

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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LIVING IN LIGHT OF THE SECOND COMING

Is Jesus coming back *soon*? The Scripture emphatically affirms the second coming of Christ, but warns against putting it in a certain timeframe (Matt. 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. A couple of decades ago, radio broadcaster 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. Another Camping disciple, a Reformed Episcopalian from Philadelphia, said: "Nothing, absolutely nothing, can change my mind." Except maybe the course of recent history. 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. He 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.¹ 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."² 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 he 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 AD 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 AD, 1989 Gregorian would be only one thousand nine hundred eighty-eight years of 365.2422 days each.”³ 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 AD 2000 is a probable termination date for the ‘last days.’” Over the 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.⁴

In 1 Thess. 5:1-11, the Apostle once again turns his attention to *The Blessed Hope*. Having begun to speak about the return of the Lord and the translation of the Church (4:13-18), Paul continues to instruct his readers on the *certainty* of the Lord’s coming *in order to urge his readers to greater efforts in Christian living* (5:1-11). This is the main thrust of this passage. Our response to the coming of the Lord’s Day should be that of watchfulness (v. 6) and growth in Christian virtues (v. 11). However, before Paul actually presents these exhortations to his readers, he first instructs them on the subject of the *time* of the Lord’s return. Herein lies the great theological debate. Leon Morris put this debate in its proper perspective *with* the proper attitude: “What he says bears upon another matter which is a source of dispute among evangelicals, namely as to whether believers will be left on earth to pass through the great tribulation of the last days. The language of this chapter could be understood either way. It seems to me that the probability is that it should be taken as meaning that believers will pass through the day spoken of. Paul speaks of them as being ready (v. 4), not as being taken out of the trouble in question. But I fully recognize that other interpretations are possible, and suggest that it is not wise for any of us to condemn those who see such passages differently.”⁵ Before examining the details of this passage, it is important to remember the precise relationship that exists between the preceding paragraph (4:13-18) and this present passage (5:1-11). The phrase that forms the connecting link between these two passages is the opening statement of 5:1, “Now concerning . . .” This phrase indicates that a new thought is now being introduced which is closely connected with the foregoing thought. As Gundry notes, the ease with which Paul moves from the rapture and the coming of Christ (4:13-18) into the Day of the Lord (5:1-11) “without explanation or differentiation argues strongly for their identification.”⁶ Interestingly, Walvoord basically concurs that there is a “new subject” being introduced (5:1-11) that has “some relationship to the preceding context” (4:13-18).⁷ He goes on to say that “Paul is continuing his discussion by dealing with the broad program of end time events as defined by the term ‘day of the Lord.’”⁸ The reason why both Gundry (a posttrib) and Walvoord (a pretrib) stress the continuity between these two passages is that both of them believe that the Day of the Lord (5:1ff) begins with the rapture of the Church (4:13ff).⁹ Therefore, since they both

agree on this point, the real issue in question is the beginning point of the Day of the Lord. Does it start *before* the tribulation or *after* the tribulation? Once this can be determined, the interpretation of the entire passage will become clear.

I. THE APOSTLE'S CONTRAST (5:1-5)

Although these readers had need for instruction concerning the relationship between the coming of the Lord and those who had died before His coming (4:13ff), they had no need for instruction concerning the general *timetable* for future events. They knew clearly about the "times and seasons" of His return. These terms refer to the final events that will foreshadow His coming. The reason they had no need for instruction concerning this matter is told to us in 2 Thessalonians 2:5; they previously had received oral instruction concerning the time of the Lord's return when Paul was first with them. In both that passage and this one, Paul refers to the end time events of Christ's coming as the "Day of the Lord." It is of utmost importance to define this term and to pinpoint its beginning in relationship to the tribulation. The term "Day of the Lord" is a familiar Old Testament expression that denotes the day when God intervenes directly in human affairs to *judge* His enemies and to *deliver* His people. It does not refer to a twenty-four hour period of time, but rather to an extended time period. At times, it was associated with the past judgments on Israel's enemies; in the future, it will be a time predicted by the prophets as being associated with the Second Coming of Christ. At that day, there will be both *blessing* poured out for the godly and judgment upon the wicked (Joel 2:32-3:1; 6b-21; Amos 5:15, 18-20; Obad. 15, 17; Zeph. 2:3; 3:11, 16; Zech. 14). As previously mentioned, the important fact to determine is *when* this day of judgment and blessing will begin – before the tribulation or after it? There are at least three reasons that are given in Scripture that indicate that the day of the Lord will occur *after* the tribulation.¹⁰ They are as follows:

