Living in expectation of the second coming of Jesus

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For two millennia Christians have prayed, “Thy kingdom come.” With awe and immense gratitude they have looked back to the first coming of Jesus, in which the whole course of human misery was changed. Now they look forward to a renewed earth, where death and tears will be wiped away and they can spend eternity with their beloved Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Contemporary Christians, like the disciples of Jesus, want to know exactly when Jesus will return. It is not easy to accept His declaration, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father” (Matt. 24:36, ESV). Yet Christians take comfort from one biblical text: “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God” (2 Pet. 3:12, ESV). Peter implies that Christians can actually hasten the waiting process and bring forward the coming of Jesus.

But how does one’s understanding of eschatology impact daily living? More importantly, how does a pastor help parishioners hasten the day that they long for?

The impact of eschatology on work

For Christians who have a postmillennial understanding (Jesus comes after the millennium) of the second coming of Jesus, the “how” of hastening this momentous event seems straightforward. This involves transforming our world, its governments, and its services under the guidance of the Holy Spirit into a place of peace and perfection ready for the reign of Jesus.

Swedish theologian Göran Agrell noted, “Variations in the view of work are related to different ways of looking at eschatology.” Miroslav Volf recognized the significant connection between eschatology and approaches to ordinary work and noted that there are two basic positions on the eschatological future of the world. Some [have] stressed radical discontinuity between the present and future orders, believing in the complete destruction of the present world at the end of the ages, and creation of a fully new world. Others postulated continuity between the two, believing that the present world will be transformed into the new heaven and new earth. Volf subscribes to the last view and offers a generally hopeful theology of human work that encourages all efforts that lead to the transformation of the world and thus usher in the millennium of peace prior to the return of Jesus.

Christian mission, meanwhile, has long been regarded as a major avenue to hasten the coming of Jesus. David W. Miller and David J. Bosch agree that Christian mission is, in essence, about transformation but in the context of millennialist theology. Miller says that mainstream Protestantism has embraced postmillennialism, with its emphasis on transforming society, but suggests that premillennialists have placed the emphasis on the saving of the individual soul. Miller does not discuss the possible dangers of a focus on the transformation of society, that is, the possibility of coercion might be employed in order to achieve what the majority perceive as perfection.

For many premillennialists (who believe that Jesus comes before the millennium), the saving of the individual soul is considered...
to culminate in (as some believe) a secret rapture, an individualistic focus of personal safety, and removal from the end-time horrors of this world. While the world stays enveloped in chaos and misery, the saved soul escapes to the glory of God.

Seventh-day Adventists are premillennialists, and they have placed a great deal of emphasis on the saving of individual souls. However, they argue that the context of Matthew 24:40, 41 (the unknown hour and the history of the days of Noah and the Flood) suggests preparation rather than the secret rapture.

But a premillennial focus on individual salvation could result in the perception that hastening the coming of Jesus is demonstrated in conversion statistics and church growth rates. Because this seems to be work for the trained pastor, it generally appears daunting or even irrelevant for the ordinary layperson.

The hastening strategies of Jesus

When Jesus’ disciples asked about the end of the age and He discussed His second coming with them, He did not seem to endorse either a transformation of the world or a specialist approach to soul saving (Matt. 24:3–14). He did not describe a transformed society and clearly indicated that the problems of natural disasters (earthquakes and famines) and human-fueled calamities (wars and rumors of wars) would continue until the end. However, He does indicate that the most significant sign of the imminence of His return would be the proclamation of the gospel to all the world, yet apparently without offering strategies for achieving this.

However, Jesus closed His discourse with the three well-known parables in Matthew 25 that do offer strategies: the ten virgins, emphasizing being ready, and especially having the oil of the Holy Spirit in each believer’s life; the talents, indicating the good stewardship of the servants of the man going on a journey by their use and improvement of the abilities each was given; and, finally, the parable of the judgment of the sheep and the goats, which highlights the activity of the good servants.

The surprise of these parables is their focus on the ordinary, everyday work of the servants and that good servants do ordinary things. They feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome strangers, visit prisoners, and give water to the thirsty. The activities are so ordinary that the righteous have no realization of having done anything important. Lord, when did we feed you or clothe you? they ask in shock.

Encouraging the ordinary parishioner

Pastors interested in the salvation of individual souls rightly encourage their parishioners to become actively involved in gospel-sharing outreach activities. But the discourse of Jesus indicates that the pinnacle of secondcoming hastening activity is found in kindly involvement with other people and their needs. This involvement is not an extra activity that good people do after they have attended to their routine work activities but rather is simply how these servants, those blessed by their Master, approach their life and work. They care about others, whether they are thirsty or hungry; in need of clothing, health care, or comfort; or in need of spiritual food. Their relationship to others demonstrates they are citizens in God’s kingdom and reflects their relationship with Jesus.

This means that car mechanics hasten the coming of Jesus by offering the best possible service at reasonable pricing to those whose vehicles are not performing well, thus blessing the owners. It means plumbers fix the leaky pipes of elderly widows cheerfully, and maybe at a reduced cost. It means that schoolteachers not only offer information but also recognize that the troublesome student in their class is a child coping with severe family dysfunction and in urgent need of love and support. It means that the city employee, paid to collect rubbish, willingly picks up the scattered mess of a trashcan overturned by a carelessly backed car or perhaps waits a few seconds while a tired and tardy shift worker drags a can of rubbish to the curbside. It means, simply, that whatever these people do, while waiting eagerly for the coming of their Lord, they do it with love and care, and with all their might (Eccles. 9:10). They are actually transforming the world, making heaven a little closer for those with whom they come in contact. Of course, their care of others includes sharing the good news of the gospel whenever they have the appropriate opportunity.

