

Does Luke 21:8 Speak to the Issue of Time Setting?

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He replied: "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them." (Luke 21:8, NIV)

What Christ Does Not Mean

Do Christ's words condemn Seventh-day Adventists for preaching about the nearness of the second coming? Some might wish to use the passage this way, but no, there is no command here to avoid talking about the second advent. In such a case, why would Jesus have said so much about it Himself? When the second coming really is near, people need to know it. Another thing not included in the above warning is the legitimate presentation of prophetic time periods. Why would God put them in the Bible if He did not want them to be discussed? When the time really is near, it is not wrong to say so. Neither of these topics is wrong in and of itself.

Nearness of the kingdom of God

One reason why we can be sure that Jesus is not placing all preaching off limits that deals with the nearness of the kingdom of God (or in our day, the second coming) is that in Matt 10:7, for example, He sends His disciplines out to say this very thing. The kingdom of heaven is near. Consider the following passages.

^{NIV} **Matthew 3:2** and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

^{NIV} **Matthew 4:17** From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

^{NIV} **Matthew 10:7** As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.'

^{NIV} **Matthew 26:45** Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners."

^{NIV} **Mark 1:15** "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

^{NIV} **Mark 14:42** Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

^{NIV} **Luke 10:9** Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.'

^{NIV} **Luke 10:11** 'Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.'

^{NIV} **Luke 21:8** He replied: "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them."

^{NIV} **Luke 21:20** ¶ "When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near."

In each of the above examples the Greek word *ēggiken* is used in the original. This word means roughly, "it is near." It is clear that Christ does not condemn people for saying that His coming is near, when it is. Seventh-day Adventists say such things because Christ Himself does, and because other portions of Scripture confirm the truth of this message.

Definite time periods

There are certain definite time periods in Scripture and the reason why they are there is because they are true and God wants us to understand them. There are times in history when it is not only appropriate, but important to say, "The time is near," as in the passages above. One of these occasions is the end of the 1260 days (Rev 11:3; 12:6), or forty-two months (11:2; 13:5), or time, times and half a time (Dan 7:25; 12:7; Rev 12:14) in 1798. Another is the end of the 2300 days (Dan 8:14) in 1844. It is important for people to understand these prophetic time periods.

Notice, though, that there is a subtle difference between the other passages quoted and Luke 21:8. What Luke 21:8 says is, "The time is near," and whatever this message might be, there is something wrong with it, because Christ warns people not to accept it. Why? The issue here is what we might call "time setting." This is different in some way from merely saying the second advent is near (when it is) and different from a legitimate presentation of information about time prophecies.

We have talked about ways to emphasize time that are legitimate and other ways that are dangerous. Consider another later warning, this one from our own day, which will help us understand more clearly, by coming down to specific cases, the issue that Jesus is addressing.

A Later Warning

Ellen Harmon and her future husband, James White, were still young when William Miller was preaching about the 2300 days in the years leading up to 1844. She had a personal involvement in these events and was able to say with assurance that,

When union existed, before 1844, nearly all were united on the correct view of the 'daily'; but in the confusion since 1844, other views have been embraced, and darkness and confusion have followed. Time has not been a test since 1844, and it will never again be a test. (*Early Writings*, p. 74).

Agreement. This is an important passage, but some have misunderstood it. Consider both the wording and the context carefully. What "nearly all" agreed on during the time leading up to 1844 was that Jesus would return in 1844. That's what united them. This is what she means by "the daily." Sometimes we refer to the preaching of Miller and others as the "1844 message." Saying just this does not capture all of what was presented, but it does focus on the one point that united the Millerites more than any other, i.e., that Christ would return in 1844. On this "nearly all were united."