- A. Malachi prophesies that Elijah will reappear "before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord" (Mal. 4:5). It is commonly held by interpreters of revelation that Elijah is one of the two witnesses that ministers in the latter half of the tribulation (Rev. 11:1-13). If this be the case, then the day of the Lord cannot begin before the tribulation or include the tribulation period itself unless, of course, Malachi's prediction has already been fulfilled, or unless Elijah will reappear to minister before the tribulation. (There are some Pretribulationists who state that he has appeared in the person of John the Baptist. However, it is clear that the Baptist only came in the spirit and power of Elijah, Luke 1:17. After John's death, Christ still affirmed that Elijah was yet to come, Matthew 17:11.)
- B. Joel prophesies that certain celestial signs will come "before the great and awesome day of the Lord" (Joel 2:30, 31). Our Lord taught that these celestial signs would follow immediately *after* the tribulation (Matt. 24:29-31). Clearly the day of the Lord cannot and will not begin with the tribulation or any part of it. Since these heavenly signs must come *before* the Day of the Lord and yet *after* the tribulation, the Day of the Lord itself must come after the tribulation.
- C. Paul taught that two tribulational events must take place *before* the coming of the day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:1-4). These two events are the revealing of the man of lawlessness (Antichrist) and widespread apostasy of professing believers. Since these two events occur before the day of the Lord, obviously the day of the Lord cannot include the tribulational period during which they occur. Therefore, in this passage Paul is talking about the end time events that are *posttribulational* when he uses the term "the day of the Lord." This becomes very important to realize when we see that Paul describes the manner of our Lord's coming at this time as being sudden and unexpected, "just like a thief in the night." Obviously this cannot mean at any moment the return of Christ that

will come after the tribulation. If this is the case, then to whom will the day of the Lord be sudden and unexpected? The context reveals the answer. There is a clear contrast between believers and nonbelievers in their relationship to this Day. Verse 3 indicates that the coming of the Lord will be sudden only upon the *nonbelievers* (“they”). In contrast, the *believer* (“you”) will *not* be caught surprised at the Lord’s return; it will not overtake him like a thief (v. 4). In other words, the contrast in these verses is between the *unexpectedness* of the Day’s arrival *for the wicked* and the *expectedness* of that Day for the *believer*. The reason the day of the Lord will not overtake believers as a thief is because they are all “sons of the light/day” and not “of night/darkness” (v. 5). Throughout the New Testament, these terms refer to coexisting spiritual realms of belief and unbelief (Luke 16:8; Rom. 13:12, 13; Eph. 5:8; Col. 1:12, 13; 1 Peter 2:9; 1 John 1:7; 2:9, 10). Consequently, what Paul is teaching is that believers, by virtue of their being in the spiritual realm of light and day, will have their *hearts prepared* for the day of the Lord and their *eyes open* to the events that signal its approach (cf. 2 Thess. 2:1-5). But the nonbelievers, being in spiritual darkness, will be totally unprepared and will fail to perceive the significance of the tribulational events. For them, the day of the Lord will come suddenly and swiftly, bringing with it eternal separation from Christ (cf. 2 Thess. 1:9). Thus it seems apparent that both believer and nonbeliever will have a relationship to the day of the Lord, the only difference between them being the manner in which the Day approaches upon them.

