

Answers to Questions: The Delay in Christ's Coming

by David L Wilson

Doesn't Habakkuk 2:3,4 suggest that there can be no tarrying because God has set the second coming for "an appointed time"?

No, Habakkuk 2:3,4 suggests no such thing. We should be careful in our applications. For example, in Hebrews 10:36,37, Paul quotes from this very passage. The author of Hebrews, uses Habakkuk's words with care. He does not use the words in verse 2 or in the first part of 3 in direct reference to Christ. The topic under consideration in verse 2 and the first part of verse 3 is "the vision". It is interesting to note that the translators of the King James (assuming this punctuation originated with them), placed a colon in the middle of verse 3, apparently because they sensed the introduction of a new subject. It is not the Second Coming of Christ, which is for "an appointed time", but "the vision". Furthermore, the Lord, whom Habakkuk is directly quoting makes a powerful inference as to what vision may be under consideration. It is one that contains an "appointed time" and which is not for Habakkuk's time but will speak "at the end". In Daniel, chapter 8, we find just such a prophecy which is to be "for at the time of the end". It is no coincidence that these concepts appear in both Daniel 8 and in Habakkuk 2. There was a reason why our forefathers saw in Habakkuk 2:2,3 a reference to the 2300 day prophecy. See GC 391,392. Of course, the last part of verse 3, as applied to "the vision", can only mean an apparent delay, but Hab. 2:3 plainly speaks of a real delay.

But doesn't the rest of Hab. 2:3, tell us that "he will not tarry"?

Yes it does, but if it says "he will not tarry", it also says, "though He tarry". So, just as surely as Habakkuk 2:3 tells us that at some point He will not delay, it also tells us that at some point He does delay. We should interpret this passage by the way it and the concepts it presents are interpreted in the rest of Scripture. The primary text which sheds light on Habakkuk 2:3 is Heb. 10:37.

Doesn't Hebrews 10:37 teach that there can be no delay in the timing of Christ's Second Coming?

The author of Hebrews is directly quoting from Habakkuk in this passage and just as Habakkuk plainly says "though He tarry"; Hebrews, in the King James apparently giving an alternate translation, says "yet a little while. Heb. 10:37 teaches specifically that there is something which must happen first before Jesus' Second Coming. It tells us not that there is no delay, or never can be a delay in Christ's coming, but rather that there is a delay in Christ's coming, but that at some point, after "yet a little while", then "He that shall come will come and will not tarry". The end of the delay is a future tense. Paul does not tell the Hebrews that "Christ does not tarry". That would be a lie. Paul is telling the Hebrews that there will come a time (future tense) when Christ will not delay His coming. Praise the Lord. The delay will not last forever. Jesus will come, and that after just "a little while".

What does Hebrews 10 tell us must be fulfilled before Christ coming “will not tarry”?

The immediate context of verse 37 considers the sufferings of God’s people as they fulfill the will of God in their lives. The preceding verse tells believers that they “have need of endurance”, then tells them why. It is only “after (they) have done the will of God”, then “(they) might receive the promise”. It is, after the corporate church has “followed the Lamb, whithersoever He goeth”, when the bride has made herself ready, being arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright; when Jesus can present to Himself, “a glorious church, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing”, then He will come and they “will receive the promise”—glorification unto eternal life, in the eternal inheritance, as the “seed” of Abraham through the covenants of promise. It is after the gospel has been effectively (as a “living witness”) preached in all the world, that the end shall come. It is after the third angel can truly announce, “Here is the endurance of the saints, here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus”, that Jesus appears in the clouds with a sickle in His hand to reap the earth. Has the church, yet accomplished these purposes of God in her existence? All of the preceding points are explicit revelations of God’s will for the body of believers. In this context we need to ask ourselves, whether the church has completed God’s purpose in its establishment. Have we “done the will of God”? Hebrews 10:36 indicates that Christ’s coming is delayed until after the church through the grace given her in Christ, has done the will of God.