Confusion. After 1844, when things did not happen as the Millerites expected, the natural response was to change something. But what? The calculation of the date seemed a likely place to begin. Some talked about extending the time to 1845, and Joseph Bates later proposed 1851 as a possible time for Christ's return. Ellen White correctly pointed out that all such additional time setting was misconceived. The correct ending date was 1844. As for William Miller, he said,

I have reckoned all the time I can. I must now wait and watch until he is graciously pleased to answer the 10,000 prayers that daily and nightly ascend his holy hill, "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly."¹

Clarification. The 2300 days are not the only time period to be fulfilled at the end time. What about the millennium? That is a time period, and it is still in the future. So was Ellen White wrong when she said there would be no more time periods to test us? But this is not what she said. She didn't said there were no more time periods after 1844, only that after 1844 time would "never again be a test."

Clearly there are other time periods that are still future. For example, there is silence in heaven during the seventh seal, which lasts "about half an hour" (Rev 8:1). Plagues fall on spiritual Babylon in "one day" (Rev 18:8), "one hour" (18:10), "one hour" (18:17), and "one hour" (18:19). We have already mentioned the "thousand years" (Rev 20:2-7). These are time periods, and they are all future. But none of them will be a test for God's people. Why is this? One possible reason is that they all come after the close of probation. At this point further hardships await the remnant people, but all important decisions have been made.

Summary. William Miller's preaching about the 2300 days ending in 1844 was legitimate and biblical. There are other biblical time periods that take place after 1844, but none of them will be used to test God's people. Some have attempted to set aside what Ellen White says about this because, as they correctly point out, we cannot set aside things like the millennium.

In our wisdom it might seem that a perfect occasion for another time-related test would be the period following the national Sunday law. In God's wisdom, however, this is not the case. Let us not set Ellen White's warning aside because we do not see the wisdom in it. The only warnings that can benefit us are the ones we pay attention to. There will opportunity later to understand why God does what He does.

What Christ Does Mean

We have said that there is a proper and legitimate place for preaching that the coming of Christ is near. We have said that there really are examples in Scripture of time periods of set duration, and that these need to be widely understood. Christ does not condemn either of these enterprises. What He does condemn, and what Ellen White warns us to avoid, is a form of time setting that falls outside the scope of what we have discussed so far.

¹ LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1954), 4:858.

Is there a specific window of time during which we can be sure that any setting of definite time is misguided? There is. This time setting version of a no-fly zone, if we could call it that, occurs between 1844 and the close of probation. We can be certain, without fail, that any period of definite time applied within these two outer limits has been misunderstood. The interpretation is wrong. We don't need to know why it is wrong from an academic point of view in order to benefit from the warning and avoid being drawn into it. The person speaking or writing might be entirely sincere and entirely convincing. We might not be able to argue him or her down, but we don't have to. If it's definite time and if it's between 1844 and the close of probation, we can know that the interpretation is wrong and spend our time elsewhere. It is wrong not merely by a detail here or there, but by a wide margin. It is fundamentally misconceived.

The time between 1844 and the close of probation is a period during which it would be especially tempting, and therefore especially dangerous, to set and reset prophetic time periods. This is exactly why Ellen White warns us not to be drawn into time setting. What she says can be appropriately understood in the context of what Jesus says in Luke 21:8. What He says there about teachers who bear time-related messages during this period is, "Do not follow them." The two warnings should be studied together.

Discussion

Going beyond generalities, what specific time periods might someone be especially inclined to apply, or reapply, between 1844 and the close of probation? It is possible to know which time periods are especially susceptible to reinterpretation and in this way to be on our guard.

The 2300 days. Right after the disappointment of 1844 people reinterpreted the 2300 days, going first to 1845, and then to 1851. Today no one is doing this. Enough time has gone by that readjusting the ending point of the 2300 days no longer seems plausible. Ellen White is not warning us of a danger that no one would encounter. She is warning of something that could sweep much of the church into a frenzy of misguided speculation. So her words should not be confined to the 2300 days alone. They do not cease to have value for the church when people lose their fascination with one period and substitute another for it. If the same danger exists, the same warning applies.