II. THE APOSTLE’S EXHORTATIONS (5:6-10)

The opening phrase of verse 6 (“so then”) introduces a logical and necessary conclusion from what has just been stated. A twofold exhortation follows: because believers live in the spiritual realm of the day/light, they should be watchful and sober-minded (v. 6, 7) and should be spiritually armored with faith, love, and hope for salvation (v. 8). In the first exhortation, Paul stresses that as sons of the day, believers must constantly keep themselves from indifference to spiritual realities (i.e., “sleep”); they are not to conduct themselves “as do the rest,” i.e., the nonbelievers. In strong contrast, believers are to be characterized by watchfulness and sober-mindedness. In the words of Hiebert (a pretribulationist): “The exhortation reflects the eschatological teaching of our Lord (Matt. 24:43-44; Mark 13:33-35; Luke 12:37). The believer must not only be alert to the dangers around him but must be looking for the return of the Lord, one of the chief objects of Christian watchfulness (1 Cor. 1:7; Titus 2:13; Heb. 9:28; 2 Peter 3:12).”¹¹ It is this exhortation to be watchful for the coming day of the Lord that is perhaps the *strongest support for Posttribulationism* in this entire passage. If the Church is to be removed seven years before the day of the Lord begins by a pretribulational rapture, Paul’s exhortation to be alert for that day becomes irrelevant and meaningless. Furthermore, what would be the point in saying that the Day will not come like a thief upon believers (v. 4), who are to be watching for it (v. 6), if it will not come upon them at all? This passage is suggesting that Paul expected believers to watch for the approaching signs that will lead up to the day of the Lord (cf. 2 Thess. 2:1-5) so that they in fact will not be overtaken suddenly or unexpectedly by it. The obvious inference is this: “Since the day of the Lord will begin after the tribulation, and since Christians will not be taken by surprise at the arrival of that day, the Church will have to come through the tribulation.”¹² Verse seven simply confirms this exhortation to watchfulness; sleep and drunkenness are activities that are characteristics of the night (literally). Since believers are not of the night (spiritually), they are not to indulge in the activities (moral sleepfulness) that are characteristic of those in spiritual darkness; rather, they are to be spiritually alert and sober-minded. The second exhortation that is given in this section is to be vigilant and spiritually armored with the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of hope for salvation. Since believers are of the day, they must be on their guard and resist spiritual enemies as they await the return of the Lord. Not only are faith and love indispensable in our present warfare in this world, but so also is hope. The nature of this hope

is the hope “of salvation,” which is the *future eschatological deliverance of believers at the coming of the day of the Lord*. In other words, our hope as believers at the return of Christ is the consummation of our salvation or glorification (Phil. 3:21; Rom. 8:23), which is the antithesis of the wrath that is mentioned in the following verses. In these following verses, Paul states the reason for this exhortation and, in doing so, describes for us the *nature, means, and goal* of our future salvation, which will be the *eternal fellowship that we will have with Christ at His return* (v. 10). The *means* of our future salvation from divine wrath is, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 9b, 10a). It is He who died for us and who has thus borne the wrath of God “for us” through His vicarious, penal sacrifice. The *goal* of our future salvation is to “live together with Christ” (v. 10b). The words “whether we are awake or asleep” are best understood figuratively, denoting whether we “live or die” (cf. 1 Thess. 4:16-17; 1 Cor. 15:51-54; Rom. 14:8-9). Thus, the emphasis again is that both the living (raptured) and the dead (resurrected) will live “together” with Him forever when He returns (4:17).

III. THE APOSTLE’S ENCOURAGEMENT (5:11)

The intent of Paul’s teaching on this subject is designed to urge these believers toward greater efforts in their Christian living. He exhorts them, on the basis of this previous instruction, to first of all “encourage one another.” This exhortation primarily concerns our mutual responsibility to encourage each other toward diligence and perseverance in our Christian lives in view of the coming return of the Lord. Secondly, we are to “build each other up” on the basis of this instruction. It is the Word of God and its eschatological truths that are designed to cause us to grow spiritually as we study and reflect upon these great truths. This, therefore, is the intended result of Paul’s teaching on this subject.

ENDNOTES

¹Greg 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.

²Smith 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 cannot 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.

³In 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.”

⁴For 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).

⁵Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistle To The Thessalonians*, p. 152.

⁶Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 105-106.

⁷John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, pp. 115-116.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁹Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 81; Gundry, p. 106.

¹⁰Gundry, pp. 93-96.

¹¹D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 219.

¹²Gundry, p. 96. See also George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 219.

ppearings and The Discipline of Grace” @ www.spurgeongems.org, p. 2.