The first phrase of verse 37 reveals that it is an explanation of what immediately preceded it. 1. “For yet a little while”—the time for the church to endure suffering and persecution as it accomplishes “the will of God”. 2. After that little while (it is encouraging that God wants us to know that our sufferings ultimately are only for “a little while”) then Christ will no longer delay, but will come immediately, when the condition for that coming happening has been fulfilled.

Heb. 10:36,37 and Hab. 2:2,3 agree, there will come a time in the future, when Christ’s coming will no longer be delayed. Both texts, however, acknowledge, Christ coming has been delayed. In Hebrews 10, the apostle reveals to us that Christ’s coming will continue to be delayed until the church has “done the will of God”. Here is the condition upon which the “little while” of the church’s trials shall come to an end, then “He that shall come, will come, and will not tarry.” Let us therefore willingly obey the commandments of our Lord, joyfully enduring whatever persecution may come on account of right-doing, for it is after the church has done the will of God, that we shall receive the promise. Heb. 10:36

What does it mean for the church to accomplish the “will of God”?

There are two great ways in which we find God’s will revealed and they are ably described in Isaac Watts words, “My blest Redeemer, and my God, I read my duty in thy Word, but in Thy life, the law appears drawn out in living characters.”

The most profound fulfilling of the Father’s will for all time was undoubtedly accomplished in the human life of His Son, Jesus Christ. The love, the compassion, the purity, the faithfulness, and the holiness of Christ are to be revealed fully in the church. This is what Christ is waiting for. This is why as believers, we are to rejoice in persecution and to be glad when we partake of Christ’s sufferings. As Paul gave us an example, so the church is called to “fill up...the afflictions of Christ....to fulfill the word of God” Col. 1:24,25 The beautiful, divine character of our Lord, Jesus Christ, was revealed in its fulness, at the cross, as the One equal with the eternal Father, gave Himself to die for the very wretched and hostile sinners, which tortured His human form. (namely, you and me.) While the church cannot equal His sacrifice, it is called upon to fully reveal the Divine love in compassion for the very sinners who will be hostile towards them to the same degree of violence as sinners imposed upon the Christ, even the death, of a cross. This is the express will of God for His people, that every one of them shall “take up His cross and follow Him.” Just as Jesus’ was “perfected” through sufferings, so His bride is called upon to come to understand who He is, and to copy the Pattern.

The sufferings of God’s people are to come to a climax in the closing scenes of earth’s history. As the church, imbued with the power of the Holy Spirit, proclaims the “third angel’s message” as a living testimony in deed and word, the world will hate them just as it hated their Master, Jesus Christ. God, in His infinite wisdom will allow the whole of His people to go through the greatest trial of their faith, a parallel to Christ’s experience upon the cross. The remnant in the time of trouble will cry, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me.” In those last fiery trials, God’s character of self-sacrificing love will be fully revealed in a group of repentant sinners, called the church. “The disciple is not above his master, but every one that is perfect shall be as his master.” Luke 6:40 So Ellen White stands in harmony with the Scriptures “Christ is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His church. When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own.” COL 69

But doesn’t the fact, that God, the Father, knows the “day and hour” indicate that God has unconditionally set the time for Christ’s return?

Certainly God knows all things and He knows the exact time at which Jesus Christ will return to earth in glory, however foreknowledge is not absolute predetermination. We can illustrate that difference by considering God’s foreknowledge concerning the salvation of believers. Did God the Father know from all eternity, which human beings would respond in faith to the gospel and be saved? Of course He did. Does this therefore mean that because He foreknew who would be saved by faith, that therefore He absolutely predetermined that only those individuals could believe unto salvation and that

He conversely forced it to be so, by preventing from coming to faith, those who eventually were not saved? The Bible tells us that the answer to the second question is absolutely not! Probably nothing is more clear in the Scriptures, but that God loved the entire world, desired that all men should be saved, caused the saving grace (the means of salvation) to appear for the benefit of all men, making it possible that all might believe.

