

Don't Be a Prudent Agnostic

Feast of Trumpets

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In the very late 1970's while we were living in Columbia, SC, I read the book *The Final Conclave*. I don't know whether you're aware of that or how many of you have read that book, but it's a very interesting novel. It's supposed to be fiction, but I would put that "fiction" almost in quotation marks because I don't think a great deal of it was fiction except for the names of the people who were named within it.

Malachi Martin, who was a Jesuit Priest, writes it. He was stationed in the Vatican for some 25 years and very familiar with the inner-workings of the higher echelons of the Catholic Church in the Vatican. *The Final Conclave* is a thinly veiled expose of the election of Pope John Paul I, the one who was in office only for about 30 days and then very mysteriously died.

The whole book centers upon the actions of the Cardinals trying to arrive at who was going to be the next Pope. We can look back on history and we can see that the choice that they made was John Paul I. In the book (on page 201 if any of you have the paperback version of it), Malachi Martin has two of his main characters, a cardinal named Angelico and another one named Dominico, involved in a conversation regarding the religious and political makeup of the College of Cardinals. It's very interesting because Angelico says that 40% of the Cardinals are firm and genuine believers in the Christian faith. That leaves 60% who are hanging out there on the edge who aren't all that firm a believer in the Christian faith, or I should say the Catholic faith.

He went on to say that 33% of the Cardinals profess loyalty, but they don't believe. What they are interested in is power and membership in a gilt-edged club with a great deal of mystique. Now the rest, 27%, Angelico said are playing an incredible game in which they are constantly hedging their bets. But these Cardinals are nothing more than prudent agnostics. They don't even know whether God exists or not. If this is anywhere near accurate, the very top echelon of the Catholic Church is being run by a number of people (60% of the Cardinals) who are playing an incredible game, especially those last 27%.

That 27%, Angelico said, hope that the teachings of the church are correct but they aren't really sure. These men have been religious, they have studied catechism, church doctrine and policy, church history, and they do believe in their own way. But they've seen enough examples of corruption and self-service, temporal concern within the church that it shakes their foundations in regard to Christianity. Their reaction to that is to soft-pedal their faith, take it easy. They blow with the wind. They go this way or that way.

And at least in terms of voting for who the next Cardinal is going to be, this was the group that was most likely to be reached out to by those who had strong convictions about what kind of characteristics the Cardinal should have who was going to be the next Pope. These men actually had positions of great power whenever there came time to vote for a Pope because they knew that they were going to be holding the fulcrum of power and they could shift the voting in one

direction or another.

These people, they drift with the wind. Whichever way the church seems to be going, they are willing to go with it. So if the church has a Pope who is reasonably religious and inclined to strengthening the church theologically and religiously, then they will tend to be strengthened by that. But if the Pope is one who is not all that inclined to be religious and the spirituality of the church and is more politically oriented, then they are willing to support that. They will go in any direction that they feel is necessary to further their own career.

This makes the second or third time that I have spoken on this subject since 1978 or 1979 when I first put this sermon together, but I couldn't help think when I originally made this sermon and when I thought again about what to speak about this year about what our attitude toward Trumpets especially is. Does there exist in us the earnest expectation of what the day symbolizes? Are we looking forward to its culmination, to the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the establishment of the government of God on earth, to our glorification, to our establishment in the government of God in positions of authority and power once again?

Do we really believe that we might even have this hope? Is it something that we think about frequently? Is it something that motivates us? Is it something that drives us and provides incentives for doing the things necessary to remain faithful and loyal to God? Or is it possible that we, too, are hedging our bets like that 27% that Angelico spoke of. That we aren't really sure. Is it possible that we have slipped into becoming prudent agnostics, or are we like that 40% that is deeply committed to what the church's vision is?

A number of years ago, in fact it was pretty much through this same period of time when we were in Columbia, I made my first in-depth study of the book of Hebrews. I later on went into it again when we were transferred to Chicago, and again when we were in the Glendale and North Hollywood area. Every time I went into the book of Hebrews, I generally followed it up with a sermon at the Feast of Tabernacles regarding an overview of what the book of Hebrews is about.

