

Which Is Better, Living in the World or Escaping from It?

In the early 1800's William Miller, a farmer from New York, predicted that Christ's second coming would happen in April, 1843, which was eventually revised to October 23, 1844. He started a movement that included thousands of people from various Christian denominations worldwide, and they were known as Millerites. Many of them sold all of their earthly possessions and climbed to the tops of hills and mountains on the appointed day, eagerly awaiting Christ's return. The failure of Christ to return to earth on that day was called "the Great Disappointment." Seventh-day Adventism grew out of this movement, and Christ's expected "cleansing of the sanctuary" was reinterpreted to be something that happened only in Heaven on that day. They are still waiting for Christ's second coming to Earth.

Something similar to this occurred among first-century Christians, who believed that their current generation would live to see the sudden and dramatic establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth. Many of them sold all their possessions and lived in communes and held all their possessions in common. Because they expected the world to end within their lifetimes, there would be no point in laying up earthly possessions. There would be no point at all to building bigger barns to store all their goods. Material wealth, rather than being a sign of God's favor, meant exactly the opposite, because very soon the world would be turned upside down. The rich would be brought low and the lowly poor people would be exalted.

Then came the "great disappointment." Christ did not return as expected. The temple was not cleansed. Instead it was completely destroyed in A.D. 70, never to be rebuilt again. Christians were severely persecuted not only by the Jews, but by the Romans as well. Many Christians became bitter and resentful towards the Jews and the Romans, and a writer named John wrote some pretty harsh, negative things about them in the Book of Revelation.

Eventually, many in the Christian community began to reinterpret the prophecies regarding the coming Kingdom and "spiritualized" them. Instead of an earthly kingdom, they began to view the Kingdom of God as something that was already in their midst. They began to regard it as a "spiritual awakening," rather than some sort of earthly utopia where Christians would be exalted and their enemies brought low. This process of spiritualization of the Kingdom of God found its way into the Gospels, especially the Gospel of John, which was the last Gospel to be written. We can also see this new emphasis in the later writings of the Apostle Paul.

So, what have we learned from this? How does this affect the way we should be conducting our lives? In my opinion, many of the early followers of Christ were embracing the Gospel for all the wrong reasons. True, they gave up all their possessions, but for very selfish reasons. They expected to be very quickly compensated many times over for their sacrifices. Instead of dedicating their lives to helping the poor and disadvantaged, and demonstrating empathy and sacrificial love, they were mostly interested in their own well-being. Instead regarding material wealth as a blessing from God, to be used for the benefit of the poor, they regarded it as a curse. Instead of praying for their enemies, they looked forward to the day when their enemies would be severely punished.

Well, guess what? Instead of helping us to escape from our life on earth, God requires us to stay where we are, make the best of it, and be made the better for it. God asks us to overcome evil with good, overcome hatred with love, overcome trials with patience, overcome greed with generosity, overcome social injustice by taking action, overcome weakness by relying on God, overcome failure by learning from our mistakes, overcome arrogance by being brought low, overcome the world by staying in it and helping to make it a better place. Getting “saved” has more to do with living in the world than escaping from it.