AWWOP Friday

Friday

The Summer That Will Never End

Anticipating the Second Coming of Jesus

By Hans Heinz

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he Reformation of the sixteenth century is one of the grand events in human history. For historians it is an epochal divide between medieval and modern times. For believing Protestants (including Adventists), however, it represents divine intervention. Christianity was to align itself in doctrine and practice back with the standard of the biblical Word, not human traditions. This is the essence of this enormous religious upheaval that ended the “Dark Ages.” As Ellen White wrote: “[Protestantism] lays down the principle that all human teaching should be subordinate to the oracles of God.”1

“Come, Dear Last Day”2

This important principle made of Martin Luther not only a Reformer regarding the question of how a person is justified before God, but also concerning the renewal of the early Christian attitude toward the Last Day.3

Medieval Christians believed in the second coming of Christ, but this promise was primarily a subject of fear and terror. Without the assurance of salvation, the end appeared as a “day of vengeance and horror,” wrote the medieval Franciscan monk Thomas of Celano, when the “judge comes to sternly mete out justice.” But Luther, based on his study of the Bible, brought early Christian joy back into the expectation of the end, because he recognized that the Christian hope is a “better hope” (Heb. 7:19), a “living hope” (1 Peter 1:3), and therefore “the blessed hope” (Titus 2:13).

One can easily understand the passionate longing for liberation in Christ that the Reformer experienced in his faith walk. The older Luther became, the stronger this expectation grew. The promise of the return of Christ was for him “a sweet and cheerful sermon.” If the day would not come, the Reformer did not want to be born. Thus, it is understandable that he had only one wish to God throughout the struggles and sorrows of his life: “You promised the day, to redeem us from all evil. So let it come this very hour, if it should be, and make an end to all our misery.”4

A “Having” and a “Not Yet Having”

The life of the Christian in this world, expounded Luther, is a life filled with tensions. The state of the believer is a “having” and at the same time a “not yet having,” a “being” and a “not yet being.” Christians already have salvation by faith, but they do not yet have it by sight. Already they are righteous before God, but they still live in a fragmented world estranged from God. Considering the biblical principle of “yet” and “not yet,” we can understand the passion and longing with which Luther expected the day of Christ’s return. For we, who have the assurance of the gift of salvation based on a trusting faith in God, will—as long as we remain in God—long for the day with fervent desire and deep joy, when personal redemption will turn into the redemption of all creation. As Luther put it: “Help, dear Lord God, that the blessed day of Your holy future may come soon.”5

Signs of the Times—“A Sweet and Cheerful Sermon”

The hope for Christ’s return became increasingly stronger with the advancing age of the Reformer because he often felt helpless in dealing with humanity and the world. It became clear to him that neither princes nor the pope could solve humanity’s problems: “The world is the devil’s child . . . one cannot aid it nor instruct it.” And: “No preaching, shouting, admonishing, threatening, or pleading” can help anymore. It’s the “devil’s tavern,” the “reversed Ten Commandments” are its mark, and, therefore, it is and remains a “den of thieves.”

Only the coming of Christ can help, because in the world Christians are “surrounded by a multitude of devils.” Pope and emperor put their hope in politics, and people considered them to be their “saviors.” But Luther cautioned to wait for the “true Savior,” who has given the sure promise of His return.

To strengthen His church in this expectation, Christ pointed to “signs of the times,” including natural disasters and wars. The clearest sign for Luther were the major dangers of his time, which are still relevant today: The decline of faith within Christendom and the conflict between Islam and Christianity. With great concern Luther observed the drifting away of the papal church from the gospel and the wave of Islamic expansion that had already flooded southeastern Europe and in 1529 even surged to the gates of Vienna. But he also saw a distinct sign of the coming judgment in the ingratitude of the Reformation’s followers in terms of the light they had received: “I want to prophesy over Germany, not from the stars, but from theology I proclaim against it the wrath of God . . . . Let us just pray, and God and His word not despise!”6

According to Luther, all signs occur for the encouragement of believers and for the judgment of unbelievers. The latter ones still have “grace” not to worry about them, while the former ones are probably able to see “God’s wrath” in them, which will not hurt them as God preserves His people.

The Reformer did not want to argue about how far the signs had already been fulfilled, but he was convinced that the “majority [of the signs] have already occurred,” and this was a reason for Christians to rejoice despite disasters and distress. This joy is characteristic for the true interpreters of the Bible, because the “star gazers and soothsayers”—Luther was probably thinking of astrologers and esoterics—speak only of catastrophes. Only Christians understand the “cheerful, sweet word, ‘your redemption’ (Luke 21:28).” Therefore, the return of Christ must be seen through the eyes of Christian hope, not through the eyes of secular reason.

Luther thought that Christians have to “bite the bullet” and drink the “bitter cup,” but afterward “sweetness” will come. That is why Christ is now calling His family to rise and to rejoice. Even if the proclamation of the gospel is not received well by most people, the “small throng” will understand it and will work and pray with Christ’s coming in view, because, as noted by Luther, “it has been a long enough winter, now wants to come a beautiful summer, and such a summer that will never end.”7

PULLQUOTE:

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING:

1. How did Martin Luther evaluate human endeavors to save themselves? Compare his analysis with modern concepts of salvation.

2. What role did the hope of the second coming of Christ play in Luther’s faith?

3. To what extent was Luther’s expectation of the final events different from that of medieval humanity?

4. What does the hope of Christ’s second coming mean for your life today?

1 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 204.

2 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition, Briefe* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2002), vol. 9, p. 175.

3 Paul Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers*, 4th ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1975), p. 351.

4 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005), vol. 34/II, p. 466.

5 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition, Tischreden* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2000), vol. 5, no. 5777.

6*Ibid*., vol. 3, no. 3711.

7 Luther, *Luthers Schriften,* vol. 34/II, p. 481.