

I Can Sleep on Windy Nights

*A Guide to Worry-Free Living
in the Last Days*

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Dedication

Dedicated to the members of the
Chan Shun Sabbath School class
on the campus of Walla Walla
University. They gave wonderful
feedback to the first draft of
the manuscript—feedback that
contributed significantly to the final
shape of the book.

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Preface

Part I

This book was born several months ago when the manager of our local Adventist Book Center told me that people were only buying books focused on the end of time. “They’re really frightened,” she said.

I knew then that I had to write this book. People need to be ready for the end of the world, but they don’t need to be frightened.

So if you are one of the frightened ones, or if you know someone who is, read on. This book is for you.

Part II: The Backstory

Of all the books I have written, none has received such extensive input and response to a first draft—a

draft that went out to the email list of Chan Shun Sabbath School. This book is dedicated to the members of that Sabbath School.

I took that input seriously and used it to shape the content of the book. But when I finished what I thought would be a final draft, I had an uneasy feeling that the book lacked coherence and flow. This backstory addresses that issue.

As I have reflected on the responses to the manuscript, I have identified some six classes of potential readers, most of which would fit into more than one category. Since I am a firm believer in “big tent” Adventism, I have attempted to meet the needs of all. And that’s why coherence and flow has seemed problematic to me.

So here’s my list of six categories. Before you read, you should carefully check over this list. It will help you know what to read quickly and casually, what to read carefully and thoroughly, and what to skip!

1. You simply want to trust God. I was surprised by how many of those who responded to the first draft suggested the Psalms as a way of anchoring the book. So go to Chapter 8. For some, that will be all you need.

2. You want to know what the Bible says about

the time of Jesus' return. Chapters 2 to 4 deal most directly with the biblical texts of the “time” of Jesus return. The answer to the question is a simple one: No one knows when it will be. But if you want to know the biblical texts that tell us that most clearly, Chapters 2 to 4 will be most helpful.

3. You need help understanding and applying certain features of what one of the Venden tribe has called “chronic” Adventism. What is meant by “chronic” Adventism? Almost any lifelong Adventist can fill in the blanks: a lack of certainty; a fear that we’re not good enough; uneasiness in the presence of a God who seems hostile to people and reluctant to let them into the kingdom; haunted by legalism; experience of grace difficult to grasp. Some of these “chronic” features of Adventism might seem puzzling or even scary if you have never tried to address them before.

What has become clear to me is that it was the early writings of Ellen White that “infected” us with chronic Adventism! But I have found her experience to be enormously helpful—observing how she worked through her difficulties provided a wonderful roadmap for me.

My book-length treatment of her experience is

found in *Escape from the Flames*.¹ But my first published material addressing her experience appeared in the Sinai-to-Golgotha series, published in the *Adventist Review* in 1981.² Until that five-part series appeared, the church had never said “in print” that Ellen White had changed.

When I wrote the series, I very carefully avoided the word “change.” I said that Ellen White “grew,” not “changed.” But bright conservatives knew what that meant and grumbled mightily.

Chapter 7 deals with those issues, especially the ones linked with Ellen White’s most troubling quotations: the one that says we will have to “stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator” and the one that says the character of Christ must be “perfectly reproduced” in His people before He will return. Chapter 7 addresses both of those quotations in some detail.

4. You want to address your frustration with Ellen White’s role in Adventism. There is a fair bit of overlap with the third category, but perhaps with more anger and acid. In that case you will want to

¹Alden Thompson, *Escape from the Flames: How Ellen White Grew From Fear to Joy—and Helped Me Do it Too* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2005).

²Alden Thompson, “From Sinai to Golgotha” series, *Adventist Review* (Dec. 3-31, 1981); see also, “*The Prodigal Son Revisited*,” *Adventist Review* (July 1, 1982).

read Chapter 7 selectively, if at all! You don't need Ellen White to be a good Adventist; however, you will be much happier in the church if you can make peace with her.

5. You want to explore the role of prayer. This links up with Chapter 8 and also the Appendix, "What Kind of Prayers Would You Publish if You Were God?"—a chapter from my book, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?*³

6. You have drifted away from God and are troubled by the gulf that seems to separate you from God. I'm guessing that there may not be many readers who would fit into this category. But if you are ready to start taking steps back toward God, I would recommend beginning with the memorization of Scripture. John 3:16 and Romans 8:1 are wonderful verses to begin with. Chapters 5 and 6 on "worry" might be helpful, too.