An ancient command

This approach to life fulfills an ancient command. When God called Abram from the culture of Ur of the Chaldeans, the call consisted of seven blessings. At the center of God’s call was a command, Be a blessing! Rather than the text being a passive you will be a blessing, this call is an imperative. Abram was called to leave his own world and enter one where he could work to be a blessing to others. To be a blessing means not only kindliness but also the development of appropriate expertise, as demonstrated in the narrative of Joseph and his work in Egypt, first with Potiphar, then in the prison, and finally as a senior official working for the good of the whole kingdom.
Jesus’ parable of the sheep and goats endorses this approach to life. While the greatest blessing that can be offered another person is the good news of Christ’s death, not everyone is immediately ready to receive it. Jesus’ own life showed a dedicated commitment to offering practical blessing to humans of all ages, nationalities, and genders. For much of His life, He performed the work of a tradesman, assisting people with their practical needs. A carpenter of His day was involved with the work of a builder, cabinetmaker, toolmaker, and mechanic. The extended time Jesus spent on these practical duties indicates the importance He ascribed to them in meeting the ordinary needs of people. Even when He began His public ministry, He did not confine His work to preaching but, by His practical work of healing, showed how much He cared about people’s suffering.

Jesus’ own life thus clearly shows that meeting the practical needs of people opened their hearts to receive the good news of His saving power. Although the witness of His public work supports the value of a health ministry as a tool to reach the needs and hearts of people, the hidden years of His life in Nazareth indicate that He was fulfilling the command given to Abram 2,000 years earlier (“Be a blessing!”) by faithfully carrying out His ordinary work as a carpenter.

Reaching the postmodern heart cry

Ideologies of various colors and descriptions clamor to be regarded as the answer to human misery, from the dogmas of Lenin and Mao to New Age philosophies. Christianity can be easily regarded as just one of these numerous competing dogmas or, worse, relegated to the status of an outdated ideology responsible for war and international misunderstanding.

Truly, Seventh-day Adventists, as premillennialists, have a deep interest in individual salvation. They long for the good news to be proclaimed throughout the world. But they also recognize that the soil of each heart must be prepared before the seed of the gospel can be received and grow.

Postmodern people, like everyone else, feel an intense need to have the problems of their lives solved. The postmodern slogan, What is right is what is right for me, has an element of truth. When people are starving, they need food; when they are sick, they need health care; when they are lonely, they need a friend. Meeting these needs when we can is what God’s righteous people do and how they can hasten the Second Coming. They mingle with people in the course of their daily work and seek to understand and meet the needs of those around them. Then they can share the good news of Jesus and bid people “Follow Him.”

The work of a pastor becomes that of coach, but not purely coaching people in associate pastoral duties. The pastor shows each person how they can use their regular duties as opportunities to minister. The pastor takes the deep doctrines of the Bible and translates them into parables that his or her parishioners can live out in their daily lives.

When did we?

The most striking thing about the hastening activities of the righteous is that the performers were completely unconscious of what they had done. They do not add good deeds to their already overloaded programs. Doing good to others is simply part of their total commitment to Jesus and is so programmed into their approach to life that it becomes second nature. They talk to others about Jesus because He is their friend, and if no one wants to listen, they still pray. Their focus remains on their Savior and not on their own performance, critical though that may be for sharing the good news with others. “Even so, come, Lord Jesus is both their focus and their cry from the depths of their hearts (Rev. 22:20).
References:


2 Miroslav Volf, Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 89.


6 C. Marvin Pate et al., The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 37.

7 Laurence A. Turner, Genesis (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 64.

Expectation of second coming. A. Overwhelming Biblical evidence of expected second coming 1. Referred to in every New Testament book except Galatians and three “postcard epistles” of Philemon, II John and III John. Jesus and every apostolic author refers to second coming B. Denial of the expected second coming 1. Predicted - II Pet 3:3,4 - “mockers will say ‘Where is the promise of His coming?’” 2. Theological liberalism denies expected second coming by claiming it was the invention of the early church. C. Preparation for the second coming of Christ is based on our participation in all that was made available in Christ at His first coming. Repeated Promises Of Coming - Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with promises of the Second Coming of Christ. There are 1,845 references to it in the Old Testament, and a total of seventeen Old Testament books give it prominence. Of the 260 chapters in the entire New Testament, there are 318 references to the Second Coming, or one out of 30 verses. This was the expectation of those among whom Jesus ministered (John 1:21; 1:45; 6:14; 7:40). John the Baptist knew of these predictions and sent his disciples to Jesus inquiring, “Are You the Coming One (ἐρχόμενος [erchomenos]), or do we look for another?” (Mat. 11:3; Luke 7:19). Peter and Stephen explained it was Jesus who fulfilled these predictions (Acts 3:22; 7:37). “When Jesus comes, the destiny of each human being will already have been decided The fact that we are judged by works does not mean that we are saved by...” It could be argued that the stretching of time beyond our expectations would undermine our belief in Jesus’ promise to return. However, this has not happened.” Well, I think it has with some of us and we’ll be looking at that this morning, but officially, no it hasn’t. And it hasn’t for us here - I know. The purpose of Jesus’ second coming - the first paragraph on Monday’s intro reads as follows: “the great plan of redemption will find its culmination in the second coming.” The great plan of redemption will find its culmination in the second coming. We’re looking at the purpose of Christ’s second coming.