

1844

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## BETWEEN THE DISAPPOINTMENTS

### The Parable of the Virgins

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The Adventists faced a crisis when the first and second predictions of the end of the world and the coming of Christ proved to be wrong, namely those of 1843 and of spring 1844. Assuming that the dates set for the Advent were wrong, what would the next step be? And what reason could be given for it? Could there still be hope? Reference to an alternative Jewish calendar eventually led to the setting and somewhat reluctant acceptance of the later date, October 22, 1844. What happened when that day closed became known as the Great Disappointment. But go back to the former disappointment and focus on spring 1844.

Interpreting Scripture in the numerical fashion leads to situations which need further references to Scripture that suggest numbers, and so to length of time. But only as the occasion rises. So, for example, following the disappointment of spring 1844, solace was found by interpreting the parable in Matthew 25. Here the bridegroom's delay meets with different responses. But the important solace for Adventists was found in the reference to the length of time of the delay, which the interpreter reckoned as half a day. So since, in the interpreter's mind, one day in prophecy represents one year, half a day represents half a year, six months. Add that half year to the date of the March disappointment and you come to the autumn of the same year. The Advent will take place then. Hope can be restored. The interpretation gives grounds for hope. The Advent will be in October.

They wanted confirmation that while severely upset, nevertheless God had guided and was guiding them, even in the abject failure of their hopes. So they believed that confirmation, as well as consolation, was to be looked for and was to be found in Scripture, the final court of appeal for them. They found it as they employed their methods of interpretation of Scripture. In particular they gave attention to the parable of the virgins in Matthew 25:1-13, finding that in each

detail it fitted and explained their unique experience. They claimed it as their own, so to speak.

A group of virgins awaits the coming of the bridegroom to the wedding feast. But he does not come as expected. After a considerable delay the bridegroom appeared at midnight. Some of the waiting virgins had provided sufficient oil in their lamps, so they were ready to meet him and enter for the feast. The others had to go off to buy oil since their lamps were going out. But they had not returned when the bridegroom finally arrived. Their companions went in to the feast. The door was shut and they were left outside.

The interpreters of the parable understood the reference to midnight as indicating half a day. In their prophetic understanding a day stood for a year. So half a day (indicated by the reference to midnight in the parable) stood for six months in real-time. So they then inferred that a new time could now be reckoned from the spring disappointment. While disappointed in the spring, they could renew their expectation for the event half a year later in the autumn of the year. So the date newly set was confirmed by this strange interpretation of the waiting time of the virgins. Confirmation of this interpretation was given when they discovered an alternative Jewish calendar that confirmed the autumn date six months after the spring disappointment. The Advent would be in the autumn. October 22 1844 was the date that now resulted. They could hope once more.

The conclusion would become irrelevant as that date would pass without the expected event, except as an illustration of an unfortunate way of interpreting Scripture. So, a decision had to be made. Holding the method of interpreting up for scrutiny led to two alternatives. One was to reject the method and also its conclusions, including the significance of 1844. The other was to continue employing the hermeneutic (of numerical prophetic interpretation) and fill the gap left by the disappointment by finding another event to suit the date. Urgent explanation was required to allow the believers to continue after their disappointment. Would they continue to employ the same method of interpreting Scripture?

For a detailed account of the process cf. *William Miller and the Rise of Adventism*, Chapter 10, esp. pp.160 - 161.

What is quite astonishing is the basic assumption of the interpreters. They believed that the parable applied exclusively to them in their situation in the spring of 1844 and later. Each and every item in the parable is not simply a fit with their experience, but is taken as prophetic of the various incidents in that experience, event by event. They thought of it as exclusively applicable to their experiences. They had discovered the way to unlock the coded message of the

parable. This attitude gave them renewed courage and hope, and fed their belief in and longing for divine guidance and fortified the conviction that they were being divinely guided in their disappointment. It was based on their conviction that their prophetic interpretation was appropriate and its result true. They claimed that each particular item in the parable had direct reference to the various events in their 1844 experience: the bridegroom's coming, the delay, the tarrying time, the midnight cry, the shut door, the separation of the wise from the foolish virgins. It enabled them to say that God knew it all beforehand and so gave the disappointed believers hope to continue expectantly in face of their frustrations. They may have been in error, but there was still a future for their quest for the truth. Their hopeful zeal might still be justified. It provided them with the confidence when other Adventists were losing theirs.