Seventh-day Adventists are not Calvinists. We do not believe in the Calvinistic form of predestination. To suggest that foreknowledge indicates predetermination is foreign to the Arminian gospel of the Seventh-day Adventist church. So, it is with the Second Coming. Foreknowledge does not indicate predetermination. Just because the Father knows exactly when the pre-conditions for the Second Coming will be fulfilled and therefore knows when the Second Coming will actually occur, does not mean that He did not place the timing of the fulfillment of the pre-conditions for that coming within our power to hasten through cooperation or conversely to delay through stubborn unbelief.

Does the Bible teach that the timing of the Second Coming will be determined by certain conditions which are within the power of the church to effect?

Absolutely. Numerous passages teach that the timing of the Second is to be determined by the fulfillment of certain conditions, which have been placed within the power of God's people through faith and its corresponding cooperation to hasten or through unbelief and its corresponding rebellion to delay.

The most famous of these is probably Matthew 24:14, "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come." That little word "then" is exceedingly powerful as it indicates very clearly the conditional nature of this event and that it is in reference to its timing.

"Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain." James 5:7 Here James compares the timing of the coming of the Lord to the harvest. The word "of" denotes source. James, here, depicts Christ as the husbandman dependent on the earth to bring forth its fruit and dependent upon the rain to do its appointed work. Sorry, there is no farmer on earth who can absolutely control the timing of the harvest or even the success of the crop. Jesus paints himself in the same needy position, when He declared, "when the Son of Man cometh shall He find faith in the earth." It is no hollow question. It is up to you brother and me to say 'yes' and endure so as to determine that He shall find it. Jesus parable of the growing seed gives us the same sense of the farmer's reliance on the earth and also reveals to us the timing of the "putting forth of the sickle" as happening only when "the harvest has come". It is no accident that Rev. 14 presents Jesus' Second Coming as a harvest in which he will "thrust in his sickle on the earth". It is even more pointed when we realize that the harvest He will reap has just been brought to fruition under the third angel's message, "Here is the endurance of the saints, here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." Evidently Ellen White knew what she was talking about when she identified the cause of the delay of Christ's coming as the failure of God's

people to receive and proclaim the third angel's message in the power of the Spirit. GC 458

Marriage is also used as an illustration of the conditional aspect of the Second Coming. "Let us be glad and rejoice for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his wife has made herself ready." When the groom arrives, He must not find her naked. That would be totally inappropriate. Jesus cannot make his bride ready. Oh no. No groom can force his bride to accept her wedding dress. He can provide her garment. He can pay for it. He can wash it, perhaps. But he cannot force her to put it on. He can encourage her to do it. He can woo her. But she must still "make herself ready". Rev. 19:7 What an awesome picture of Jesus: a picture that should make us weep to realize that He who could predetermine everything to His own liking in His infinite power has determined rather to place Himself in a relationship of love with His creatures; a relationship of risk, wherein He may suffer disappointment, rejection, and grief; a relationship which demands reciprocal love, which cannot be forced or coerced. Oh, someday He will have a people who realize what suffering they have put Him through, "... I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his own son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn." Zech. 12:10 When we enter into experiencing the heart of God, who mourned over His only-begotten Son as He suffered the equivalent of the Second death on the cross, then you and I will truly weep over our sinful abuse of Jesus, the Saviour.

Finally, the Second Coming is also presented in Scripture as a destination and our Christian experience as a journey to that destination. Peter tells us that on this journey we should be "looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God". 2 Peter 3:12 How do we do we haste unto the Second Coming? The previous verse (11) tells us, by living in "all holy conversation and godliness".

Doesn't Ellen White tell us that the purposes of God know no haste or delay?

