

✠ An International House of Prayer Author

# END TIMES

## SIMPLIFIED

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PREPARING YOUR HEART FOR  
THE COMING STORM

REVISED &  
EXPANDED  
WITH STUDY  
GUIDE

DAVID SLIKER

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FOREWORD BY MIKE BICKLE

David Sliker has an uncommon ability to present the coming end-time events, as revealed in Scripture, in a manner that is both clear and relevant for your walk in Christ. This book, while simple, is also profound. Don't just read this book—take the time to understand its important message.

—Bob Sorge, author, [bobsorge.com](http://bobsorge.com)

One of the difficult tasks of a good author is the ability to take a complex subject and make it simple. In order to do so, the writer must have a deep and complete grasp of the issues involved, and be able to articulate those issues in a concise way that gives a solid foundation of understanding. David Sliker's book *End Times Simplified* is an excellent example of this task. Based in thorough scholarship—David's own study in the context of a team of scholars at the International House of Prayer Missions Base in Kansas City—this little volume provides a structure of understanding, a platform from which to dive more deeply into the details of this most fascinating and important subject. Read it with a grateful spirit, and be launched into the captivating topic of the return of Jesus and the establishment of His eternal Kingdom on the earth.

—Gary Wiens, *International House of Prayer Northwest*

If you think of the Bible as a movie, most folks press pause just before the climax and never watch or understand the last part of the movie. David Sliker not only walks us through the second coming and the events of the final age with ease and simplicity, but he illuminates for us the role the saints will play in those times. This is a must read for all believers and a foundational part of the curriculum at my church.

—Zack Hensley, Senior Pastor, *New Hope Fellowship*, Rochester, NY

I love listening to good preachers and David Sliker is one of my favorites. He drips with revelation, wisdom, and urgency. He's both rooted in Scripture and relevant to our time. Prepare to be stirred to new levels of desire for Jesus!

—David Perkins, *Desperation Student Ministries*

David Sliker is an honest, straightforward messenger filled with passion to see a generation come alive in Christ and to walk in the Kingdom with hope and holiness. His knowledge of the Word and depth of revelation has always intrigued and inspired me. It is a complete honor and privilege to call him my friend. I know that those who hear the heartbeat of his message will be forever

changed.

—Jake Hamilton, Recording Artist and Worship Leader

*End Times Simplified: Preparing Your Heart for the Coming Storm*  
By David Sliker

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[forerunnerpublishing@ihopkc.org](mailto:forerunnerpublishing@ihopkc.org)

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This book is dedicated to my bride and dearest friend, Tracey Sliker. You have been an amazing wife to me and an incredible mom for our kids. You were made by God to love well and help prepare the hearts of our children to love Jesus fiercely through every storm of life.

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# FOREWORD

BY MIKE BICKLE

Many people dismiss the subject of the end times as controversial, peripheral, even irrelevant, yet the Bible has much information about the generation of the Lord's return. Having studied for many years what both the Old and New Testaments teach about the end times, I believe it is possible that we could be in the early days of the generation of the Lord's return. The Church today needs to know the main events that the Scripture highlights concerning the generation of His coming. It is a very important biblical theme that is worthy of our time and attention.

Although Jesus' teaching is the foundation for every believer's life, many in the Body of Christ today neglect His teaching on the signs of the times, either wrongly believing that it is not relevant to the Christian life, or that it is a subject that can only be understood by scholars. On the contrary, understanding the main themes in the Scripture about the end times is within the grasp of all. The prophetic Scriptures, including the book of Revelation, were written so that all God's people might understand the message and prepare themselves for what lies ahead. Gaining understanding about the events of the end times is important for spiritually preparing the Church to be victorious over compromise, fear, and deception in what will be a time of unprecedented glory and pressure.

In His mercy, the Lord has given us, in the Bible, prophetic signs that we should look for in the generation of His return, so that we can make the necessary spiritual preparations for the unique dynamics—both positive and negative—that will occur across the earth in that generation. These signs serve the Church like a weather station that signals the coming of a storm, so that God's people can have understanding of and prepare their hearts for the catalytic events of the end times.

Both Jesus and the apostles taught on the value of discerning the generation of the Lord's return. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for not paying attention to the prophetic signs that pointed to His first coming. In light of their failure to recognize His first coming He instructed His people to "watch and pray" (Mark 13:33) in preparation for His return. Jesus was calling His people to

live ready and prepared for the most dramatic time in human history.