The 1290 and 1335 days. At present the time periods most often put forward as likely candidates for fulfillment in the near future are the 1290 and 1335 days of Dan 12:11-12. There is a groundswell of interest in this idea. Books are being written on the topic. A major trend within Adventism involves futuristic reinterpretations of these two periods. I have written about them elsewhere and will not go through the details here,² but if we want to gain insight into what Ellen White might have had in mind in *Early Writings*, p. 74, the 1290 and 1335 days of Dan 12:11-12 provide a useful starting point.

Let me clarify that it is not wrong to study the 1290 and 1335 days. The problem comes when we remove them from the close connection they have always had with the

² See http://www.historicism.org/Documents/Dan12_Response.pdf, especially pp. 20-22.

1260 days as prophetic time and place them in the future as literal time. It is the moving of them and needless reanalysis that is bad, not the study of these time periods in and of itself. Indeed, we should study them more than we do, but in their proper context.

Below is a summary of the way Seventh-day Adventists have understood the relationships among major time periods in the past, and which still bears scrutiny today. Notice that the 1290 and 1335 days serve to lock the 1260 days into position, so that they do not represent just any 1260-year period but specifically the 1260 years from A.D. 538 to 1798. This is the only function these supporting time periods have. If we cut them free from the function, and location, where they properly belong, we cut the 1260 days free as well, and it becomes possible to think of relocating them as well. Even if the 1260 days remain while the 1290 and 1335 days are moved, there is a question whether their position is arbitrary or not. In the following diagram the position of the 1260 days are strongly supported by what surrounds them.

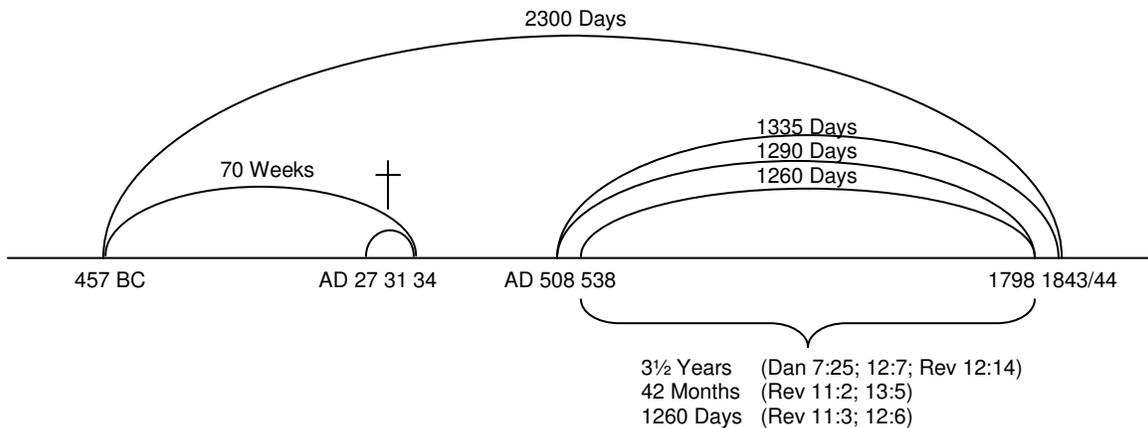


Fig. 1. Diagram showing how the major biblical time periods relate to and strengthen each other.

A present danger. Unfortunately, realigning the prophetic time periods is something more than harmless speculation. Doing this has potentially disastrous consequences. Consider the following from Ellen White, which I quote at length to get the context.

