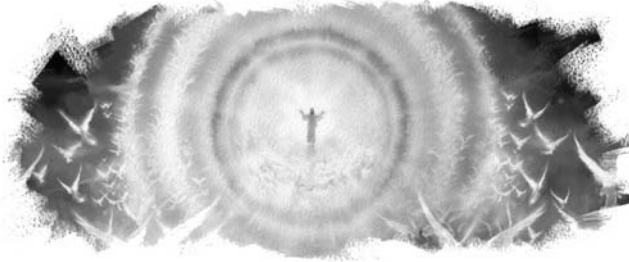


# The Promise of His Return



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** 2 Pet. 3:1–10, 13; John 14:2, 3; Dan. 2:44; Heb. 9:28; 11; Rev. 6:9–11; Luke 12:42–48.

**Memory Text:** “ ‘And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work.’ ”  
(Revelation 22:12, NKJV).

**Key Thought:** When is Jesus coming back? It doesn't matter. What matters is that He is.

At the end of the 1990s, many were wondering whether the world would last until the new millennium. Then the year 2000 came and went. Some argued that the time calculation was wrong and that 2001 was the first year of the new millennium. But, alas, we're still here.

Either way, Seventh-day Adventists, unlike many other Christian traditions, believe that the second coming of Christ draws nearer. In news reports, even secular reporters sometimes reflect on how the world seems edging closer to some great crisis, whether political, ecological, economic, military, or any combination thereof. One doesn't need to be a biblical apocalypticist in order to see a world that seems to teeter on the brink of catastrophe.

None of this should surprise us; after all, just about every Bible prophecy depicting end times paints a bleak forecast for the world prior to the Second Coming.

When is Jesus coming back? We don't know. What we do know is that He is, and that's what matters.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 31.*

## The Beginning and the End

The description of our pitiful human condition is honestly and correctly painted in Scripture. Bible writers did not always despair, however, because they knew the final outcome. The last chapters in the books of Isaiah and Revelation assure us that the destruction of sin is coming and that God's kingdom will be restored. God revealed to His prophets the "last things" that will lead to the end of our world's dark history. These prophets gave full weight to the gravity of the situation, but they lived with hope because the remedy had been revealed to them.

As we saw earlier, if you believe the world began by chance, you most likely believe it will end that way, as well. This view doesn't really leave much hope for those in between such a beginning and such an end, does it?

In contrast, the Bible consistently refers to and describes a literal historical understanding of Genesis 1 and 2. Nothing was left to chance in the Creation of the world. Hence, it's no wonder that the Word of God also insists on a literal end of this world, as well. Nothing will be left to chance here either.

**Read 2 Peter 3:1–10. How does Peter link early events in human history with final ones? What message of hope can we take from this passage?**

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The primal creation and the final re-creation are vitally linked, each enhancing the significance of the other. When studying the doctrine of the last things (eschatology), we deal with God's final, definitive acts toward His creation, which lead right into the restoration of His kingdom.

Jesus clearly links the beginning and the end of things with Himself. Three times in Revelation (*Rev. 1:8, 21:6, 22:13*) Jesus refers to Himself as the Alpha and the Omega (*alpha* is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, *omega* the last). Whatever else He means by saying that, at a minimum it shows us Jesus' power and omnipresence; it tells us that Jesus was there at the beginning of all things, and He will be there at the end. We can trust in Him no matter where we are in between. It's a way of telling us that, however chaotic things might seem, He is always there for us.

**Some Christians have moved away from belief in a literal, physical return of Jesus and a supernatural restoration of God's kingdom on earth. Instead, they think we need to build the kingdom ourselves. Dwell on past attempts to do something similar. Why should we think future ones will fare any better?**

## Promise and Expectation

Because “last things” center around the establishment of God’s kingdom, attention to “last things” has always been a paramount Seventh-day Adventist concern. So much so that we have drawn attention to the end times in our name: Seventh-day Adventist. The name itself points to our belief in the second advent of Jesus.

**How** does Peter express this hope? *2 Pet. 3:13*. Why is this hope so central to all we believe? Without it, why do we have no real hope at all?

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Our own human expectations and hopes often are disappointing. Many times they fail us because we cannot control future events. Our most ardent hopes are often not fulfilled. We cannot control the future, no matter how hard we might try. Human beings are faced with possibilities and probabilities. Every plan of ours is tentative. The unfolding of history is complicated, incalculable, and subject to too many varied factors to allow us confidence in what we may decide about it. And this uncertainty causes us anxiety.

But the biblical writers assure us that we need not despair; the Lord is in control, and we have the promise of His return and the promise of what He’ll do at that return.

**Read** the following verses. What hope and assurance is found in them? What different emphasis is found in each one of these promises, as well?