Yes, but she never says that Christ's Second Coming is not delayed, she taught the exact opposite. We should not make Ellen White contradict herself. The statement mentioned is found in *Desire of Ages*, p. 32. I will quote it here:

"...the prophecy of Daniel revealed the time of His advent, but not all rightly interpreted the message. Century after century passed away; the voices of the prophets ceased. The hand of the oppressor was heavy upon Israel, and many were ready to exclaim, "The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth." Ezek. 12:22.

But like the stars in the vast circuit of their appointed path, God's purposes know no haste and no delay. Through the symbols of the great darkness and the smoking furnace, God had revealed to Abraham the bondage of Israel in Egypt, and had declared that the time of their sojourning should be four hundred years. "Afterward," He said, "shall they come out with great substance." Gen. 15:14. Against that word, all the power of Pharaoh's proud empire battled in vain. On "the self-same day" appointed in the divine promise, "it came to pass, that all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt." Ex. 12:41. So in heaven's council the hour for the coming of

Christ had been determined. When the great clock of time pointed to that hour, Jesus was born in Bethlehem.” {DA 32.1}

First, we should notice that this phrase is used with particular reference to prophecies for which God has revealed a specific time for their fulfillment, but the Second Coming has no such prophecy. In fact, this quotation makes no reference to the Second Coming. It simply tells us that what God purposes happens on time. This is true of all of God’s purposes. However, God has never revealed that it is His purpose for all events to happen at specific times on the basis of His predetermination. Neither has God chosen to reveal the exact timing of certain events, although He knows in His infinite foreknowledge when they will actually occur.

This inspired quotation in no ways denies that God purposes for some events to happen when certain conditions have been fulfilled. For example, God has not predetermined arbitrarily, when an individual will be born again. He has purposed rather that the timing of an individual’s birth into the family of God shall be conditioned upon when they respond in faith to the gospel. So when applying this phrase to the second coming we should ask ourselves whether God has revealed that it is His purpose for the Second Coming to happen at a specific pre-appointed time, or whether it is His purpose for it to happen when certain conditions have been fulfilled. As we have already shown, the Scriptures clearly reveal and Ellen White’s writings explicitly agree. God has made the timing of the Second Advent conditional upon the corporate perfecting of His character in His people. God has purposed that when His character shall be so revealed in His people that the gospel of the kingdom irrepressibly shines forth to all the world in the proclamation of the third angel’s message, then Jesus will come again. It is the purpose of God that Christ shall come, when the conditions are fulfilled. It is then, exactly when God purposes for it to be so, when it will happen, then there will be no “haste or delay”.

Let us illustrate this again. God has purposed some things through natural law. For example, when a dam breaks the water will pour out. Similarly, when Mary’s alabaster box of spikenard was broken, the fragrance could not be hidden. Christ is longing for our stoney (alabaster) hearts to be broken and the beautiful fragrance of love to be revealed (spikenard-not poured out is not fragrant at all, love unshared is no love at all.) But love cannot be forced. Jesus will not force the accomplishment of this purpose. We have a choice to make as to when we shall allow our pride and selfishness to be broken up, and allow Christ to be revealed in us. It is possible to “frustrate the grace of God”.

Does Ellen White indicate that the timing of the Second Advent is conditional?

“The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. ...Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the Word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional.” LDE 38

The Lord promised the children of Israel: "Ye shall see the altering of my purpose" [Num. 14-34]. Thus we see that the Lord's promises are upon condition of obedience....” Letter 106, 1897

“We may have to remain here in this world because of insubordination many more years, as did the children of Israel, but for Christ’s sake His people should not add sin to sin by charging God with the consequence of their own wrong course of action. Now have men who claim to believe the Word of God learned their lesson that obedience is better than sacrifice? ‘He hath shewed thee (this rebellious people), O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?’” Letter to Percy Magan, Dec. 7, 1901

Does Ellen White indicate that there has already been a delay in Christ’s Coming, as a result of a failure of believers to do “the will of God”?