Ask how the parable of the tarrying of the bridegroom possibly refers uniquely to the situation of some New England Adventists and to them only in view of their experiences in the spring of 1844. Their assumption was that their experiences were the fulfilment of prophecy and so expressed in history the will of God who saw it all before hand, and revealed it to those who had the understanding of the code in which it was expressed.

Couple this with the later strange interpretations of Hiram Edson. Ask how his exegesis of Leviticus 24 where he discovers seven instances of the word 'time' (with two quite different meanings). He mistakenly takes each occurrence of the term 'time' in the passage to mean year' and assumes that correct interpretation of the passage should be the prophetic one, where a 'time' or 'day' represents a year in real time. This, he believes, enables him to pinpoint the date for the start of the 'time of the end'. His conclusion emerged that the starting date for 'the time of the end' was 1798. That would have been welcome since it supported the understanding that while no time was now to be set for the Advent, nevertheless the end would be 'soon'. That left the problem of emptiness. If you cannot specify either a date for the event or the length of time to elapse before the event, the term 'soon' became meaningless. That is a problem for contemporary Adventists, now a hundred and seventy or more years after the nineteenth century disappointments, who declare that the Advent will be soon, is imminent, but refuse to say when or how long in the future. Perhaps the individual who so speaks has some definite time or length time in mind. A kind of double think, not often expressed openly.

Edson's example is documented at some length in my *Recent Writings*. My book, *The Adventists' Dilemma* examines the problem of the timeless and so empty 'soon'.

At the very least reassessment of the method of interpreting Scripture, as well as the various doctrinal consequences it has produced is urgently needed as the primary problem of today's Adventism.

So what does this, and other examples easily quotable, say about the attitude to Scripture and the method of interpreting Scripture we have been discussing? My impression is that the attitude to Scripture is very like the attitude of someone faced with an enigmatic puzzle, or perhaps, even more appropriate, the use of a sophisticated code for which a code breaker is needed, with knowledge of the key of breaking that code. Both of these analogies are appropriate. The interpreters of the passages with a numerical core taken as prophecies required a special knowledge to enable them to reach understanding. The nineteenth century Adventists were quite sure that they had knowledge of that code, sure also that they were the only ones who had it in the detail that developed. That gave them certainty, a great certainty that remained even after repeated disappointments that should have indicated to them that something was seriously mistaken in the nature of the hermeneutic.

Seventh-day Adventists inherited and decided to retain the 1844 date and the method of interpretation that led them to those conclusions. That date they made part of their tradition and are pleased to call their resulting doctrine 'the truth'. Alternatives are ripe for discussion.

At the very least, reassessment of the inherited and endorsed methods of interpretation of Scripture, as well as of the doctrinal consequences they have produced, is urgently needed. In this respect honesty in the present takes precedent over loyalty to the past. Here is where reformation begins in earnest.

It is clear that administrators are rightly concerned for the unity of the church, and pleased with the range of its services, medical, publishing, the success of its educational system, its universal organisation. But serious work on the inherited problems of hermeneutic demands priority of attention. This will involve detailed and serious consideration of questions that have been considered difficult and even prohibited in the past. It will also involve considering one important question, namely the priority of Scripture over every secondary written source.

I have addressed in some detail the range of problems concerning the topics of inspiration, the authority of Scripture, revelation and others, suggesting profitable ways of reading and interpreting the very diverse writings of Scripture. A key issue in relation to the interpretation and the unquestioned authority of Scripture. Is the understanding of the concept of inspiration. See my *From Inspiration to Understanding. Reading the Bible Seriously and Faithfully* (355 pages).

1754