*John 14:2, 3* \_\_\_\_\_

*Dan. 2:44* \_\_\_\_\_

*Acts 3:20, 21* \_\_\_\_\_

In all of these texts, and so many others, we have been given the promise not only of Christ’s return but that a radically different new world and existence await us when He does. Try to imagine what it will be like. We are so used to sin, sickness, death, fear, violence, hatred, poverty, crime, war, and suffering that we can’t easily imagine a world without them. And yet, that’s exactly the world we’re hoping for, the world we have been promised.

## Our Great Assurance

As Christians, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we live with the hope of Christ's literal return to this earth. Some Christian groups have abandoned hope in this teaching or have pushed it off to the side, or they have watered it down and so spiritualized it away that the Second Coming becomes essentially just a personal thing. They may say, *The Second Coming is realized in our hearts when we learn to fulfill our role in our community*, or *When we learn to love others as we should, then the second coming of Christ is actualized in our life*. Though, of course, we should love others and be fruitful members of our community, none of these are the same as the second coming of Jesus.

From our perspective, especially with our understanding of the state of the dead, it's hard to imagine what our faith would mean without the physical, literal return of Christ, at which time He will raise the dead in Him. It's so central to what we believe (again, our name itself reflects just how central) that, without it, our whole system would crumble. And that's because all that we believe in and hope for climaxes in the literal return of Christ "in the clouds of heaven" (*Matt. 24:30*); remove that and our teachings take us to a dead end.

**Of all the assurances we have of the Second Coming, which is the greatest? What one event, more than any other, guarantees His return, and why? *Heb. 9:28, 1 Cor. 15:12–27.***

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Of course, the great hope of the Second Coming rests upon what Christ accomplished for us at the First Coming. After all, what good is the First Coming without the Second? In a sense, one could say that the First Coming, and all that Jesus accomplished for us there, is incomplete without the Second. At times the Bible uses the metaphor of ransom to refer to the Cross. Jesus Himself said that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (*Matt. 20:28, NKJV*). At the cross, Jesus, by His death, paid the ransom for our souls, a ransom that was full, complete, and once and for all. At the same time, what good is paying a ransom if you don't come and get what was ransomed? The paying of the ransom isn't the end of the story. Just as a human parent would come to get the child he or she ransomed back, so, too, Jesus will come back to get what He paid such a great price for. Hence, Christ's first coming gives us the greatest assurance possible for the second.

## “Where Is the Promise of His Coming?”

From the earliest days of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Adventists believed that Christ’s coming was soon, “nearer than we first believed.” As it stands, we’re still here, much longer than many among us anticipated. How are we to understand this “delay”?

First of all, we’re not the only ones whose expectations about when the Lord would act have not been fulfilled as people have thought.

Eve, for instance, thought God’s promises for a Deliverer (*Gen. 3:15*) would be fulfilled in her first-born son. Read Genesis 4:1. An accurate translation of this text should have the word *from* in italics, because it is not in the original language but has been added by a translator. Eve’s statement can be more literally translated: “I have gotten a man—the Lord.” She was wrong; the child born was Cain, not the Redeemer. The Lord’s coming wasn’t until thousands of years later.

“The Saviour’s coming was foretold in Eden. When Adam and Eve first heard the promise, they looked for its speedy fulfillment. They joyfully welcomed their first-born son, hoping that he might be the Deliverer. But the fulfillment of the promise tarried. Those who first received it died without the sight. From the days of Enoch the promise was repeated through patriarchs and prophets, keeping alive the hope of His appearing, and yet He came not.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 31.

**Read** Hebrews 11. What’s the main point of this chapter, and how does it fit into the whole question of “delay”? (*See especially vs. 13, 39, 40.*)

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Throughout the Bible, we have examples of people waiting in earnest expectation. Look at how long Abraham waited for the promised son; look at how long Israel waited in Egypt for deliverance. Time and again in the Psalms, we read the question, How long, Lord, until deliverance comes? And, of course, we shouldn’t be surprised about the “delay” in Christ’s return, not when Peter wrote, almost two thousand years ago, the following words: “Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (*2 Pet. 3:3, 4*).

**Have you thought the Lord would have been back by now? Do you sometimes find yourself discouraged by the “delay,” or doubting the Second Advent because we’re still here? Think about evidence for belief in Christ’s return, realizing that your understanding of time is radically different from that of God.**

## “Behold, I Come Quickly”

**That** the Lord had not yet come is undoubtedly the basis for some of Paul’s counsel to the Thessalonians. What counsel does Paul give to the church at Thessalonica as they wait for the promised coming of Christ? *2 Thessalonians 2*.

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Certain events have to transpire in human history before Jesus will return, yet, the hope for the future is glorious.

