

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### CALENDARS, CALCULATORS, AND THE PROMISE OF CHRIST'S RETURN

**I**s Jesus coming back soon? The Scripture emphatically affirms the second coming of Christ, but warns against putting it in a certain timeframe (Matthew 24:36; 25:13). But this has not stopped a seemingly ever-increasing host of self-proclaimed prophecy experts from trying. These people always specialize in three areas: (1) Antichrist naming, (2) Rapture dating, and (3) Tribulation speculating. Harold Camping published a convoluted study of Biblical chronology that he claimed pinpointed the date of Christ's return. Appropriately entitled 1994, Camping declared that sometime in September of that year Christ would return. A Camping follower was quoted (Knight-Ridder Newspapers) as saying: "I will be absolutely shocked if this doesn't happen on September 6." Camping declared that "some kind of sign" would occur on that date, one which will create worldwide consternation, fear, and bewilderment. Fast forward to the present and Camping, with the same kind of bravo confidently declares that May 21, 2011 is the exact date of Christ's return. One of Camping's disciples declared in an interview "If this doesn't happen the way Camping says it will then the Bible is wrong!" The Bible is wrong? Another example of the blind following the blind. Camping's meandering and misguided sojourn into chronology, symbolism, arbitrary numerology, and eschatological date-setting, along with his subsequent book *Are You Ready?*, have sold between 60 - 100 thousand copies, thus securing a tidy financial gain for the prognosticator, along with his ruined reputation. Shortly before his first prediction Camping was even willing to appear on the Larry King call-in show on television (CNN) to present and defend his views to millions of viewers in this nation and around the world. Camping has acted contrary to the Savior's own words and brought embarrassment upon the cause of His kingdom, but Camping's *faux pas* is anything but unique.<sup>1</sup> God's people have been scandalized by date-setters throughout the history of the church. There have been dozens in our own generation. In 1970 Hal Lindsey published *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which went on to sell millions of copies. He predicted that Christ would return within forty years ("a generation") of the re-establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948. Heading an Arab-African alliance, Egypt was supposed to attack Israel, with the Soviet Union subsequently entering the fray. His predictions caused enough hoopla that even *Time* magazine covered it (Jan. 8, 1973: "Is the End Near?"). Lindsey later wrote: "unmistakably ... this generation is the one that will see the end of the present world and the return of Christ" (*The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon*, 1981). In 1981 Bill Maupin, leader of the Lighthouse Gospel Tract Foundation (Tucson, AZ), declared that "there isn't any chance" that the rapture would not take place on June 28 of that year. His followers quit their jobs and gave away their cars. Six weeks later he had revised his calculations, and his followers again gathered at his house, waiting to be lifted off the face of the earth. But his was a small flock. Not so for Chuck Smith, founder of the Calvary Chapel network of huge worship centers (first in Costa Mesa, CA). In "Future Survival" (1978) he said: "From my understanding of biblical prophecies, I'm convinced that the Lord is coming for His Church before the end of 1981."<sup>2</sup> In 1986 Charles Taylor (Anaheim, CA), the editor of *Bible Prophecy News* published the startling calculation (about which he claimed to be "89 percent sure"! ) that Jesus Christ would return on September 24, 1987. "All signs point to it," he assured readers based on a complex formula extrapolated from Leviticus and Daniel. "The majority of Christians," according to him, knew that the rapture would take place within the next couple of years. Perhaps the most egregious was Edgar C. Whisenant. He claimed he could prove it with mathematical precision; he was, after all, a rocket scientist. So he set out to demonstrate how "all the 886 end-time Bible prophecies" coalesced to make Rosh Hashanah of 1988 the exact date of Christ's return to rapture the saints. He published *88 Reasons Why The Rapture is in 1988*. Whisenant was anything but humble: "Only if the Bible is in error am I wrong, and I say that unequivocally. There is no way Biblically that I can be wrong; and I say that to every preacher in town." When the author's intricate system of predicting the end failed, he went on undaunted with a new book called *The Final Shout: Rapture Report 1989*. It seems that he had made a critical error because he was following the wrong calendar: "My mistake was that my mathematical calculations were off by one year ... Since all centuries should begin with a zero year (for instance, the year 1900 started this century), the first century A.D. was a year short, consisting of only 99 years. This was the one-year error in my calculations last year (1988). The Gregorian