David Sliker has broken down this topic so that anyone—even the person who has never even thought about the end times—can understand what the Bible teaches will happen in the days to come. Using an informal writing style, he has sought to simplify a topic that some have made unnecessarily complicated. The end times is a subject that David has devoted much time, study, and prayer to understanding and teaching, and this book will help you gain a foundational understanding of the key events in the end times.

David and his wife, Tracey, have been part of our senior leadership team at the International House of Prayer in Kansas City since 2002, where he serves and teaches in our Bible school and internship programs. Our team and spiritual family have been blessed and ministered to by their faithfulness to Jesus and devotion to His Word. I am thankful for David's ability to take complex truths and make them accessible to anyone who seeks to know and love Jesus more, and desires to understand the main truths related to His return. I trust that the fruit of his labors contained in this book will be a help to you as you also seek to gain greater understanding about this important subject.

When I teach on the subject of the end times, I do not expect anyone to quickly and simply accept my views. Rather, I urge them to personally take everything I say and compare it with the Scripture. I want them to prayerfully think through the ideas with their Bible open. Truth is never hurt by careful scrutiny, but rather is confirmed. David and I welcome you to refuse any ideas in this book that you cannot clearly see in Scripture for yourself.

I encourage you to read this book with an open mind and an open heart, and to ask the Holy Spirit to speak truth to you. I pray that this book will leave you with a burning desire to love Jesus more and to be anchored in the hope of His return.

*Mike Bickle*

*Director, International House of Prayer  
Kansas City, Missouri, 2013*

# PREFACE

It is a joy to return to this little book I wrote in 2005. The reasons that originally compelled me to write are still alive in my heart almost a decade later. In studying these matters, we are reaching to understand what God says about our future and what it means for our families and those still to come. The subject of the end times challenges our hearts in ways that I had not anticipated when I initially wrote these words. These are challenges the Lord wants us to face together as a family on the way to our grand wedding. I am thankful for the opportunity to revisit truths that still form my convictions about our future and to explore emerging ideas and conflicts that are forming a different future for the Body of Christ.

When I initially wrote this book, I never imagined how quickly things would change in the global Church. To a certain degree, I had anticipated the difficulties that people would wrestle through related to the subjects of God's wrath and coming judgments. In fact, my original purpose for writing was to help prepare believers to deeply love the Jesus of the prophets and the book of Revelation. I could not have known the intense opposition that would arise related to wholehearted lifestyles of prayer, fasting, and sacrificial living. A distorted grace message has emerged in this season that poses a very real threat to believers everywhere as we grapple with what it means to walk faithfully with Jesus every day of our lives.

What Scripture show us about our future will help us take our heart preparation and Spirit-filled, prayer-based lifestyles more seriously. Whenever Scripture talks about the future, it is to envision for us the possibilities and strengthen our resolve to love Jesus faithfully and loyally to the end of our days. The issues of preparation and lifestyle are urgent and of utmost importance for the generation alive just before the return of Jesus. However, this parallel movement has re-entered the conversation (as it has many times throughout church history), looking to redefine "radical Christianity" and set the subject of preparation for coming storms aside.

These movements seen today and throughout history have different faces from different backgrounds. All have different ideas about Jesus and Scripture. They usually work to redefine Christianity as human-centered and pleasure-oriented versus gospel-saturated, Christ-focused, and Sermon-on-the-Mount-based, with a first commandment outcome. These competing messages and

their destinations of apostasy and shipwrecked faith deserve a more thorough examination in this book. They form a key part of the storyline of our Lord's return.

I am more convinced than ever that we are in urgent days, approaching times never before seen by human eyes. Unimaginable days of incomparable glory, power, trouble, and trial are ahead of us. These are days in which wise fathers prepare their children and ready their families for inconceivable times and impossible situations. We cannot continue to live our lives as if He is not returning. We may not know when, but there is a gnawing, relentless sense within believers in every denomination now that His return is surely nearer than we think.