The book of Hebrews is clearly written to a group of Christians who were older in the faith. It's thought that it was possible (nobody knows for sure) that this was written to people who were in the Jerusalem area. It was written to people who were familiar with Judaism. They were familiar with the activities of the Tabernacle and the Temple. They knew all about the priests and what their responsibility was. And above all they knew about the High Priest and what his responsibility was.

These people had been in the faith apparently for quite a period of time, not Judaism, but they were in the Christian faith. Looking back from this point of history back to that period of time in which the book of Hebrews was written was somewhere around 63 or 64 A.D. We can see that those people to whom that book was written were only about six years away from an end.

That begins to have very interesting ramifications in regard to us. We're only less than seven years away from the year 2000. Is Christ going to return then? Will He return in 2001 or 2010? Whenever it might be, it can't be all that far away, and we, too, are approaching an end, and every one of us knows very well that is occurring. The signs are all around us. The seals have been broken and we can see these things in the news, and we're not very far away from the tribulation and the Day of the Lord and the return of Christ and the resurrection and our

glorification.

One of the reasons that this book was written was that their faith was wearing away. Here was a period of time in which they needed faith more than at any other time in their life, because they were going to witness the end virtually of civilization in the area of Jerusalem. Because once the temple was destroyed, Judaism was destroyed, almost the whole reason for the Jews being disappeared with it because their life revolved around the temple. It was what they looked to as being the source of their strength and the reason for their being because they felt that God resided in that temple and that, therefore, God was in their midst.

They didn't know when this book was written that it was that close, at least Paul gives no indication that it was that close. But I am sure that God inspired it because it was close. He didn't tell Paul how close, but He gave Paul enough of a feeling of urgency that Paul felt that it must have been fairly close and the book is without a doubt, to me, the most urgent one in the whole New Testament and I think that arguably contains the strongest admonishments and exhortations in the entirety of the Bible.

What was wrong with these people? Paul tells us right in the second chapter. He said that we better not "neglect so great a salvation." That's what was happening. Christianity had become old to them. They were hedging their bets.

We find as the story in the book of Hebrews moves on because Paul refers back to times when they suffered and they did it in a sense in an enjoyable way, the spoiling of their goods, the taking of their property, the losing of their jobs. They were pressured by society to go back to Judaism, but they had not. The time had come when that enthusiasm, when that zeal, when that joy of being a part of Christianity had slipped away because they were neglecting their salvation.

Are we any different than 1st century Christians? Can we lose it? Can we be hedging our bets? Has the return of Christ been so delayed in your mind that it's possible that you are not sure any more and you become prudent in what you have done regarding living this way of life?

That's what this sermon is about. We have reason to hope. There is reason to be filled with joy. There is reason to have the desire for the Kingdom of God.

The method or the ploy that the apostle Paul uses within the book is to give a series of comparisons and to show that what they have is so much better than anything that anybody else has been given, there is no comparison. He begins by glorifying Christ and showing that He is the express image of the Father's person. And he says that Christ is greater than angels because Christ receives the worship of angels.

Then in chapter 2 he shows how great the salvation is, that we're going to inherit all things. And he quotes Psalm 8 in so doing: "What is man that you are mindful of him, Or the son of man that you visit him?" All of God's creation is going to be inherited by the sons of God because of the work of Jesus Christ. He compares Moses to Christ, and Moses is only a servant. Christ is the builder of the house.

He compares Christ to Aaron, and on and on it goes. His argument through the whole thing is that nobody has ever been given anything better than what we have been given. There is no

greater hope. There can be no greater reason for living. There is nothing that mankind has ever heard that even begins to come close to the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Mr. Armstrong said that the Bible was written more for this end-time generation than any other. I don't know that I have ever doubted that but I, of course, have wondered in what way, how does it apply to me more than it did to somebody who lived in the 1700's or the 1100's or the 800's or whenever it was? The reason is very clear—because we are living at the time of the end. We are living at the consummation of the age. We are living when everything that God has been pointing to in regard to the church is going to reach its climax. We are living at the fulcrum point of all of the ages and that's why it applies. Those others have lived and they have died and they are waiting in their graves for us to be prepared to inherit that Kingdom.

I don't even know how many Christians who have lived in former ages ever saw the entirety of the Bible up until the 1400's when the printing press was invented and the Bible was, I guess, the first thing that was printed. It would have been awfully difficult for anybody to come in hand with an entire Bible. But we have Bibles coming out of our ears. I don't know how many you have, but I know I have at least twenty of them. A couple are repeat versions, but most are all different versions.

