now in my 60s, strong in my faith that death is only a rest until He comes, my longing for the imminence of His return continues. My desire for an end to sin and the consequent suffering that destroys life on this earth has only increased with the passing of years.

The term “last generation” evokes differing mental images. For some, the term introduces the horrifying reality of earth’s inability to infinitely sustain life; for others, the devastating destruction of nuclear warfare; and for others, an impending cosmic calamity. Ironically, for those who anticipate the return of Christ, these fearful predications are themselves affirmations of Christ’s return, and they sustain our hope to be among the last generation.

**Promises of the Second Advent**

As others do, I often review the promises of Jesus’ return provided within Scripture. “‘In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also’” (John 14:2, 3). When Jesus ascended from this earth, angels proclaimed the promise of His return: “‘This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven’” (Acts 1:11). The earliest believers in Christ were comforted with the promise just as we are:

> Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:51–55).

I find it helpful to rehearse these and many other familiar Bible passages that proclaim the return of our Lord (for example, 2 Thess. 1:10; 1 Cor. 3:13; Rev. 22:7). The blessed hope (Titus 2:13), the return of Jesus, is central to my faith and to that of others who share biblically grounded Christian beliefs. I readily confess there are times when secular concerns, disappointments, suffering, or the sinfulness of this world assault my confidence in the promises of the second coming of Jesus. At such times the Holy Spirit uses these inspired texts to keep the blessed hope alive in my soul. All of us disciples of Jesus must constantly reinforce the blessed hope with these assurances from Scripture.

**The problem of time**

Time is a problem for us. We have waited, and our hope for Christ’s return has subsequently moved from expectation to disappointment. I recall the lament of a faithful uncle who had experienced the great American Depression in the 1930s, World War II, nuclear fears during the cold war, and countless calamities. He had given a lifetime of Christian service, but in the end felt let down; that belief in the return of Christ seemed a vain hope. For some, the response to waiting has been to seize on some means for controlling the determined moment of Christ’s return rather than submitting to His providence, as though we might, through some effort of our own, become that last generation.

We are a bit like the disappointed disciples of Jesus who treasured the idea of the restoration of the glory of Israel in their lifetime. Ellen White’s account of their confusion as Jesus turned to Jerusalem and the cross reveals that Jesus attempted to nurture their longing for the kingdom...
into enduring trust in His providence. She wrote of their experience, “Then for their encouragement He gave the promise, ‘Verily, I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in His kingdom.’ But the disciples did not comprehend His words. The glory seemed far away. Their eyes were fixed upon the nearer view, the earthly life of poverty, humiliation, and suffering. Must their glowing expectations of the Messiah’s kingdom be relinquished?”

How shall we relate to our hope? Faced with waiting, hope creates tension. This tension does not constitute something negative; rather, this tension is positive, even necessary. The tension challenges us to exercise faith while living as His good stewards (Matt. 24:45–51) in the present time, actively and joyfully caring for His household. Jesus apparently recognized, even nurtured, that tension by providing signs of His coming that every generation has observed as harbingers of His return.

**Signs of the Second Advent**

Since my childhood, events in the natural world and affairs of our society have been noted as signs of Christ’s soon coming. These events have provided a source of encouragement in one sense. Sabbath School teachers, pastors, a succession of evangelists, and even my mother all described natural disasters, political and religious events of importance, and the increase of knowledge in our society as certain signs of Jesus’ soon coming. Though such signs often are in the context of horrific human suffering, the words of Jesus serve to remind us during such times that He is coming to put an end to this age.

To recognize these events as signs is not simply wishful thinking. Jesus taught that such events are signs of His return: “‘wars and rumors of wars’” (Matt. 24:6); “‘famines and earthquakes in various places’” (v. 7); “‘false prophets will arise and lead many astray’” (v. 11); “‘lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold’” (v. 12); and then my favorite, “‘And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come’” (v. 14). These and many other Bible references to signs on earth or in the expanses of our environment affirm, and create, a sense of the imminence of Christ’s return as years pass.

But time has become a problem for us. Reflection on the redundancy of these signs as my years advanced led me to examine the urgency of my hopes in light of the providence of God. Jesus did caution us to understand that there is an appointed time that we do not know. “‘See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet’” (v. 6). “‘All these are but the beginning of the birth pains’” (v. 8).

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“‘But the one who endures to the end will be saved’” (v. 13). “‘Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming’” (v. 42). Believers in Thessalonica were cautioned to wait expectantly but without identifying the day of Christ’s return (2 Thess. 2). Jesus apparently intended for us to rehearse the promise of His coming daily but to trust in His providence while caring for His household—the world and its citizens, whom He so passionately wishes to redeem.

Theological tension

In her work on the life of Jesus, Ellen White cautioned Christian disciples: “But the day and the hour of His coming Christ has not revealed. He stated plainly to His disciples that He Himself could not make known the day or the hour of His second appearing. . . . The exact time of the second coming of the Son of man is God’s mystery.”

In the earliest years of my pastoral ministry I came to realize the importance of both nurturing the blessed hope and avoiding sensationalizing that hope. Generations of Christians have waited expectantly. In their hope of Jesus’ return, people can be manipulated through the coming and passing of current events. Some become skilled at manipulating these events. The news from any particular day can be heralded as the last warning, and fear may fill empty church pews.

Certainly, God wishes us to hold on to His promise. We should reflect on His Word constantly. However, we can so sensationalize every devastating earthquake, every outbreak of human violence, and every political or religious event that it eventually undermines faith. Our need is to affirm the inspiration of Scripture, proclaim the gospel, magnify the love of God, so that every reoccurrence of these signs serves as a reminder that our Lord promised to return and will return.