³Alden Thompson, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (Cantonment, FL: Energion Publications, 2011).

Chapter 1

Asleep When Jesus Comes

In 1941, the great Adventist storyteller, Arthur Maxwell, published a story about a young man he called Victor, who had taken a job with a farmer. Before he hired Victor, the farmer kept asking him what he knew about farming, but the only thing Victor would say was, “I can sleep on windy nights.”

The farmer was both intrigued and puzzled by the boy’s answer because it wasn’t really an answer to his question. The farmer ended up hiring Victor anyway. Let’s hear Uncle Arthur tell the story:

His work was good, and the farmer was pleased with him. But one night something happened.

It was late, and everybody had gone to bed and to sleep. Presently a heavy gust of wind in the trees awakened the farmer, and in an instant he was on his feet. He sensed immediately that a storm was coming up, and his thought was for his cattle, his haystacks, and his barns.

Rushing into Victor's bedroom, he found the boy fast asleep.

"Wake up, wake up!" he cried.

But Victor slept on.

"Wake up, I tell you!... Can't you hear the wind?"

Still Victor slumbered.

"I'll fire him in the morning for this, I will," stormed the farmer as he hurried out of the room and down into the farmyard.

But here another surprise awaited him.

No doors were banging in the boisterous wind. All were tightly closed and barred. He opened one and peered into the cow barn. Every animal was in its place.

But what about the haystacks? He wondered. They must be blown to pieces by now. But they were not. In fact, so carefully had someone covered them that not a wisp of hay had been lost.

Through the darkness and the blinding rain the farmer stamped around his property, expecting every minute to find something wrong, but always finding everything right.

At last, dripping wet, he returned to the house. Going upstairs to Victor's room, he looked in. The boy was still sound asleep.

As the wind continued to howl around the house the farmer recalled the mysterious words: "I can sleep on windy nights." Suddenly he understood.

The boy had done his work so faithfully that there was nothing for him to worry about. He could sleep in a hurricane or an earthquake.¹

¹Arthur S. Maxwell, "Why Victor Slept So Well," in *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1950), pp. 111-114.

I'd like to see this story as a parable of what could and should happen when Jesus comes again: His people have done their work so well that they can "sleep on windy nights" without fear. Their Lord has found them ready.

Interestingly enough, Jesus' story of the ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom (Matthew 25:1-13)² echoes part of this story, for the virgins were sleeping when the bridegroom finally came. Among the ten virgins, five were ready. Jesus called them "wise." And five were not. Jesus called them "foolish."

The bridegroom was so late that all of them became drowsy and slept.

Suddenly, at midnight a shout is heard, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Jesus' punch line ignores the fact that they had all been asleep. In fact, He says, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." In other words, "Be ready. Always. Because you don't know the day or the hour when He is going to come."

In Adventist history, the Great Disappointment never would have happened if our Adventist forebears had read their Bibles carefully.

²Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical passages cited are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Today, we could say that we don't need to be frightened, surprised, or disappointed—because we are ready to meet the Lord whenever He comes.

Jesus' story, however, comes right in the middle of two New Testament chapters—Matthew 24-25—that are very important for those who are waiting for Jesus' return. In the pages ahead, we'll take a close look at both Matthew 24 and 25.

Chapter 2

Matthew 24: Signs and Surprises

Ask most Christians about the content of Matthew 24 and they will immediately say that it is a chapter about the “signs” of Jesus’ return. And they would be quite right—yet they might be unprepared for the “surprises” announced in the following chapter! Let’s look more closely.

The setting of Matthew 24

The relationship of Matthew to the other three Gospels does not directly affect us here. But scholars date the book of Matthew somewhere between 60 and 90 C.E. (Common Era = A.D.).

The crucial event, however, was the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. Jesus

incorporated this ominous event into His teaching. As He was coming out of the temple, He startled the disciples by saying, “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (Matthew 24:2).

Later, as Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples asked Him about His prediction. “Tell us,” they asked, “when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3). Note that they linked three events together: fall of Jerusalem, Jesus’ coming, and the “end of the age.”

Jesus’ answer begins to help us understand how to live at the end of time. There will be false messiahs who will lead many astray, He said. There will be wars and rumors of wars. But, He added, “See that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet” (Matthew 24:6). There will be strife among nations, famines, and earthquakes. Yet, “all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs” (Matthew 24:8).