**The** book of Revelation, the great book of high points, also gives evidence of a time lag. At the opening of the fifth seal, what do the voices under the altar cry out? *Rev. 6:9–11*. What’s implied there about the question of the “delay”?

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**Read** Luke 12:42–48. How does that text help us to understand the “delay”? More so, what important warning should we take from it for ourselves, who could easily start feeling the same way?

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What about the texts that talk about Jesus’ coming back quickly, or soon? For example, “Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book” (*Rev. 22:7*).

In one sense, as far as our own personal experience is concerned, the Second Coming is as “soon” as our death. We die, and regardless of how long after we are in the grave—two years, two hundred, two thousand—we sleep, and the next thing we know, in an instant, in a twinkling of an eye, Jesus has returned. Thus, one could argue that from our own personal perspective alone, from what we personally experience ourselves, the Second Coming takes no longer than the span of an individual human life. Although the Second Coming itself is a literal universal event that impacts the whole earth, we experience it only as individuals.

As the years roll by, do you find yourself becoming at ease in the world, getting comfortable with things, and less focused on the reality of the Second Coming? If so, you’re probably not alone. How can we fight this natural, although potentially dangerous, tendency? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

**Further Study:** “Another year has almost passed into eternity. A few more days, and we shall enter a new year. My brethren and sisters, employ wisely the remaining hours of the old year. If you have in any wise neglected your duty, repent before God, and return to the path from which you have wandered. Remember how brief the period of life allotted you. You know not how soon your probation may close. Say not presumptuously, ‘To-day or to-morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain.’ God may have different plans for you. Life is but a vapor, ‘that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth.’ You know not how soon your hand may lose its cunning, your step its firmness. There is peril in a moment’s delay. ‘Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, December 23, 1902.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In class, discuss your answer to Thursday’s final question. Discuss, too, the irony of the fact that the longer we’re here, the easier it is to put off the sense of Christ’s return, and yet the longer we’re here, the closer we come to that return.
- ❷ What are the reasons that Jesus has not returned yet? Are we responsible for that “delay”? How do you justify your answer?
- ❸ In your mind, what is the greatest reason for trust in the promise of the Second Coming?
- ❹ Although there’s much debate in science about human origins, many scientists argue that the long-term prospects for humanity, the earth, the universe even, are not good. They predict that the universe is going to burn out or collapse back in on itself, leaving no life anywhere. As Seventh-day Adventists, we believe that the long-term prospects for the universe are the opposite: they are wonderful. The point is, if science has the end of all things so wrong, why should we trust that its understanding of the beginning of all things is any more accurate? This is especially true when science’s common understanding of the beginning is centered on various forces, including evolution, that deny a Creator or any purposeful design or intention in the creation itself. How much more wrong could it be?

**Summary:** We have many very good reasons for trusting in Christ’s return, no matter when it happens.

## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Revelation 22:12*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Outline the biblical promises and assurances of Jesus' second coming.

**Feel:** Anticipate the auspiciousness and nearness of the Second Coming.

**Do:** Wait for His coming actively, improving the hour.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Coming Again**

**A** Why do we believe that Jesus is coming again in a physical, literal sense?

**B** How long have we had the promises of Jesus' second coming? Why do we believe that it will be soon?

**C** What are the connections between Christ's death and His coming again, and why are these connections so important to the Christian living today?

**II. Feel: Coming Soon**

**A** Why is it important to live with the consciousness of Christ's soon coming, when it appears that He has been delayed?

**B** What kinds of emotions do Christ's soon coming elicit?

**III. Do: Improve the Hour**

**A** What kinds of activities are important to do while we are waiting for Christ's return?

**B** What tendencies that can accompany waiting and Christ's seeming delay should we guard against?

► **Summary:** From the Fall onward, earth's inhabitants have been pointed forward to the time when God would come to deal out justice, cleansing, and a final solution to sin. Christ reiterated these promises, and we are assured that His coming will be soon. Even though it seems that He is delayed, we need to stay alert and ready in preparation for the day and hour of His return.



## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1**—Motivate

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, it is crucial that we stay focused on the second coming of Jesus. After having waited for Jesus' coming for so many years, it is easy to lose our passion and eagerness for the event.

**Just for Teachers:** The focus of this lesson is to revitalize the hope of Christ's coming—a hope that is shared by Seventh-day Adventists as a corporate body and as individual Christians.

Think about how different time is for beings like us, who exist only for a short time, than how it is for God. Can we really have any concept of what time is like for God? How can the awareness of just how limited our understanding of time is help us as we patiently wait for Christ's return?

### ► **STEP 2**—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** The goal of this section is to reexamine ourselves as a people anticipating the Second Coming. The primary areas of focus will be our priorities, our attitude, and our responsibilities.