Is this caution a threat to our faith? No. No one comes to Christ through fear. Some may come to the church or to a decision to exercise greater moral resolve through fear. But I am convinced through the Spirit-led testimony of Scripture and years of working with people that love draws one to Christ, and love has a far greater power than fear. “Hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (v. 8). “Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:17–20). Love sanctifies: “For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 5:14, 15).

If received, this caution regarding how we regard the signs of Christ’s coming will, in fact, strengthen our church and its mission, not weaken it. Truth is powerful. And the truth? We do not know when Christ will return (Matt. 24:44), nor are we to know. Just as I believe He is coming very soon (and the signs encourage me in that belief!), so my great-grandmother believed. And if we are still here on this earth a century from now, I hope and pray my great-grandchildren will treasure that hope will dim.

The last generation

After years of serving God’s church, my observation is that faithful stewardship in the proper tension with hopeful expectancy yields to the control of our human need. The transition is a subtle one, clothed in spiritual language, but nonetheless human in nature. We drift to believing we influence the determined time of the return of Christ, believing we have delayed His return or can hasten His return. Clothed in religious tones, this provides the control we need.

Thus, we drift from believing His coming is so near that we are the last generation to believe that we may become, by our own efforts, the last generation. This seems honorable. We determine within ourselves to be a people of a special quality, a distinct people like the world has never before known, fit for the return of Christ. We certainly pray earnestly for that transformation. To be more like Christ is the longing of our hearts. And, as the Scripture affirms, the longer we follow Jesus, the more His transforming work will be experienced: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). Exegesis of the text suggests Paul’s ambiguous sense of reflecting the righteousness of Christ while, at the same time, experiencing continuing and progressive transformation provided by the Holy Spirit. No sense in the text exists suggesting that work has an ending point.

Rightly understood, the ongoing transformative work of the Holy Spirit helps us understand the mission of the church. That is, the call of the church to gather a people who are becoming more and more like Jesus while anticipating the day of His return. Ellen White wrote, “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.”

Careful attention to her thought is important. She states in the same context: “By giving the gospel to the world it is in our power to hasten our Lord’s return.” The context of these comments is her reflection on the intention of God for the mission of the church. We are to gather people who are being transformed as they anticipate and long for the return of the Lord. We do not satisfy our mission by issuing warnings but by leading people to Jesus. She
underscores the mission the church is to engage in and suggests that the end of this history could have been before our time had that work been faithfully done. Several points are worth noting when examining her thought: (1) this refers to a sign—the worldwide preaching of the gospel; (2) the thoughts are not formed as a reference to a supposed higher spiritual nature of God’s people; and (3) there is no reference to the human moral condition being determinative. White’s thoughts reflect on the call to mission. In the context, she repeats the several biblical references to the gospel being carried to the entire world before Jesus returns.

It is compelling to note, and important to repeat, that the aforementioned thoughts responded to Jesus’ speaking of the call to disciples for engagement in mission. Waiting for Jesus to return means caring for His household, sharing the gospel, sharing His love. Waiting is not idleness nor focused on self. Indeed, Jesus called us to be a selfless and serving church as we wait.

Believing we become the last generation by our own spiritual performance produces a focus on ourselves. Inevitably, such a focus leads us to moralism and perfectionism as ends in themselves and as substitutes for faith and humble proclamation of the grace of God. The vital tension of faith with a transformed life can be lost. The message of the last generation is the love of God, His grace, His redeeming power, the call to serve as enduring stewards of His household in the present time, and joy in the promise of His return.

**Conclusion**

Long for the return of Jesus! Rejoice in the promise of His return! At the same time, knowing this is God’s world, be active in the concerns that impact human experience. Share the gospel. Be engaged in issues of poverty, climate, health care, pollution, hunger, and violence. We are His stewards, servants of the One who has redeemed us, who is risen from the grave, who ministers for us in heavenly places, and is returning. Serve in love and joy! I long to be among the last generation. Perhaps you do as well. In His providence, it may be the next generation, or generations from now. We do not know when He will return. Nor do we need to know.

He will come at a time we do not expect (Matt. 24:44). The conditions on earth affirm that the Second Advent is near. Could Jesus return today? That question creates some tension. We anticipate a time of trouble greater than the world has known (Mark 13:19) while we acknowledge that for many of God’s children on this earth, that time is here. The last generation may be surprised by His appearing!

This we do know: Jesus is coming again. Time is not a problem for God. The redeemed will give Him glory and welcome Him with joy at the appointed time.

Meanwhile, let us be about our Father’s business. 

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1 All scripture references are from the English Standard Version.
3 Ibid., 632, 633.
4 Ibid., 633, 634.
5 Ibid., 633.

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Preparation for His return

Now more than ever it is time to prepare the church for the return of Jesus Christ. Make no mistake—Jesus Christ will come again, and God has given us specific instructions regarding what we should do while we wait. As spiritual leaders, we have a special mission to teach and preach the Word.

We need to pay careful attention to the world around us while keeping the lightest possible hold on the things of this world. Obviously, we live in the world, but this doesn’t mean we have to be of the world. In other words, we should take care not to become so involved in the things of this life that we forget what really matters.

As we draw closer to Christ’s second coming, it is imperative that we are prepared and eagerly waiting. Indeed, we have entered the fearful end-time years that are the grand climax of human civilization. If ever there was a time to pay attention and get prepared, it is now.

If you have a real sense of Christ’s imminent return, it will also impact the way you live (1 John 3:3). God’s ultimate goal for your life on this earth is not comfort but character development. He wants you to grow up spiritually and become like Christ. He wants you to reflect His character in your daily life. “Christ is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His church.”

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* Ellen G. White, Christ’s Object Lessons, 69.