So expect plenty of trouble. But don’t be afraid because this is only the beginning!

Sound encouraging? Not really. But Jesus just doesn’t want His followers to be caught by surprise.

Surprises, yes. But they don't need to be caught by surprise. Already Jesus is addressing the question of signs and surprises.

A quick survey of issues related to “time” in Matthew 24:14-31

Matthew 24 is packed with significant issues that deserve careful attention. But for our purposes here, the issues relating to “time” are most important.

So let's ponder those passages that have to do with time—passages that might suggest that the end is near (or far) and those that suggest that the end is something we can count on (or that it will be a surprise).

Remarkably, we can say right up front that there are no passages that tell us when the end will be. In other words, date-setting is not part of the story in Matthew 24. But these are the passages that have something to do with “time.”

And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come (Matthew 24:14).

If we believe that every person in our world must hear the gospel before Jesus comes, the end would certainly be a long time in coming. But in Colossians 1:23, the Apostle Paul suggests a more limited application. He states that the gospel “has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.”

If, in Paul’s day, the gospel had already been proclaimed to every creature, then failure to preach the gospel would not be a hindrance to Jesus’ immediate return. But if we think of reaching every creature in our modern world, we could indeed be in for a very long delay.

If those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short (Matthew 24:22).

Here Jesus indicates that the crisis will be severe, so severe that the Lord will cut those days short. Such a perspective would allow for the immediate return of Jesus.

Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from

heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven” with power and great glory (Matthew 24:29-30).

Two surprises lurk in Matthew 24:29-30. First, Jesus declares that “the sign of the Son of Man” appearing in heaven is the most significant of all the signs. And what is that “sign of the Son of Man”? The “Son of Man” Himself “coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” In other words, the most important sign is one that indicates that it’s all over because Jesus is actually coming. There is no point in worrying, for there is no time to get ready—the end is already here.

That’s one surprise, but the other surprise is significant for quite a different reason. For the signs in the heavens (involving the sun, moon, and stars) are not just one-time events. They have been markers all the way along!

Because Adventists are so steeped in the historicist approach to Scripture—an approach that places every event on a single timeline leading to the end—

we have often linked the three great events—earthquake, dark day, and falling stars—with three specific dates: Lisbon earthquake in 1755, the dark day of 1780, and the falling of the stars in 1833. Those events did happen on those dates, and they had a profound effect on those who experienced them. Yet these signs are not just points on a calendar of events. In the Old Testament, they are consistently linked with the idea of the “Day of the Lord.” And that “Day” could be any disaster, any local judgment. That local “Day” pointed to the ultimate “Day of the Lord,” when the Lord would actually return to earth, the Second Advent.

And here it is very important to take a closer look at the Old Testament use of both of these closely related ideas: the heavenly signs (especially the ones mentioned in Matthew 24:29—the sun, the moon, and the stars) and the idea of the “Day of the Lord.” These ideas are not deeply buried secrets. They are jewels in plain sight. Still, we can easily be surprised by this idea of multiple applications. I remember how surprised I was when J. Paul Grove pointed out these “facts” to us in his Hebrew Prophets class at Walla Walla College.

Sun, moon, and stars in the Bible

Here is a list of all the biblical passages that mention the signs in the heavens, with an indication of the original application as given in the Bible:

Biblical passage	Original application
Isaiah 13:10	Babylon
Isaiah 24:23	earth
Jeremiah 15:9	Jerusalem
Ezekiel 32:7	Egypt
Joel 2:10, 31	Zion (moon “turned to blood” in Joel 2:31)
Joel 3:15	all nations
Amos 8:9-10	Israel
Habakkuk 3:10-11	earth
Matthew 24:29-30	Jerusalem/ Second Advent
Mark 13:24	Jerusalem/ Second Advent
Luke 21:25-28	Jerusalem/ Second Advent
Acts 2:20	Pentecost (“moon turned to blood” as in Joel 2:31)
Revelation 6:12	Second Advent

(“moon became like
blood” as in Joel 2
and Acts 2)

This list makes it abundantly clear that these signs were well known long before the dark day of 1780 and the falling of the stars in 1833. The “historical” idea of a single application on a timeline needs to be expanded by what we find in Scripture.

