

Pestilence Prophecy

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Critics often appeal to the following statement, penned in 1849, as a prediction that failed: “[What we have seen and heard of the pestilence \[of 1849\], is but the beginning of what we shall see and hear. Soon the dead and dying will be all around us.](#)” This pestilence epidemic lasted for only a short time and is now long gone. Is this a failed prediction?

Response:

1. Larger Literary Context:

This statement appeared in *The Present Truth* (September 1849, page 32), the first periodical published by James White. This is the only place in Ellen White’s writings where she refers to a local pestilence. In her other 109 uses of the word, it occurs in the context of biblical times or the end of time.

2. Historical Setting:

The pestilence Ellen refers to peaked during the summer of 1849. It was one of the three cholera epidemics that hit the United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866 (see Charles E. Rosenbert, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866*). This pestilence had swept through Europe in 1848 and made it to the United States by April 1849, spreading suffering and death in many cities and villages. By the end of July, the epidemic was so bad in New York that “business had almost ceased: hotels were empty; railroads and steamships arrived without passengers.” Dead bodies were literally lying around the city, sometimes for days (Rosenbert, 112, 114). Newspapers were informing the public and Americans were greatly concerned. In response to the crisis, President Zachary Taylor declared Friday, August 3, 1849, as a day of national fasting and prayer. By the time the September issue of *The Present Truth* rolled off the press, the disease was certainly on the minds of its readers. Although its epidemic proportions diminished later that fall, cholera would remain in America until 1854, when it disappeared abruptly as it had in 1832 (Rosenbert, 172). It would return after the Civil War in the epidemic of 1866. This is the historical setting in which Ellen White wrote the above statement.

3. The Statement in Context: (For purposes of explanation, the paragraphs are numbered in the original sequence of the article.)

Paragraph 1:

O, let us live wholly for the Lord, and show by a well ordered life, and godly conversation that we have been with Jesus, and are his meek and lowly followers. We must work while the day lasts, for when the dark night of trouble and anguish comes, it will be too late to work for God. Jesus is still in his Holy Temple, and

will now accept our sacrifices, our prayers, and our confessions of faults and sins, and will now pardon all the transgressions of Israel, that they may be blotted out before he leaves the Sanctuary. When Jesus leaves the Sanctuary, then he that is holy and righteous, will be holy and righteous still; for all their sins will then be blotted out, and they will be sealed with the seal of the living God. But those that are unjust and filthy, will be unjust and filthy still; for then there will be no Priest in the Sanctuary to offer their sacrifices, their confessions, and their prayers before the Father's throne. Therefore, what is done to rescue souls from the coming storm of wrath, must be done before Jesus leaves the Most Holy Place of the Heavenly Sanctuary.

Paragraph 2:

The Lord has shown me that precious souls are starving, and dying for want of the present, sealing truth, the meat in due season; and that the swift messengers should speed on their way, and feed the flock with the present truth. I heard an Angel say, "speed the swift messengers, speed the swift messengers; for the case of every soul will *soon* be decided, either for Life, or for Death."

Paragraph 3:

I saw that those who had the means, were required to help speed those messengers, that God had called to labor in his cause, and as they went from place to place, they would be safe from the prevailing pestilence. But if any went that were not sent of God, they would be in danger of being cut down by the pestilence; therefore all should earnestly seek for duty, and be sure and move by the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Paragraph 4:

What we have seen and heard of the pestilence, is but the beginning of what we shall see and hear. Soon the dead and dying will be all around us. I saw that some will be so hardened, as to even make sport of the judgements of God. Then the slain of the Lord will be from one end of the earth, to the other; they will not be lamented, gathered, nor buried; but their ill savor will come up from the face of the whole earth. Those only who have the seal of the living God, will be sheltered from the storm of wrath, that will *soon* fall on the heads of those who have rejected the truth (*Present Truth*, September 1849, 32).

4. Immediate Literary Context:

That Ellen White believed the Second Coming was close is clear from the context. In paragraph 2 the angel is quoted as saying, "For the case of every soul will *soon* be decided." Paragraph 4 begins with, "What we have seen and heard of the pestilence, is *but the beginning* of what we shall see and hear. *Soon* the dead and dying will be all around

us.” This paragraph ends by saying that the “storm of wrath” will “*soon* fall on the heads of those who have rejected the truth.” Thus, the repeated use of “soon” indicates that Ellen believed the end of time was near.

5. The Meaning of “Soon”:

How soon is “soon” in this context? Does “soon” mean in the next few months? Or does it mean in the next few years? Three and one-half decades later, Ellen White explained what she meant by “soon” during these early years. After quoting several New Testament verses where the texts speak of time’s being short (1 Cor. 7:29-30; Rom. 13:12; Rev. 1:3; and Rev. 22:6-7), she wrote:

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 (*Selected Messages*, Volume 1, 67; emphasis mine).

While the principle of conditional prophecy should not be applied to everything a prophet says, it does find application in certain utterances, both in the Bible and Ellen White’s writings. This 1849 article in *The Present Truth* is clearly one of those places. For more discussion on the principle of conditional prophecy, [go here](#).