When the Thessalonian church received erroneous views concerning the coming of Christ, the apostle Paul counseled them to carefully test their hopes and anticipations by the word of God. He cited them to prophecies revealing the events to take place before Christ should come, and showed that they had no ground to expect him in their day. "Let no man deceive you by any means," are his words of warning. Should they indulge expectations that were not sanctioned by the Scriptures, they would be led to a mistaken course of action; disappointment would expose them to the derision of unbelievers, and they would be in danger of yielding to discouragement, and would be tempted to doubt the truths essential for their salvation. The apostle's admonition to the Thessalonians contains an important lesson for those who live in the last days. Many Adventists have felt that unless they could fix their faith upon a [291] definite time for the Lord's coming, they could not be zealous and diligent in the work of preparation. But as their hopes are again and again

excited, only to be destroyed, their faith receives such a shock that it becomes well-nigh impossible for them to be impressed by the great truths of prophecy. The more frequently a definite time is set for the second advent, and the more widely it is taught, the better it suits the purposes of Satan. After the time has passed, he excites ridicule and contempt of its advocates, and thus casts reproach upon the true time movement of 1843 and 1844. Those who persist in this error will at last fix upon a date too far in the future for the coming of Christ. Thus they will be led to rest in a false security, and many will not be undeceived until it is too late. (*Spirit of Prophecy*, 4:290-91)

The end of the 2300 days in 1844 provides the immediate context for Ellen White's remarks, but not their only possible fulfillment. If this were the case, it would falsify her prediction. The 2300 days ceased being an object of speculation long ago, but speculation itself did not end then. Those who wish to speculate with numbers and counting will use whatever lies closest. Why should they confine themselves to the 2300 days when other periods are readily available?

Conclusion

Christ's warning in Luke 21:8 applies with special force at certain times in history. During the first century, just after Jesus went back to heaven, people would naturally be inclined to speculate on the timing of things and would want to use prophetic time periods to help them find answers. This is why Paul speaks as he does to the church in Thessalonica. The focus of the church's attention during the first century was not to be diverted to the matter of time.

Another especially tempting period for speculation about the timing of things is now, just before Christ returns to earth. That is why we have the warnings that we do, because there is something especially now to warn against. Now more than ever we might wish to speculate about time, but must not. The warnings are given because, under certain circumstances, like our own, it is so very natural to wonder how long. If people were not prone to such speculation no warning would be necessary. The warning addresses a need. It is not vacuous. And if we are inclined to think that our speculations, by contrast with those of others, are sound because they involve time prophecies drawn from the Bible, then we are exactly the ones to whom the warnings apply most. What we drawn from the Bible is by definition true and reliable. So arguments framed in this way have the greatest potential for deceiving both ourselves and others.

The national Sunday law holds a special fascination for those who wish to know what will happen when. But we must allow God to exercise His own discretion in these matters. He gave us the 2300 days and has brought us this far through a message of definite time. From here on in, though, God has chosen to lead us in other ways. He has not chosen to reveal how long the present delay will last. Nor has He chosen to reveal how much time will lapse between the national Sunday and the close of probation, or between the national Sunday law and the second coming. If we knew these things we would use our knowledge of time as a substitute for faith and there's no way this could do anything but work against us.

There are some things God does not want us to know. In such cases we must simply trust Him. This is an enormously important point. Here is the real preparation for

final events – not knowing when this will happen and when that will happen, and not buying cabins in the mountains or storing up food just in case, but knowing how to trust God. We must trust God even when it seems that He is not leading us well and perhaps not giving us everything we need, whether that's food and clothing or knowledge of the future. He does lead us well. He does everything well. But sometimes it will not seem so.

Recall that Eve did not think God was not giving her enough information. There were things He had not revealed that she wanted to know. If only, for example, she could know good from evil. We know how that turned out. The parallel is real. If we feel dissatisfied with the amount of information God has chosen to give to us – chronological information in this case – and set about to supply the lack in the face of clear warnings that this is not His will, what does that say about our relationship with God and our readiness to trust Him implicitly during the time of trouble? Is it faith to want more than He gives us? If it is not, is it sin (see Rom 14:23)?

I submit that there is no need for schedules during the last moments of time. God has given us all the information we need, if we will study it, and has withheld certain other information that He does not want us to have. If He does not want us to have it, then the lack is for our good. Let us accept His leading just as it comes to us. "Time has not been a test since 1844, and it will never again be a test" (*Early Writings*, p. 74).