We have easy access to the word of God to give us hope, to give us reason for living. I think we can see why the Bible, the subject material, fits us better than anybody else who has ever lived before us. This church is going to go through the most tumultuous period of history that has ever occurred on earth and it is going to try our faith like nothing else ever has. It comes at a time when God Himself prophesied of the Philadelphians. He says that you are weak.

We are weak; I take it, in the things that really count as compared to others who lived before us. Maybe that's a little bit unfair. Maybe what He means is that we are weak in relation to the immensity of the problems that are coming and our faith better be in God or we are going to have very great difficulty in enduring that period of time.

The trying of our faith is good, but it is also very difficult because of the pressure and sometimes brethren we see our loved ones capitulate to the enemy and that's awfully hard to take. Sometimes there's a great deal of confusion. How can one know what is right? There's a book that covers some of these things. We're going to be spending some time in that book eventually. But before we get there we have to continue to lay a little bit more of a foundation.

Trumpets is to me very much like a hammer. I think in looking at the prophecies you will agree with me. A claw hammer is what I am thinking of, not a ball peen hammer. There's the business end, as I would like to call it—the hammerhead. It gets the job done and hammers the subject right in and joins two pieces of wood together. Then there's the claw end that can be used to destroy, to yank out, to tear out, whatever isn't worthy to be stuck together. I think that we are going to be seeing things like this in the future in regard to the lives of people we love, as well as our own.

It's this way with Trumpets. It's capable of lifting, of inspiring, of filling us with hope, of giving us a sense of reason for living, for doing the things that we do, for sacrificing. Because the business end (if I can put it that way) has to do with the return of Jesus Christ. It has to do with the resurrection of the dead. But also it has its somber side as well because there are the

seals, there are the trumpets, and there are the final seven plagues of God that are going to be poured out on this earth. So it has its somber side.

But either way, either for good or for bad, there is going to be a great deal of pressure. Even happiness creates stress. Even good times create stress. Even blessings create stress, because when you get blessings, now you have to take care of them. You have to develop them. You have to use them, and that creates stress. So there's stress for good or for bad and we are in this period of time that we better have our convictions very well in order.

Joel 1:13-15 Gird yourselves and lament, you priests; Wail, you who minister before the altar; Come, lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to my God; For the grain offering and the drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land, into the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD. [He's talking about the Day of the Lord. He's talking about how serious it is. He's talking about (I think most specifically) the period of time leading up to the blowing of the trumpets.] Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is at hand; It shall come as destruction from the Almighty.

That's part of what we are going through right now and Joel, used by God, is warning us that what is coming is going to be something that we better be prepared for.

Joel 2:1 Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in [the church] My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; For the day of the LORD is coming, for it is at hand: A day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, Like the morning clouds spread over the mountains. A people come, great and strong, the like of whom has never been; nor will there ever be any such after them, even for many successive generations.

We find in verse 6 that "Before them the people writhe in pain; All faces are drained of color." .

Joel 2:12-17 "Now, therefore," says the LORD, "Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him; A grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and nursing babes; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room. Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, weep between the

porch and the altar; Let them say, "Spare Your people, O LORD, and do not give Your heritage to reproach, that the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

It's pretty graphic language. Let us understand that what is coming is not something that should be looked toward lightly. It is going to be painful like no time in history has ever been painful. There will be so much fear, so much anxiety, it is beyond our comprehension to understand, and especially when we think of this in light of the peoples of Canada and the United States and Australia and South Africa where we have never really had to face the horrors of war as an entire population. Some of our men have been involved in war and they've seen some of it. But we have never had our own shores touched by a war that is anything like this. It's going to pale the Civil War into insignificance when this thing finally occurs.

Let's go to another place in Jeremiah, a very familiar scripture.

Jeremiah 30:6-7 Ask now, and see, Whether a man is ever in labor with child? So why do I see every man with his hands on his loins like a woman in labor, and all faces turned pale? Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it; and it is the time of Jacob's trouble, but he shall be saved out of it.