calendar (the calendar used today) is always one year in advance of the true year. Numbered correctly from the beginning, *i.e.*, 1 A.D., 1989 Gregorian would be only one thousand nine hundred eighty eight years of 365.2422 days each."<sup>3</sup> Whisenant was not alone in making 1988 the termination point of the last days. Many others succumbed to last days madness. Clifford Hill writes that "two young men from Denmark announced that they were the two witnesses of Revelation 11:3 sent by God to prepare the way for Messiah. Two years earlier I had met two young Americans camping on the Mount of Olives also claiming to be the two witnesses." On the heels of Whisenant came Grant R. Jeffrey's *Armageddon: Appointment with Destiny*. Jeffrey, who has gained quite a reputation for finding "secret codes" in the Bible, writes that through his own research into biblical prophecies he has discovered a number of indications "which suggest that the year A.D. 2000 is a probable termination date for the "last days." Over (he last decade or so both the Christian Broadcasting Network (*The 700 Club* with Pat Robertson) and the Trinity Broadcasting Network (*Praise the Lord* with Paul and Jan Crouch) have had numerous self-proclaimed prophets and prophetesses declare their visions and revelations about such things - all of them without exception have been 100% wrong."<sup>4</sup> A mega-church pastor in Colorado was quick to jump on the end-times band wagon writing that one of the *signs of the times* is natural calamity. He pointed to the "amazing" number of recent earthquakes *i.e.* in Chile, New Zealand, and Japan as sure indicators that the Second Coming is close.<sup>5</sup> This is an all too common mistake, assuming that Jesus' remarks in Matthew 24:7 is what the Bible means by *Signs* that immediately precede Christ's return. Anthony Hoekema wrote: "On the basis of this view, which has affinities with the mistaken view just discussed, the signs are thought of as spectacular interruptions of the normal course of history which irresistibly draw attention to themselves. But if the signs of Christ's return are of such a sort, how can we be continually watchful? Jesus himself warned against this understanding of the signs when he said to the Pharisees, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you' (Luke 17:20 - 21)."<sup>6</sup> In this first major section of the Epistle, Paul is dealing with his readers' most pressing need, the persecution they were experiencing because of their faith. In doing so, the Apostle primarily seeks to encourage and to comfort these saints through three specific means.

#### I. ENCOURAGEMENT OF PRAISE (1:3, 4).

There are many times, and especially in times of affliction, that we ourselves are unable to evaluate what God is accomplishing in our lives. However, others can see spiritual improvement within us even when we miss it completely. This is especially true of the Apostle Paul in relationship to his readers." After one endures many difficulties, a strength of character develops that was not present previously. Such tested character in turn generates hope. Why does tested character spark hope? Because moral transformation constitutes evidence that one has already been changed by God. Thus it assures believers that the hope of future glory is not an illusion. There is a pattern of growth in the here and now, however imperfect, that indicates that we are changing. Believers, then, become assured that the process that God has begun he will complete (1 Corinthians 1:8; Philippians 1:6)."<sup>7</sup>

##### A. Their faith was growing (1:3a)

Faith, like any other muscle on our body, must be exercised in order to grow stronger. One of God's means to exercise our faith, and thus to enable it to be strengthened, is trials and persecutions. The specific persecutions that these believers suffered did precisely this: their faith had grown. Previously, Paul had prayed that their faith might mature and grow (I Thessalonians 3:10), and now he is thankful that in the midst of persecution, his prayer is answered.

##### B. Their love was abounding (1:4)

This again is an answer to Paul's previous prayer (I Thessalonians 3:12). It is evident from this that these readers' sufferings did not prevent them from sharing love with others who were suffering. In fact, it is very probable that their common plight was the means that God used to draw them closer to one another.

##### C. Their patience was increasing (1:4)

The result of their growing faith and abounding love was that the writers themselves were "speaking proudly" of them to the other churches in the region. As we have seen, others were already doing this (I Thessalonians 1:8ff), and now the Apostles do so as well. This is indeed high *praise* for these readers, intended to *encourage* them in their persecutions and trials. The specific subject matter of this boasting is their "patience and faith" in the midst of their difficulties. The term "patience" indicates their preserving endurance; it is closely linked with "faith." The clear implication is that without genuine faith these readers, like us today, would not be able to remain steadfast in their afflictions. Their increasing patience manifested the growing reality of their faith, and for this Paul praises them.