“For forty years did unbelief, murmuring, and rebellion shut out ancient Israel from the land of Canaan. The same sins have delayed the entrance of modern Israel into the heavenly Canaan. In neither case were the promises of God at fault. It is the unbelief, the worldliness, unconsecration, and strife among the Lord’s professed people that have kept us in this world of sin and sorrow so many years.” MS 4, 1883 (cited in Evangelism p. 696)

As we contrast the present prosperity of the work with the early years of poverty passed through by the pioneers of this cause, when our numbers were but few and our resources were limited, we can but exclaim, “What hath God wrought!”And yet there remains much to be done. In the past we have not been as diligent as we ought to have been in seeking to save the lost. Precious opportunities have been allowed to pass by unimproved. This has delayed the coming of our King. Had the people of God constantly preserved a living connection with Him from the beginning of the great advent movement; had they obeyed His word and advanced in all His opening providences, they would today be in the heavenly Canaan. LUH, November 19, 1908

“It was not the will of God that Israel should wander forty years in the wilderness; He desired to lead them directly to the land of Canaan and establish them there, a holy, happy, people. But “they could not enter in because of unbelief.” Heb. 3:19. ...In like manner, it was not the will of God that the coming of Christ should be so long delayed and His people should remain so many years in this world of sin and sorrow. But unbelief separated them from God. As they refused to do the work which He had appointed them, others were raised up to proclaim the message. In mercy to the world, Jesus delays His coming, that sinners may have an opportunity to hear the warning and find in Him a shelter before the wrath of God shall be poured out.” Great Controversy, p. 458

What can we do to hasten the coming of the Lord?

“Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?” 2 Peter 3:12

“It is the privilege of every Christian, not only to look for, but to hasten the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Were all who profess His name bearing fruit to His glory, how quickly the whole world would be sown with the seed of the gospel. Quickly the last great harvest would be ripened, and Christ would come to gather the precious grain.” COL 69

“By giving the gospel to the world it is in our power to hasten our Lord’s return. We are not only to look for but to hasten the coming of the day of God.” DA 633

“Those who think of the result of hastening or hindering the gospel think of it in relation to themselves and to the world. Few think of its relation to God. Few give thought to the suffering that sin has caused our Creator. ...The cross is a revelation to our dull senses of the pain that, from its very inception, sin has

brought to the heart of God. ...Our world is a vast lazar-house, a scene of misery that we dare not allow even our thoughts to dwell upon. Did we realize it as it is, the burden would be too terrible. Yet God feels it all. In order to destroy sin and its results He gave His best Beloved, and He has put it in our power, through cooperation with Him, to bring this scene of misery to an end. 'This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then the end shall come.'" Education 263,264

But doesn't Jesus say that it is the "wicked" that say "My lord delays his coming"?

Again, we need to read the Scriptures carefully. Don't the Scriptures also say that we shouldn't let anyone judge us in regard to "Sabbaths"? Don't they also say that "all things are good, and nothing to be refused" in the context of what we eat? Don't they also say that "the smoke of their torment ascends forever"? My point is that, if we read the scriptures shallowly, we shall come to many faulty conclusions. In context these same texts tell us that the Sabbaths we are not to worry about are "shadows of things to come" and that those things which we need not refuse are "received by those who believe and know the truth" because they are things "sanctified by the Word of God" (I have yet to find any place where the Word of God sanctified drinking alcohol or eating cyanide pills.) Furthermore, the Scriptures say also that Jonah was in the whale forever!

The phrase cited in the question is a half-truth. Jesus' complete description of the wicked goes on to say that the wicked servant "shall begin to smite his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken." Matt. 24:48. It is the actions of the servant that contradict the expressed will for him, that he faithfully rule over God's household "to give them meat in due season". The context indicates that the unfaithful servant is condemned, not for recognizing that there was a delay, but for an inappropriate response to the delay, that of failing to faithfully wait, endure, and accomplish the will of the Master.