An encouraging note—except for one thing—he's going to be in it before he's saved out of it. Now we have choices, don't we? Choices to make between now and the time that this trouble actually begins to fall on this lovely land that God has given to us. Choices as to which path that we are going to go on. Are we going to go down with the country? Or, are we going to cast our lot with God and spend our time and energy preparing for whatever it is that He wants us to prepare for?

Brethren, we are on the threshold of the greatest period of testing and trial that has ever come on mankind. It is a period that is unique in history. Jesus Christ Himself said that it will never happen again. It has never happened before, and it will never happen again. We have got to have something to guide us. We have got to have something to look forward to, a hope that will energize us, fill us with resolve, motivate us, get us moving now before it is too late. Because the die, from God's own word, has already been cast.

God knows the end from the beginning and He knows that these things that He speaks of here are going to come to pass. We can't afford to be like the men that Angelico was describing where we are prudent agnostics, where we are hedging our bets. We better be convicted about where we are headed, because without conviction, there can be no commitment. And without commitment, there will be no progress made, except in fitful starts and stops from time to time.

It's interesting to review a statistic that I heard in regard to the Worldwide Church of God, and that is that over the period of its existence (for some 50 years we'll say) that one-third of the people who were members have left. That seems to me to be a very large percent. In other words, people heard, they were called, they went to the place where they were baptized, and

we'll just have to assume they received God's Holy Spirit, they were part of the body, maybe for many years, five, ten, fifteen, twenty years, but something during that period of time stuck in their craw, whatever it might happen to be.

I know in the period of time that I've been in the church, since 1959, that I would hear in the sixties of somebody occasionally leaving the church, but when we got into the seventies, things began to loosen up considerably, and in 1974, a pretty large number of people left the church. Then in 1978 and 1979 an even larger number of people left the church when the State of California attacked the Worldwide Church of God. The overwhelming majority of the people who went through those situations with the church went through it and it may have affected them somewhat, but they kept on going. They had something to sustain them.

But things are a little different now, aren't they? Now it's not the State of California that's attacking us. It's not an enemy you might say that is "visible." Now it's something that is invisible, and not only invisible—insidious. And people's faith is being drained away in apostasy, and the falling away has arrived. Not a falling away from the body, but a falling away from truth, as II Thessalonians makes very clear.

People fall away because they have not the love of the truth. And because they don't have the love for the truth, they have nothing to pour out their energies on, and so they drift away. Anybody who is drifting is going to go with the current opinion within the body, whatever it happens to be. And that's what's occurring. They're being swept away in a tide of apostasy from within.

Who would have ever thought that it would have happened like that? But it is. We have to be ready to stand alone if need be. Just God and us. It may come to that. It is something that we have to be prepared for. But are we prepared? Are we prepared to stand alone when there are no brethren to fellowship with? None of them to buck us up? None of them to give us strength? It's just us and our faith in God.

I hope that never happens to any of us. But it happened to Christ. Everybody abandoned Him and He had to stand alone before the greatest power on earth at that time—the Roman government. And He had to stand alone before the government of the Judeans, and they took His life. But it says, "He committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" because that's where His faith was.

If the Archegos went through that, the path has already been established. We may have to go through it, too. And that same Christ said that when that time comes; don't worry about what you'll say. I'll give you the words to say. Do you believe that? Are you convicted?

The times that we are headed to are like nothing that has ever hit this earth yet. There have been tortures. People have lost their lives. Their faith has been tested, but never on the scale that is going to arrive very shortly because it's going to be worldwide. It's going to begin in the Israelitish countries, but it is going to affect the entire world eventually.

We need to be prepared, don't we? People have bailed out, and they have bailed out because they are confused, because they really didn't have the convictions that they should have had to carry them through it. Let's go back to the book of Acts in the 1st chapter.

Acts 1:6-8 Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

The return of Jesus Christ was on their minds too. And they, like us, would have liked to have seen the Kingdom established right away. They didn't understand that they needed to be prepared for the Kingdom of God. They weren't ready yet. They didn't even have the Holy Spirit yet. They hadn't put things together yet in their entirety.

I think it's interesting that Jesus told them that "It is not for you to know the times or seasons," but, brethren, it has been given to us. We know what they didn't know. We know that we are just that close to the end. We don't know the day, but we know that we are in the times and in the seasons and if there was ever a people on the face of this earth in all the history of Christianity who needed to get prepared for something, it is us. We aren't ready yet, and I think that it is in God's mercy that He's given us time to get ready.