Thus, in 1849 Ellen believed “soon” meant time was short and that the pestilence all around her was a sign that the final pestilence would soon begin. As the years rolled by, she understood “soon” to be conditional. Nevertheless, up until the year of her death in 1915, she continued to describe the Second Coming as “near” or “soon.” **The fact that Christ did not come in Ellen White’s lifetime does not make her a prophetic failure any more that it does the apostles, who believed Christ was coming in their day.** For two insightful studies on Ellen White and the delay of Christ’s coming, see Ralph E. Neall, *How Long, O Lord?*; and Arnold Wallenkampf, *The Apparent Delay: What Role Do We Play in the Timing of Jesus Return?*

6. Detailed Analysis:

Paragraph 1 makes it abundantly clear that Ellen White believed the *commencement* of the final crisis was *still future*. “Jesus is still in his Holy Temple,” she explained; the “dark night of trouble and anguish” has not come yet. The “storm of wrath” is “coming” but will commence only when “Jesus leaves the Most Holy Place of the Heavenly Sanctuary.” It is at that time, during the “storm of wrath,” that the final pestilence will devastate the earth, and the “slain of the Lord will be from one end of the earth, to the other.” **Thus, when Mrs. White’s train of thought is followed through all four paragraphs, the statement under consideration in paragraph 4 cannot mean that the local pestilence was the literal beginning of the final pestilence. The final global pestilence would not**

commence until *after* Jesus leaves the most holy place in heaven.

Her statement, “What we have seen and heard of the pestilence, is but the beginning of what we shall see and hear,” is an *application* of the local pestilence, rather than a prediction about it. Notice the language. The first clause, “What we have seen and heard,” describes what Ellen and her contemporaries had evidently “seen” (in person) and “heard” (from reading the papers or word-of-mouth) concerning the cholera epidemic. In the second clause the “but” functions as an adverb and is thus a synonym of “only.” The clause can thus read: “is *only* the beginning of what we shall see and hear.” **As such, Mrs. White is saying, “This pestilence we have seen and heard of is *only the beginning of what we will see and hear when Jesus leaves the Holy Temple and the storm of wrath commences.*”** Mark the contrast between “have seen and heard” (related to the present pestilence—1849) and “shall see and hear” (future final pestilence). The final pestilence that takes place during the “storm of wrath” was still future; it had not commenced yet. The dead lying in the streets of New York during the summer of 1849 were, therefore, only a foreshadowing (“only the beginning”) of the massive death that will take place during the final pestilence. And, as noted above, in Mrs. White’s thinking at the time, this final pestilence was near because the “storm of wrath” was near: “Soon the dead and dying will be all around us” (see above, #5 “The Meaning of ‘Soon’”).

The “I saw” in paragraph 4 demarcates Ellen White’s application of the local pestilence (first two sentences) from what she saw in vision regarding the final pestilence still in the future (remainder of the paragraph after “I saw”). Thus, when Jesus leaves the Holy Temple and the “storm of wrath” commences, some will “make sport of the judgements of God,” and “the slain of the Lord will be from one end of the earth, to the other.” During this time, only those “who have the seal of the living God, will be sheltered from the storm of wrath,” which certainly includes protection from the deadly pestilence. This all relates to the time after Jesus leaves the Holy Temple (see paragraph 1). The only specific detail Ellen saw in vision about this local pestilence was that God’s messengers would be protected from it if they were led by the Holy Spirit (see paragraph 3).

Therefore, when the literary context is taken into consideration, this statement is an application, rather than a prediction.

7. Meaning of the Cholera Epidemic of 1849:

Was the cholera epidemic of 1849 a sign of the final pestilence that will strike the earth at the end of time? Two years prior to writing this 1849 statement, Ellen wrote in the context of a discussion about the final crisis, “And I saw the sword, famine, pestilence, and great confusion in the land” (*Word to the Little Flock*, 19). This statement certainly fits the scenario in the Lord’s Olivet discourse in Luke 21:10-11 (“kingdom against kingdom [sword]” and “famines and pestilences”). Ellen thus understood the final crisis upon the earth to include “pestilence.” In her later writings regarding the end of time, for example, she uses the word “pestilence” to describe part of the devastation upon the earth (see *The Great Controversy*, 649).

So what is going on in the statement about the cholera epidemic of 1849? When she saw and experienced the pestilence—the suffering, death, and fear it caused—she immediately connected it to what she had seen in vision concerning the final crisis, which included massive death from pestilence. **As we consider the statement today, many years later, what Bible-loving Christian looking for Jesus to come would deny that when the end does come and the final pestilence is unleashed on the world, “the dead and dying will be all around us” and “the slain of the Lord will be from one end of the earth to the other”?** In other words, for those who believe in Ellen White’s prophetic gift, this statement, in its context, is still relevant because it gives us a glimpse into the future regarding the nature of the final pestilence.

Conclusion:

Thus, in light of the above reasons, it is too simplistic to call Ellen White’s statement about the cholera epidemic of 1849 a false prediction because the end did not come then. The death she had seen and heard about during the summer of 1849 was, in her mind, “only the beginning” of what will take place when the “storm of wrath” commences, which, according to her thinking at the time, was “soon” to occur. The “soon” has taken a lot longer than Ellen or any of us could have ever imagined. **The day is yet to come, however (and it will come!), when “the dead and dying will be all around us” and “the slain of the Lord will be from one end of the earth to the other.”** In that day all true believers in Christ can claim the promise:

I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly *pestilence*. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the *pestilence* that stalks in the darkness, nor the *plague* that destroys at midday (Psalms 91:2-6).

Bibliography

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