#### II. THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF PROMISE (1:5 - 10)

The promises of God's Word are an extremely important means to encourage afflicted saints. In this section, Paul promises these readers that at the return of Christ, a righteous God will deal justly not only with them, but also with their persecutors as well." This passage," notes C. Samuel Storms, "is therefore

intensely eschatological and contains one of the strongest and clearest inferences for Posttribulationism in all of the New Testament."<sup>8</sup>

A. The Promise of Reward

The first promise that Paul gives these readers in order to encourage them is that in the future day of judgment, their present sufferings will be found to have been beneficial in that they will be considered worthy of entering the Kingdom of God. Paul begins' this eschatological train of thought somewhat abruptly in verse 5. The meaning of the verse appears to be this: the Thessalonians' perseverance in trials (v. 4) is a plain indication (i.e., "proof positive" evidence) of God's righteous judgment. The purpose of which is to declare openly that these believers are worthy of entering the future Kingdom of God. It is evident from the following verses that this righteous judgment (just and without partiality) of God will take place at the future coming of Christ, a coming which all acknowledge as the Second Advent of Christ which occurs *after* the tribulation (v. 6-10). In other words, *enduring faith in the midst of persecution is that which reckons these saints worthy of entrance into the Kingdom of God when Christ returns as righteous Judge*. This is *not* to say that suffering is meritorious, procuring entry into the Kingdom, but it *is* to say that perseverance in suffering is the outcome and evidence of having been saved by faith. As a result, they are considered worthy of the Kingdom of God.

B. The Promise of Double Recompense

The mention of the coming righteous judgment of God leads to a description of that judgment. It is a judgment that is based upon the principle stated at the beginning of verse 6 - "if indeed it is a righteous (just) thing with God to recompense ... " What Paul is saying is that *God's righteous character in judgment assures a just/righteous outcome*. He *will meet out strict judgment to both the believer and nonbeliever*. For the nonbeliever, this will be *retributive* (punitive). He will justly repay those who are afflicting these saints with affliction. But for the believer, this just recompense will be *remunerative* (rewarding). This rest will not only be experienced by these readers, but by the Apostles as well. The word used for "the rest" that both these groups will experience connotes the idea of loosening or relaxing a taut bowstring, and therefore, suggests the idea of relief through the relaxing of tension or pressure. What is significant is that Paul states that this twofold recompense will occur "when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven. ..." The detailed description that follows unmistakably defines Paul's meaning of our Lord's "coming" as the Second Advent. The resultant difficulty for pretribulationism is obvious: Paul places the release of these readers from their persecution at the posttribulation return of Christ when He comes to judge unbelievers. If the rapture is a separate event that occurs seven years before the Second Advent, at which time these readers would have been removed (and released) from tribulation, then this passage becomes inexplicable. What follows in verses 8 - 10 is the further description of this coming of the Lord, which clearly defines it as the *posttribulation* Second Advent. It will be a time of judgment, when those who neither know God nor obey the Gospel of Christ will be inflicted with full and deserved justice from a just Judge. The consequences of this judgment will be the eternal destruction of the lost, which is the exact opposite of eternal life; it is ruin. This is further described by being "away from the presence of the Lord and from the glorious manifestation of His might." In other words, this banishment from the Lord's presence will be the very essence of eternal punishment. But in striking contrast is the destiny of the saints at Christ's return. At this event, the Lord will be glorified "in" His saints; meaning that "He will be glorified when it is openly displayed what He has wrought in His saints, now assembled with Him in glorified bodies and perfected in spirit." Further, the Lord will be the object of marvel and admiration "among" all who believe. This description indicates that the Lord, as well as the saints, is the occasion for this admiration. Probably those who do this marveling are the angels who were previously unable to understand the salvation of the saints (1 Peter 1:12), but who will now understand this at *the Second Advent*. That Paul directly relates these promises of *reward* *retribution*) and *relief* to these readers is evident from the concluding phrase: "For our testimony to you was believed...."

III. THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF PRAYER (1:11 - 12)

To further encourage these readers, the Apostle now offers the first of four prayers for them. In view of the coming glorification of Christ in His saints, Paul prays that these readers may be worthy of their salvation. They have been efficaciously *called* through the preaching of the Gospel, resulting in their initial conversion (I Thessalonians 4:7; II Thessalonians 2:13, 14). This *call* to salvation looks forward to its consummation in the coming Kingdom (I Thessalonians 2:12). In view of this future consummation, described in the preceding verses (1:5, 10), Paul is praying that these saints might be enabled to live lives worthy of this calling (cf. Ephesians 4:1). In order for God to do this, He must also fill them/us with the desire for goodness and the faith that produces or prompts works. Only God can do this (cf. Philippians 2:12, 13). The ultimate purpose of this prayer is that the name of the Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in our/their lives.