Maybe He is delaying the return of Jesus Christ to give time to His people to get ready for what is going to come. It was a good while before these men came to grips with the fact that the return of Jesus Christ was not going to occur in their lifetime. I think that's pretty evident from the things that are written within the pages of the New Testament. The first things that they had to come to grips with were that they had a job to do before that time would come.

Let's go to another book that deals with the time of the end in I Thessalonians 5. There are many scholars who believe that I Thessalonians was the first epistle that Paul wrote. It was written around 50 A.D. and shortly after that came II Thessalonians, maybe several months later as a response to something that they wrote back to the apostle Paul clarifying some of the things that were going on in the congregation there. It's very evident from reading the book that the people misunderstood remarks that the apostle Paul made regarding the return of Jesus Christ.

Now here it is 50 A.D. It's nineteen years after Christ returned, and still these men are talking about it. It's going to happen. They were putting in these people a sense of urgency, but it had not happened yet.

Now we find here in I Thessalonians 4 that the apostle Paul clarifies and said that the trumpet is going to sound. Well, we didn't hear about seven trumpets until the book of Revelation was written, and that wasn't written until about 40 years after the book of I Thessalonians.

I Thessalonians 5:1 But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you.

Now compare that to Acts 1:6. They had learned a great deal in the time between those intervening nineteen years.

I Thessalonians 5:2 For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.

A thief doesn't come up and knock on the door. It's going to happen suddenly. It's going to happen at a time that people don't think that it's going to occur. Now what about us? Shouldn't we be ready? Don't we know the times and the seasons? Yes, we do. We have every reason to be able to be prepared should the thief arrive, i.e., should Christ return.

I Thessalonians 5:3 For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. [Those who are not prepared, they shall not escape.]

Now, undoubtedly, what was on these people's minds is what was going to happen to them, and that should be on our minds, even as it was on their minds. We find out a little bit later that some of these people had actually quit their jobs because they felt that the return of Christ was so near. They were misinterpreting Paul's sermons. So they were just going to wait it out.

Do you think it can't happen to Christians? The record is already here. They were going to wait it out. But you see, time was rushing by, and Paul had to admonish them to get back on the job. Let's go to II Thessalonians 2:7. Paul affirms here that "the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way"

Pressure was mounting for these people. Jewish civilization was in turmoil. It really would not come to a climax for some nineteen years after this in 69 A.D. An end was coming upon Palestine in 70 A.D. The church was already beginning to experience some of that turmoil. About a dozen years after the writing of I and II Thessalonians, Nero was alive and he was emperor in Rome and he was persecuting Christians.

I think you can begin to see when we put the pieces together, that it broke out (I'm talking about tribulation against the Christians) in one place and then another. It was scattered all over the place, a little bit here, a little bit there, some in Rome, some in Corinth, some in Thessalonica, some down in Jerusalem, but gradually it was coming to the place where what happened? The church was driven to the wilderness for 1,260 years where it barely maintained its existence.

We can't depend on that. That prophecy has been fulfilled. There is going to be no running away. Not this time. There will be no disappearing into the woodwork except for those to whom God gives the privilege of going to the place of safety. And who knows what we have to face between now and then. I am sure it is going to be a very tumultuous period of time. We find that these people were falling away in verse 10.

II Thessalonians 2:10-12 And with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them

strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

You can see the direction that we have to go in order to be prepared. We have to move our lives in a path of righteousness, keeping the commands of God, going in His way of life, developing the relationship with Him. It's not mysterious. Not at all. The path is very clearly seen. That's what God is looking for. A people who will live His way of life, who will submit to Him, and in submitting to Him they will make the kind of witness that needs to be made before this world.

I Peter 1:6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith . . .

Notice this carefully. This book was written about the same time as the book of Hebrews was written, maybe just a year before. But Peter was aware of what was going on. Paul was aware of what was going on (I mean in Christian life what was going on in the world) and the trials were beginning to mount. They had about five or six years to go before the headquarters area would be wiped out, as it were, and it would no longer be safe to live in Jerusalem—not because of what the Christians were doing, but because of what the Jews were agitating about.