Disappointment stems from our inability to predict or control the future. As Seventh-day Adventists, we are a people who have been waiting for generations for the Second Coming. How do we handle the inevitable disappointments associated with the waiting?

## Bible Commentary

### I. Because He Said So (*Read John 14:1–4 with the class.*)

When you've been waiting for a long time for something, it is difficult to stay focused. It is easy to be distracted by the immediate and the urgent. Sometimes you can get so tired of waiting that you give up altogether. It's the same with the Second Coming: we've been waiting for so long that we get distracted by the responsibilities of life and find it difficult to maintain our level of hope and excitement about it. We often settle into a state of complacency within our earthly life and responsibilities, things such as jobs, mortgages, education, and so on. These things fill our time

and preoccupy our minds. The only way to keep up the momentum of hope is to stay focused on Jesus. It is important that we refresh, in our hearts and in our lives, His promise to return and take us home. Because He said He will come again, He will. It's really as simple as that. There is no ambiguity in His words. He said, "I will come again."

The disciples heard these words, and they believed. What a sham the years with Jesus would have been if the disciples hadn't believed the promise of His return! How would they have carried on what Jesus started without faith in Jesus' return? They were able to overcome adversities and even face death because they took seriously Jesus' promise. Without that promise, and especially with our understanding of death, what hope would we have?

**Consider This:** If there were no Second Coming, would you still strive to be Christlike? Why, or why not?

■ *As Christians, our belief in the Second Coming provides us with a unique hope in the face of difficult circumstances. When has your faith helped you to persevere through trying times?*

## II. Live Like You Believe (Read Matthew 28:16–20 with the class.)

The waiting church needs to do more than wait and believe that Jesus is coming back. Should Jesus come today and ask you what you've been doing, it's not enough to say that you've been waiting patiently for Him. It's not enough to believe in the church's theology, to be equally yoked in marriage, or to stay clear of worldly temptations. Jesus calls us to be an active church. He calls each of us to be His disciples. We need to do more than ensure our salvation; we also need to be concerned about the salvation of others.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, by its name and by its fundamental beliefs, is expected to be a church that actively participates in the gospel commission. And as its members, we must take ownership of the gospel commission. The ways in which we live and respond to the promise of the Second Coming is one of the things that marks us as Seventh-day Adventist Christians.

The disciples of the early Christian church are our examples. Fueled by their hope of the Second Coming, they made evangelism and witnessing their priority. In it they invested all of themselves and all of their earthly resources. And, in return, others joined them to do the same. The disciples' business plan for the early church was simple, their strategy even more so. And the church would have failed had it not been for their

attitude and their actions. Everything that they said and did was centered on the hope of Jesus' soon return.

**Consider This:** Why do you think Jesus has delayed His coming for so long? Or is that question itself wrongheaded?

■ *What are some of the lessons we can learn from the Great Disappointment of 1844?*

■ *It is not enough to simply wait in anticipation of Christ's return. We must prepare ourselves for the end times—always ready, always vigilant. What are some ways in which you can prepare yourself for the Second Coming?*

■ *Imagine that you had never heard the gospel. Then you discover that God loves you. He sent His Son to die for you. And He is coming back to give you eternal life. Now imagine the excitement you would feel upon receiving this news. How can we maintain this same newness and enthusiasm for the Second Coming?*

### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** This section focuses on the ways each individual Christian should live while waiting for the Second Coming. Do this by reviewing Jesus' life on earth. Then ask the students to come up with ways in which they can exhibit a more positive attitude in life.

**Consider the life of Jesus.** The four Gospels tell His story from four perspectives, but no matter which perspective you study, Jesus' life spanned only a third of an average lifetime. And His ministry of about three and half years was a far shorter time of service than is most of ours. Yet, His few years of service have influenced more than two thousand years of history.

Think of simple ways in which you can live the kind of life that everyone will want to be a part of. Use the following questions to get started: What is your mission as a Seventh-day Adventist Christian? What are you doing to accomplish that mission? What is the role of hope in your life? What are some of your positive character and personality traits that can be your assets in the accomplishing of your goals?

**► STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** When discussing the subject of a positive, optimistic life in a group setting, such as a Sabbath School class, we are easily fueled with enthusiasm. But a few weeks later, the motivation fizzles. We get busy with responsibilities and forget what our priorities should be. That's why it is important for every person to have his or her own personal motivation tool, or a reminder of what his or her life is all about. We need a tangible way to keep us on the right track.

**Activity:** Read Habakkuk 3:17, 18. Then ask the class members to spend a few minutes in personal reflection. Next, have the class create a practical tool or way that will help them to maintain a positive perspective, even when things are not going well. Ask people to share how their hope in the Second Coming, and all that comes with it, has helped to sustain them in times of trial and grief.