**CONCLUSION:** One of my former professors, the late Philip Edgcumbe Hughes wisely observed: "The Lord's return may be soon or it may be long delayed. In each succeeding generation the presence of anti-Christ has been, and continues to be, readily discernible. The coming of Christ, therefore, is always imminent and there is need for constant watchfulness. This explains why the prophetic teaching of the New Testament is consistently presented with a strong ethical emphasis. It is intended, not as pabulum for mystery-mongers and puzzle-solvers, but as an incentive to godly living. Such instruction is always accompanied by the call to be diligent and watchful in the Master's service, so that when, suddenly, he comes we may not be found wanting. Typical is the following admonition uttered by Christ himself: *Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or a cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch! (Mk. 13:33 – 37).* Paul stirs up the Christians in Rome with this challenging appeal: *You know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Rom. 13:11 – 14).* John urges his readers to live lives befitting those whose Master may appear at any moment: *Now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. . . . Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (I Jn. 2:28; 3:2f.).* As it was in the days of the apostles, so in each succeeding generation the expectation of the Lord's return has been a spur to earnest Christian living,"<sup>9</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Greg Bahnsen points out "It is unusual to have a date-setter be an amillennialist like Camping; most turn out to hold a Premillennial (and dispensationalist) perspective. However, I even know one postmillennialist who predicts the beginning of "the latter day glory" of Christ's kingdom to be around the year 2000. The infection of a date-setting mentality can afflict adherents of any millennial viewpoint, even though the best representatives of all three (or four) schools vaccinate against it." *Penpoint*, vol. 5, no. 9, 1994.
- <sup>2</sup> Smith has learned his lesson: "Date Setting is wrong, and I was guilty of coming close to that. I did believe that Hal Lindsey could have been on the track when he talked about the forty-year generation, the fig tree budding being the rebirth of Israel, and I was convinced in my own heart. I never did teach it as a spiritual dogma, but I had a personal conviction that Christ was coming before 1982 .... I've learned that we can not put any parameters on the return—or on the rapture of the church—there are no parameters—it can happen at any time, hopefully within our lifetime but maybe not." As cited in W.A. Alnor, *Soothsayers of the Second Advent* (Revell, 1989) p. 41.
- <sup>3</sup> In a February, 1989, *Charisma & Christian Life* magazine interview, Whisenant, in highly hubristic fashion, stated his ministry "is the final movement of God," while relying on subjective—and questionable—visions and revelations that God's final movement would come from his hometown in Arkansas in the last days. "By the way, God did say His last movement would come out of Little Rock. I live in Little Rock. I believe this is it," he said. " ... Corrie ten Boom saw it in a vision. And Kathryn Kuhlman said it would."
- <sup>4</sup> For further documentations cf. W.M. Alnor, *Soothsayers of the Second Advent* (Revell, 1989) and G. DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (American Vision, 1999).
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.christianpost.com/news/megachurch-pastor-tackles-confusion-over-end-times-...>
- <sup>6</sup> A. Hoekema, *The Bible and The Future*, (Eerdmans, 1979), p. 130. He adds, "A further word of warning is in order here. Spectacular signs are specifically associated with the kingdom of Satan; they could therefore be quite misleading. It is said that the coming of the man of lawlessness will be 'with all power and with pretended signs and wonders' (II Thess. 2:9). And of the beast rising out of the earth described in Revelation 13, it is said that he 'works great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of men; and by the signs which it [or he] is allowed to work in the presence of the beast, it [he] deceives those who dwell on earth' (vv. 13 – 14). Instead of looking for spectacular signs, therefore, God's people should be on the alert to discern the signs of Christ's return primarily in the nonspectacular processes of history. That there may be catastrophic signs like earthquakes is not denied, but to limit the signs to the category of the unusual and the abnormal is a mistake." I will deal with this in detail next week.
- <sup>7</sup> T. R. Shreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, (Baker, 1998), p. 256.
- <sup>8</sup> C. S. Storms, unpublished paper on Biblical Eschatology, 1981. I again must acknowledge my indebtedness to my friend's paper for the general features of this message.
- <sup>9</sup> P. E. Hughes, *Interpreting Prophecy*, (Eerdmans, 1976), p. 30.