But you see, the Christians got caught in what was going on in the world, and they eventually became the scapegoat for much that was no way done by them. But the anger of the rulers was vented against them. As Nero did, he blamed the burning of Rome on the Christians. They had nothing at all to do with it.

Now why are these trials coming?

I Peter 1:7 That the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,...

Is that written to you and me? If there was any generation that is written to, it is us, because He's not that far away now.

I Peter 1:8-11 ...whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith; the salvation of your souls. Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.

Peter wrote this epistle in order to do all he could to build some hope in these people. What he does in this book is exhort people to hang on. He begins here by showing them that their trials have purpose, that they are being refined. In II Peter 3: 1-4 we find another prophecy that has to do with our day:

II Peter 3:1-2 Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior.

What did they write? They wrote prophecies. They wrote about the life and death of Christ. They wrote about the second coming of Christ. They wrote about the resurrection of the dead. They wrote about the establishment of the government of God on earth. They wrote about a whole nation being born in one day. They wrote about the world being filled with beauty and love and peace and prosperity.

Peter says, I'm going to remind you of this because this is where your hope needs to be. You need to be looking forward to this, and I'm going to remind you over and over again to be able to relate what you are going through now with what is going to happen in the future because what is happening now is meant by God to prepare us for the future so that when His kingdom is here, we are ready for it. Christ is not only preparing a place for us, He is in charge of preparing us to be able to fill that place.

II Peter 3:3-4 Knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation."

Now you know it's not like that. Things aren't continuing as they were, and the reason you know is because God has given you and me discernment of the times and seasons that we are living in. It's not going to continue the way it is. It's going to get worse before it gets better. So Peter is reminding us.

The problem in the church by the time Peter wrote this (the date the scholars put on II Peter is 64 A.D.) is open and it's really in turmoil now. Where is Christ? He's not here yet. The world seems to be falling apart. Jerusalem, especially, is in turmoil. The Christians are being blamed for the trouble that is being incited in Rome.

Do you know what the people did? I don't know how many, I don't know what percentage, or how high of a percentage did what they did, but the New Testament writers are revealing to us that what they saw in the church was a church going to sleep. Can you imagine that? Yes, you can, because it's happening again. At the most critical juncture of history for the church—Matthew 25 in the parable of the ten virgins shows the church asleep—all ten were asleep, not just five of them. The virgins slumbered and slept at the time of the end and that's

what happened in the first century too, just before the destruction of the temple.

It's an incongruity that seems almost impossible to believe. That with all this excitement going on, instead of being stirred up to press on toward the Kingdom of God, the church instead, very many of them anyway, were doing what the Thessalonians were doing and they were just going to wait it out. Now not everybody did that, and it's a good thing or Christianity would have died out.

The apostles were stirred up. There's no doubt about it because they wrote about it. These people were doing the very same thing that the apostles were warning of and that is that they were walking after their own lusts, their desires.

II Timothy 2:15-18 Be diligent [Paul writes to Timothy] to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some.

Now in this era of the church, the one that we are living in, we have our own problems with certain doctrinal matters. The first century also had problems with certain doctrines that they had to deal with and they were these. You can tell again by the writings of the apostles. The very first bridge that they had to cross had to do with justification—justification by faith in the blood of Jesus Christ.

That was a new concept, something that had not been bridged before into the minds of people. That's why God commissioned the apostle Paul to write so much about justification by faith, not by works, not by earning your justification, but by faith in what God said and what Jesus Christ did. And so we have so much of that in the book of Romans and in the book of Galatians about justification by faith.

The second bridge that they had to cross was law and grace. Even today people like to separate the two. Oh, you believe in law, as if you can't believe in law and grace at the same time. But they had to bridge that into peoples' minds that law and grace were not opposed to one another, but worked together in harmony to complete the process of justification and then sanctification. That God not only forgives us, but God also gives us gifts by His Spirit by which we can be sanctified unto holiness which is the middle part of the process of salvation and absolutely can not be left out.

The third thing is what we just read here and that was the second coming of Christ. As time passed, the pressure mounted and the last one, the return of Jesus Christ, became more and more important in the minds of people and it naturally led people to believe that they had plenty of time to overcome and it seemed to work on them so that they cast themselves adrift, and that's why Paul said that they were neglecting their salvation.

