

Living *the* Advent Hope



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 18:1–8; Matthew 24–25; 1 Cor. 15:12–19; Eccles. 8:14; 12:13, 14; Rev. 21:1–5; 22:1–5.*

Memory Text: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (*1 Corinthians 15:58, NKJV*).

Jesus announced the kingdom of God as a present reality that we can be part of today. He sent His disciples to make the same announcement and to enact His kingdom through preaching the gospel and by serving others; that is, by giving as freely as they had received (*see Matt. 10:5–8*).

But Jesus also was clear that His kingdom was a different kind of kingdom: “not of this world” (*John 18:36*)—and yet to come in full. By His incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection, the kingdom of God was inaugurated, but Jesus also looked forward to a time His kingdom would fully replace the kingdoms of this world, and God’s reign would be made complete.

By definition, Adventists—those who await this coming and this kingdom—are people of hope. But this hope is not only about a future new world. While hope looks to the future, hope transforms the present now. With such hope, we live in the present as we expect to in the future, and we begin working to make a difference now in ways that fit with how we expect the world will one day be.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 14.

“How Long, O LORD?”

Throughout the Bible’s story, there is a repeated call from God’s people—particularly those experiencing slavery, exile, oppression, poverty, or other injustice or tragedy—for God to intervene. The slaves in Egypt, the Israelites in Babylon, and many others called out to God to see and hear their suffering and to right these wrongs. And the Bible offers significant examples of God’s actions to rescue and restore His people, at times even taking revenge on their oppressors and enemies.

But these rescues were usually short-lived, and the various prophets continued to point forward to a final intervention, when God would put an end to evil and lift up the downtrodden. At the same time, these prophets continued the cry, “How long, O LORD?” For example, the angel of the Lord asked about the exile of the Israelites, “LORD Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy?” (*Zech. 1:12, NIV*).

The Psalms are full of laments about the apparent prosperity and good fortune of the wicked while the righteous are abused, exploited, and poor. The psalmist repeatedly calls on God to intervene, trusting that the world is not presently ordered in the way God created it or desires it, and taking up the cry of the prophets and oppressed, “How long, O LORD?” (*see, for example, Ps. 94:3–7*).

In a sense, injustice is more difficult to endure among those who believe in a just God who desires justice for all His people. The people of God will always have a sense of impatience about evil in the world—and God’s seeming inaction is another source of impatience. Thus, the sometimes harsh questions of the prophets: “How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save?” (*Hab. 1:2, NIV*).

A similar cry is taken up in the New Testament, where even creation itself is portrayed as groaning for God to rescue and re-create (*see Rom. 8:19–22*). In Revelation 6:10, this cry—“How long, O Lord?”—is taken up on behalf of those who have been martyred for their faith in God. But it is the same cry, calling on God to intervene on behalf of His oppressed and persecuted people.

Read Luke 18:1–8. What is Jesus saying about God’s response to the repeated cries and prayers of His people for Him to act in their behalf? How is this linked to the need for faith?

A Certain Kind of Hope

Religion has often been criticized for a tendency to draw believers away from life here and now toward some better afterlife. The criticism is that the focus on another realm becomes a form of sanctified escapism and renders the believer of less benefit to the world and to society. At times, believers have left themselves open to such criticism, sometimes even cultivating, preaching, and practicing these kinds of attitudes.

And, too, we have terrible examples of those in power telling the poor and oppressed just to accept their sad lot now because, when Jesus returns, all will be made right.

Yes, our world is a fallen, broken, and tragic place—and there is nothing wrong or misplaced in longing for when God will set the world right; when He will bring an end to injustice, pain, and sorrow; and when He will replace the current disorder with His glorious and righteous kingdom. After all, without that hope, without that promise, we really have no hope at all.

In His sermon on the end of the world (*see Matthew 24 and 25*), Jesus spent the first half of His discourse detailing the need for escape, even getting to the point of saying that “ ‘if those days had not been cut short, no one would survive’ ” (*Matt. 24:22, NIV*). But this is more an introduction to His explanation of the significance of these promises of God. To focus solely—or even primarily—on the “escape” aspect of the Christian hope for the future is to miss some of the deeper points Jesus was making.

Read Matthew 24 and 25. What are the most important points from your reading of this sermon of Jesus? How would you summarize Jesus’ instructions for how we are to live as we wait for His return?

What we believe about the future has important implications for how we live now. A healthy reliance on the promises of God about His future for our world should be the catalyst for energetic engagement, the spark for a life that is rich and deep and makes a difference to others.

How can and should the hope and promise of Jesus’ return impact how we live now, especially in the context of helping those in need?

Resurrection Hope

The Christian hope in the second coming of Jesus is not just about looking forward to a bright future. For the early Christians, the bodily resurrection of Jesus gave the promise of His return a solid reality. If He could come back from the dead—which they had witnessed for themselves—He would surely come back to complete the project of removing sin and its effects and renewing the world (*see 1 Cor. 15:22, 23*).

For the apostle Paul, the resurrection was the key element of the Advent hope. He was prepared to stake the credibility of everything he preached on this crowning miracle in the story of Jesus: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile” (*1 Cor. 15:17, NIV*). Think about his words here and how important the resurrection of Christ is to all that we hope for.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12–19. How would you explain to an interested nonbeliever why the truth of the Resurrection is so pivotal to Christian hope?