Day of the Lord

The idea of the Day of the Lord as the day when Jesus returns is thoroughly biblical. But it is easy to overlook the richness of the idea in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament. Here is a list of the passages in the Old Testament where the phrase appears. If you read each passage in context, it is clear that the “Day of the Lord” was always a time of “judgment” in the author’s own day, which became a “type” of the day of the Lord, His second coming. And let me emphasize again how surprised I was when Grove pointed out these “facts” to us in his Hebrew Prophets class. Many of you reading this book may be just as surprised as I was! Here is the list.

Day of the Lord (and related terms): Key Old Testament Passages

<i>Book</i>	<i>Specific verses</i>
Isaiah	2:12; 13:6, 9
Jeremiah	46:10
Ezekiel	30:3, 18
Joel	1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14
Amos	5:18-20
Obadiah	15
Zephaniah	1:7, 14-15
Zechariah	14:1
Malachi	4:5

Because of Peter's use of Joel 2 in Acts, 2, the passage in Joel is particularly interesting. The "dark day" in Joel 2 originally was a grasshopper plague in Joel's own day (cf. Joel 2:1, 10, 31). Yet Peter applied Joel's words to the dark day and the events connected with the crucifixion (Acts 2:17-21). Then Revelation 6:12-17 applies those same "signs" to the time of Jesus' actual return.

In short, we don't need to see these signs as pointing to a particular time in the past or future. They could happen at any time. And now we can return to

Matthew 24.

When you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place (Matthew 24:33-34).

Commentators have debated endlessly over what Jesus meant by “this generation.” But the context suggests that “this generation” is the one in which they were living. Thus one could conclude that the Lord has come to the gates and is ready to enter.

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the only the Father (Matthew 24:36).

As George Knight puts it, “Thus the pattern of Matthew 24 appears to be that the *real* signs are not signs of nearness but signs of coming.”¹ That point is becoming increasingly clear in Matthew 24: We *cannot* know when the Lord will return. But we can

¹George Knight, *Matthew*, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1994), p. 237.

choose to be prepared. That is a real choice, indeed, our only choice.

For as the Days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away (Matthew 24:37-39).

Here Jesus drops in a startling change of pace. Almost everything else in chapter 24 reeks of turmoil and pain, all indicating trouble to come. But Jesus changes the scene. He now compares His coming to a joyous and fun-loving party scene. Everybody was living it up—until the flood came *suddenly* and brought it all to an end.

I could go on at length about the contrasting scenes. The dominant mode is turmoil and trouble, like an air-raid siren in time of war. But the party scene is one where all thoughts of trouble have been banished. Life is quite ordinary—eating, drinking, and marrying. Suddenly it all comes to an end, virtually without warning.

The reference to Noah is an interesting one, for he had been preaching his heart out to the people day after day. But as his warnings droned on and on, day after day, the people found it easy to tune him out. They no longer paid any attention. His words became like the too frequent cry of “Wolf! Wolf!” when there was no wolf. Then one day the wolf actually showed up and caught everyone totally by surprise.

The contrast is a little bit like that presented by C.S. Lewis, who noted that the devil doesn’t care if people go to one extreme or the other—either completely disbelieving in the existence of devils or feeling an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.²

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming (Matthew 24:42).

Jesus repeats the point: You don’t know the day your Lord is coming.

If the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not

²C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1982), p. 3.

have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour (Matthew 24:43-44).

Jesus reinforces his point once more, this time with an illustration of the “thief.” You don’t know when the thief is coming, He said. So stay awake.

But if that wicked slave says to himself, “My master is delayed,” and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does *not* expect him and at an hour that he does not know (Matthew 24:48-50, emphasis added).

To the illustration of the “thief,” Jesus adds a second one: the “careless” slave. The moral is the same: Be ready because you don’t know when He is coming.

Now, having looked at all the references that refer to time in Matthew 24, let’s move into Matthew 25. Again, Jesus uses stories, three of them. The first is the story of the 10 virgins who were waiting for the bridegroom, whose coming was delayed.

The second is the story of the master who traveled to a far country and returned after a long time, but before he left, he distributed his assets to his slaves to invest and use while he was gone. The story is often called the story or parable of the “talents.”

The third is the story of the Great Judgment Day, featuring the sheep and the goats.

There is a link between these three stories and the content of Matthew 24; there is also a link between the three stories. All this we will explore in the next chapter.