In Matthew 24:42 we find that Jesus anticipated this would occur. Jesus really understood

human nature. Incidentally, do you want to know what it is that causes people to kind of go to sleep, so that you can be aware? It's not a hard principle at all to understand. It is having to face so many difficulties, so many pressures, that one becomes weary with facing them.

That's a simplification, but that's what occurs. We have to face so many stresses that we become apathetic and say, "What's the use?" We're going to have to stir ourselves up and recognize that this can happen to us.

Matthew 24:42-44 "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready [There's your Savior telling you that.], for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect Him.

We know the times and seasons. We know that we're in the ballpark, but we don't know the day. We don't know the hour, and it kind of gives the impression there that if Christ is speaking to His people, that we're going to be caught by surprise by it too.

Matthew 24:45 "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season?"

I think that this undoubtedly is directed primarily at the ministry. In principle it applies to everybody because everybody has responsibility, but He's talking here about a faithful and wise steward or servant whose responsibility it is to give the household food in due season, and that's what I'm doing. I'm being used of God to feed His household, a portion of it anyway.

Matthew 24:46-51 "Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat [be abusive] his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards [that is those who are out in the world and are drunk from the wine of the wrath of her fornication], the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

So brethren, be aware that God knows human nature and God is giving us a witness in His word of what happened to the New Testament church in the first century. We're no different. Human nature never changes. Satan never changes. God never changes, and we, too, can be lulled to indifference and neglect simply because of the pressure that is constantly coming upon us, hitting us seemingly from every angle now, whether economic, job pressures, marital pressures, health pressures, pressures from relatives, pressures from society, pressures from

entertainment. Everywhere you look you are being pressured by something that is of this world, and that creates a stressful situation in the mind that eventually wants to give in to weariness. Is it any wonder that Jesus said that "he that endures to the end, the same shall be saved" (Matthew 24: 13)?

Now what does an athlete do whenever he knows that somewhere in the future he is going to have to endure a pretty great trial, a hard game? Does he sit back and relax and say, I'll take care of it when it comes? Athletes don't do that. It doesn't make any sense. Why doesn't it make any sense? Because you're going to lose if you do that. You're not going to be in shape. The other person is going to beat you to a pulp. The other team is going to beat you to a pulp.

The athlete has to prepare himself, doesn't he? He has to be in good shape. If he's not prepared, then he's going to be wearied and he's not going to be able to endure the difficulty of the trial, of the contest, of the game, or whatever it is.

Human nature has the tendency to go into one of two extremes. Either we will play while Rome burns, allowing ourselves to be distracted, or we will get confused and discouraged and quit because of the heat. But you see there is a third alternative, and that alternative is to get yourself ready. Get yourself in shape.

Let's go back to I Peter. It's such an encouraging book.

I Peter 1:1-5 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, [Brethren, are you children of the dispersion? Yes, you are. We aren't in those areas. We are in the United States. We're in Canada. The people of Israel have been disbursed much further than they were in the days of Peter. But we are the pilgrims of the Dispersion.] elect [Hang on to that word. It means more than just called.] according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience [There's the purpose of God's calling and His election of us, sanctification and obedience.] and sprinkling [cleansing, being forgiven] of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

First of all Peter reminds us of whom we are. And that term "*elec*" is the very ground of our comfort. Do you know why? Because it means (when connected to the foreknowledge of God) that God knows us personally. We meet a lot of people who would like to know that the President of the United States knows them personally.

Or let's come down a level or two. They would like it to be known that they are known by some

other personality that they respect very highly. They would like to be able to tell their friends, Oh, I know him and he knows me. We went to school together, or we did this together or that together. Whether the person is a millionaire or a billionaire, or whether they are a well-known athlete or entertainer, somebody well known in the area around wherever you happen to be, we like to drop names. Peter just said if there's any name you want to drop, drop God's. He knows you. That's something.

Before God called you, He watched your life. He did it because He wanted to make sure that He and you would be able to work together and that He wouldn't lose you. And He's sure that with His help you can make it. You can be prepared for the opportunity, for the job, or whatever it is, that you're being prepared for.

That is the ground of your hope, right there. God knows you and because He knows you, He's going to do things for you. He's in the position to be able to do it. All He has to do is give the word, just like the great personality we might know in society. They can open doors for us, whatever it might be. God can open any door anywhere for us. And He will do what is right for us.