Witnessing the resurrected Jesus transformed the first disciples. As we have seen, Jesus had previously sent them out to announce and enact the kingdom of God (*see Matt. 10:5–8*), but Jesus’ death shattered their courage and smashed their hopes. Their later commission (*see Matt. 28:18–20*), given by the resurrected Jesus and powered by the coming of the Holy Spirit (*see Acts 2:1–4*), set them on the path of changing the world and living out the kingdom that Jesus had established.

Freed from the power and fear of death, the early believers lived and shared courageously in the name of Jesus (*see, for example, 1 Cor. 15:30, 31*). The evil that brings death is the same evil that brings suffering, injustice, poverty, and oppression in all their forms. Yet, because of Jesus and His victory over death, all of this will one day end. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (*1 Cor. 15:26, NIV*).

In the end, no matter whom we help now, they will all eventually die anyway. What does this harsh truth teach us about how important it is to let others know of the hope they can find in the death and resurrection of Jesus?

Judgment Hope

Read Ecclesiastes 8:14. In what ways do you see the stark and powerful reality of what is written here?

While suffering, oppression, and tragedy are hard enough to bear in their own right, the injury or insult is harder still if it appears to be meaningless or unnoticed. The possible meaninglessness of sorrow is heavier than its initial burden. A world without record or final justice is the ultimate in cruel absurdity. No wonder atheist writers in the twentieth century lamented about what they believed was the “absurdity” of the human condition. With no hope of justice, no hope of judgment, no hope of things being made right, ours would indeed be an absurd world.

But the cry of Ecclesiastes 8:14 is not the end of the story. At the end of his protests, Solomon takes a sudden turn. In the midst of his laments about meaninglessness, he says, essentially: *Hold on a minute—God is going to judge. So, everything is not meaningless; in fact, now everything and everyone matters.*

Read Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14. What does this tell us about just how important all that we do here is?

The hope of judgment comes down to what one believes about the core nature of God, life, and the world in which we live. As we have seen, the Bible insists that we live in a world that God created and loves, but a world that has gone wrong and in which God is working toward His plan for re-creation, all through the life and death of Jesus. God’s judgment is a key part of His setting our world right. For those on the receiving end of so many of the world’s wrongs—those who have been marginalized, brutalized, oppressed, and exploited—the promise of judgment is surely good news.

What does it mean to you to know that, one day, and in ways we can’t imagine, the justice that we so much long for now will finally come? How can we draw hope from this promise?

No More Tears or Pain

Read Revelation 21:1–5 and Revelation 22:1–5 and spend some time trying to imagine what life will be like as described here. Why is it difficult to imagine life without sin, death, pain, and tears?

The Bible’s descriptions of our life after sin are unquestionably wonderful and glorious and no doubt barely represent what is awaiting us. Even in these verses, the descriptions are almost as much about what won’t be there as what will be. When this world is all we have known, it can be hard to imagine life without pain and suffering, death and fear, injustice and poverty.

Not only is there no more of these things, but this description adds a personal touch: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes” (*Rev. 21:4, NIV*). In the context of those who have been saved, God’s compassion for those who have suffered throughout human history reaches a climax in this single sentence. Not only does He bring an end to their suffering, but He personally wipes away their tears.

Battered and scarred by a life of sin and a world of injustice and tragedy, we can see in the book of Revelation hints at a process of healing for all of us who have been victims of sin in many different ways. Describing the tree of life, John explains that “the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (*Rev. 22:2, NIV*). Again, God shows His understanding of, and compassion for, what it has meant to be human, to feel, experience, witness, and even participate in the evil of this world. His plan for re-creating our world includes restoring and healing each of us.

Until then, we seek to be all that we can be in Christ, doing our part, as faltering and small as our parts might be, to minister to those around us who need what we have to offer. Whatever it is we can do—kind words, a warm meal, medical help, dental work, clothing, counseling—we should be doing with the kind, self-abnegating, self-denying, self-sacrificing love that Jesus manifested when He was here.

Of course, the world is still going to get worse and worse, despite our best efforts. Jesus knew that; yet, this truth didn’t stop Him from ministering to others, and it shouldn’t stop us, either.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Called to Reach a Higher Standard,” pp. 309–322, in *The Acts of the Apostles*; “Desolation of the Earth,” pp. 653–661, in *The Great Controversy*.

“When the voice of God turns the captivity of His people, there is a terrible awakening of those who have lost all in the great conflict of life. While probation continued they were blinded by Satan’s deceptions, and they justified their course of sin. The rich prided themselves upon their superiority to those who were less favored; but they had obtained their riches by violation of the law of God. They had neglected to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to deal justly, and to love mercy. . . . They have sold their souls for earthly riches and enjoyments, and have not sought to become rich toward God. The result is, their lives are a failure; their pleasures are now turned to gall, their treasures to corruption.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 654.

“The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.”—Page 678.

Discussion Questions:

① Explain how what you have studied this week demonstrates that life, here and now, matters. Compare this with the belief some hold that we need not worry about this life and this world because God will destroy it all and start again. How can we be careful, too, not to use this truth of the promise of new existence to neglect those in need (after all, in the end, God will make it all right)? Even more important, how can we make sure we don’t become one of those who have used this truth to exploit others?

② The Seventh-day Adventist understanding of Bible prophecy expects evil, trouble, and suffering to increase as we get nearer to the return of Jesus. When such things happen, we often refer to Matthew 24. How should we view these tragedies in light of Matthew 25?

Summary: Our God will not allow evil to continue forever. The Bible’s great hope is the return of Jesus to bring an end to evil, to heal injustice and create a new world as it was meant to be. Built on the resurrection of Jesus, this hope transforms today and gives courage to our service for God and others as we wait for His return.