This parable peculiarly applies to God's remnant people, for we are the ones to whom God has given this opportunity, of serving God's purpose in the last days. Jesus words, "but and if", imply our responsibility and raise the possibility, that if we choose, we may be represented by the wicked servant and fail to fulfill our duties. The fearful reality that thus far we have been unfaithful to our charge during this time of delay must now awaken us, as Seventh-day Adventists to the chilling prospect that unless we repent we shall be "cut... asunder" and receive our "portion with the hypocrites".

Does the Spirit of Prophecy reveal more particulars as to what it is that we have disbelieved, that has caused us to fail so far in the fulfillment of our destiny?

"If all who had labored unitedly in the work of 1844, had received the third angel's message and proclaimed it in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord would have wrought mightily with their efforts. A flood of light would have been shed upon the world. Years ago the inhabitants of the earth would have been warned, the closing work completed, and Christ would have come for the redemption of His people." GC 458

"The Lord in His great mercy sent a most precious message to His people through Elders Waggoner and Jones.This is the message that God commanded to be given to the world. It is the third angel's message, which is to be proclaimed with a loud voice, and attended with the outpouring of His Spirit in a large measure." TM 91

Isn't it rather egocentric, though, of us to say that we could have such an effect on the salvation of others and upon the greatest event in human history?

We could just as well ask. "Isn't it anthropocentric for us to believe that the sovereign ruler of the everything that exists would give His only begotten Son to die for a polluted and rebellious world?" No, rather, it is Theocentric to proclaim the good news of Christ's glorious sacrifice. It is also Theocentric, to give full glory to Him for the amazing grace and love He has bestowed upon His children, that He would give them the marvelous and real responsibility of "justifying God", that through the indwelling Spirit they may fulfill the high and holy purpose of convicting "the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment." This must be why it is called a "privilege". When we truly see Him for as He is and sense our unworthiness, the extent of the responsibility and the expectations which He places upon us should fill us with humility and astonishment. As Paul asked the Corinthians, "For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" 1 Cor. 4:7 Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. How is it that God has bestowed on us, unworthy sinners, the highest of privileges; that we might be collaborators with Christ in the great work of redemption and become the amazement of angel's and of the unfallen worlds? Yet, the Word of God plainly teaches this glorious truth. It is anthropocentric, and may be damningly so, to disbelieve what God plainly says.

Our mission is the same as the apostle Paul's, "to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery...to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God." Eph. 3:9,10 No wonder, the Lord's messenger wrote:

"It is God's prerogative to command; it is the duty of man to obey. Nothing is forced upon any soul. The honor of duty is a thing conferred upon him as a son of God, an heir of heaven. He is to labor for God in interested, true-hearted, glad, honorable service. In obeying all His commandments, a spirit of love for God is revealed. (not love for self!) In this very atmosphere of love, Christ lived and worked. Each word, each action is a work for God. Here is faith in God, and faith in men. Christ would never have given His life for the human race if He had not faith in the souls for whom He died. He knew that a large number would respond to the love He had expressed for humanity. It is not every heart that responds, but every heart may and can, if it will, respond to that love that is without a parallel. "My sheep hear My voice," Christ said. A heart yearning for God will recognize the voice of God. God cannot respond to one soul that does not respond to His grace offered, His love bestowed. He is waiting for a response from souls in Battle Creek. The issue rests wholly with themselves. He bids them to the marriage feast, He sets before them the banquet that will satisfy every want. His Word is full of marrow and fatness. "And ye shall seek Me and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart" [Jer. 29:13]. Shall this decision and effort commence in every family in Battle Creek? Then the Lord will give an outpouring of His Spirit as on the Day of Pentecost." Letter 153a, 1897

It is to the glorification of God's goodness and graciousness for us to joyously affirm the teaching of the Word of God, that His grace changes sinners into saints and He has made it possible for the church to be acceptably fitted to give glory to the infinite God for time and for eternity, world without end, Amen.