He goes on in verse 3 that He is the author of an act of mercy by which He has given us a sure hope of being brought into our inheritance.

I've painted a pretty dismal picture throughout the beginning of this sermon. I did it on purpose, because I was leading to this. Even though it is going to be bad, it can be done! God has not given us something that is impossible to do. He has begotten us again to a living hope. Do you know why it's living? Because Jesus Christ is alive!

He is our High Priest. And He loves us in a way that we can't even begin to understand. He loves us so much that He gave His life for us. He loves us so much, that He is willing to do whatever is necessary to ensure that we will be in His Kingdom. You have access to the highest of all places. You have friends who have names and power that are so awesome there is nothing greater.

We don't need to fear what is coming in the way the world is going to fear what is coming, because God is able to bring us through it. If we had to face it ourselves, there would be no hope for us. So God is the author of this act of mercy by which we are given a sure hope and we will be brought into our inheritance (verse 4). It is incorruptible. The contrast is being made between Canaan, Palestine, and the Kingdom of God. Which is better? Well, there's no doubt which one is better.

One more thing here. It is "undefiled and that does not fade away. It is reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation." That word "*kept*" can easily be translated "*guarded*," "*surrounded*," "*hedged in*." God is watching out for you in a way that He is not watching out for this world. But because we are the apple of His eye, and because He is preparing us for something, Jesus Christ is going to discharge His duties as High Priest in our behalf and He is guarding us and protecting us from the worst of what is going on around us.

That ought to be encouraging, that if He were not doing what He is doing, it would be far worse already for us.

I Peter 1:20-21 He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

There is no hope in this world. If you are looking for things to be resolved by the leaders of this world, it will never happen. If you are looking for hope from your own abilities to be clever, to think quick, to be able to say the right things, to skills that have been developed, to education that you've received, from knowing friends in the world, whatever it is that you might put hope in, not one of them is going to be able to save us from what is coming.

Our hope has to be in God. It is hope that buttresses faith. Faith is the foundation. We believe. But it is hope. Because there is a goal, because there is something worth driving toward, that motivates us to act on what we believe. And our hope has to be in God.

Let's go to the wonderful verses in Romans 8:28.

Romans 8:28-29 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew [just tie this together with I Peter 1, we are elect according to foreknowledge of God], He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son . . .

Now if God predestines someone to be conformed to the image of His Son, has God ever failed at anything? Never! It says in Philippians 1:6 that God is able to finish what He starts. We stumble around. But God desires to save us. God desires that we be in His Kingdom and He has arranged for us to be resurrected at the time of the seventh trump, at the time of the return of Jesus Christ. He is preparing us to be conformed in the image of His Son so that we can rule under and with Jesus Christ in the Kingdom of God. Do you have that hope? Does it stir you that God has not failed at anything yet, and that it is His desire for you to be conformed to the image of His Son?

I am not saying that this will be easy because in order to do this He may have to give us some awfully great pain in order to bring it about. A great deal depends on whether or not we submit to Him; whether we do it willingly or whether we fight Him all along the way.

Romans 8:29-30 . . . conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. [Now look at verse 30]. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Now that hasn't happened yet, that glorification. But as far as God is concerned, it's a done deal. We are the ones that hold in our hands the power to stop God, and it consists in His willingness to give us free moral agency where we choose what we will do with our life. We've

already seen from His word what His will is.

His will is that we be conformed to the image of His Son. His will is that we be glorified. His will is that we allow Him to prepare us to do a job, to do a work in the Kingdom of God and to reign under and with Jesus Christ as a king and a priest. So His will is very clearly seen. It's His will to take us through any difficulty. It's His will that we receive the salvation that He has offered to us.

I hope that you will think about these things, and know that even though the trials may be difficult, God is with you. He hasn't abandoned you. That what we are going through (as Peter says) is preparation to test the genuineness of our faith so that when Christ returns, then we will be prepared for what it is that He wants us to serve in. But it's part of the process of sanctification unto holiness unto glorification. So what we go through has very wonderful purpose behind it.

Don't be dismayed but be filled with hope that God has set His hand to save us and to bring us into His kingdom and He doesn't fail.