Though this book addresses issues of cosmic and global significance, its greatest application is intensely personal. Even as I write these words, I drift back and forth between a future of nations in conflict, rumors and fear gripping hearts, trouble on every side, and the quiet of today. I think of fathers and sons, new marriages and emerging families, and young men and women giving their hearts and lives for the gospel. The story of man's fall, plunging the earth into great darkness, and God's plan to restore the earth and its people to His glory, is a story worth passing down to our children. The story of Christ's first coming and soon return, both bringing His Father's plan to its culmination, is now even more personal and powerful. For the generation that meets Jesus in the air when He returns, it is the most personal and powerful—for that generation is the one that lives the end of the story.

I believe we are in the early days leading to the return of Jesus and that our children have a role to play related to His return. This is a story both personal and powerful to Jesus. It was the joy of His heart to give us prophetic "clues" and pictures of momentous events to come throughout the Scriptures. It is the joy of His heart to hear us tell our children, and their children, of things to come. Books like this are written to gain understanding because we love Jesus, we want to love His leadership—and wisdom and understanding is the best gift we can give our children. We want them standing steady, hearts filled with loyal love for Jesus, faithful in the midst of every storm. This includes the greatest storm still to come, filled with glorious and terrible stories. These are stories that our families will experience and live. I want to revise and expand upon this story in my telling of it for them—for my children and yours.

Eschatology means the study of the last things, the study of the end times, the period in history before Christ's return. It can be challenging to read a book

about the end times, but not because studying the end times is difficult. It is because it is difficult to hear the truth of God's Word when we have various complex views and preconceived notions about the Bible. Some ideas or interpretations become lodged in our minds, and it can be difficult for us to think of particular Bible verses differently. We all need help from the Holy Spirit to understand the Bible because our unrenewed minds are incapable of grasping much of it without the Holy Spirit's assistance. Our confidence cannot be in one's ability to teach, write, or learn. It must rest in the magnificent grace of God and the power of His Holy Spirit to help us, teach us, and lead us into His truth. He promises to be our faithful teacher as we talk about the Bible with Him.

I believe it is vital today that believers study eschatology. Like the sons of Issachar who "had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do," (1 Chronicles 12:32) there is a unique invitation to our generation, our children's, and their children's, to plunge into the Word of God and devour its prophetic contents about the days to come. God's Word helps us confidently see and understand when events of "biblical proportions" unfold before our eyes. Even now, events the Bible speaks about are beginning to unfold. Jesus is waiting for His people to lay aside the reasons why they shouldn't study the end times and instead ask Him to help them do so.

This book is an invitation to journey into a study of the end times. Those who embark on this journey will discover God's glorious, eternal end-time plan for them and for their family. They will fall more in love with God as they ponder the glorious return of a King like no other and His triumphant victory over darkness. The greatest realization of all awaits the student of the end times because mankind's journey does not end with Jesus' return. Our journey continues into eternity, where we will go with Him on an adventure that thrills our hearts and satisfies our souls forever. This eternal, joyful, and astonishing journey can begin today for those who desire to know Him more.

There is an end-time principle that I have taken to heart: "The closer we get to Christ's return, the clearer things get." As I have set my heart to "watch and pray," (Luke 21:36) related to the return of Jesus, I have found these words to be true. The subject of eschatology is like a room within a mansion containing the knowledge of God. Like every other room in this mansion, endless surprises await every time we enter a room, look around, and make ourselves at home. In this end-time room, more new discoveries and new ideas can surprise us. Even old ideas become new when we give them another look.

Over time, the room seems increasingly beautiful every time we step back into it. These truths demand that we return to them often, to behold what we could not see before.

# INTRODUCTION

## SIMPLIFYING THE END TIMES

There are many theological resources for the student who wants to delve deeply into eschatology, “the study of the last things.” Over the years a number of scholarly works, commentaries, and examinations of the subject have blessed me. The goals of this book are much simpler: I want to make understanding the end times and the second coming of Jesus accessible to anyone who wants to explore the subject. The subtitle reveals a secondary goal—preparation of the heart. Understanding these two goals will assist you on how to use this book in your studies.

While my personal approach to studying and understanding the end times is exegetical and inductive in nature, my approach in *End Times Simplified* is to tell a story. There are a large number of texts that give us information about the future. This book weaves many of those prophetic passages together to present a broad look at events surrounding the second coming. From there, it is the reader’s responsibility to search the Scripture to see if the picture painted within these pages honors the prophets’ intentions. By the time the reader is finished, there will be many scripture references to explore and ideas to test.

For better or worse, a simplified, narrative-based approach to the material means that this book will be filled with scriptural concepts and ideas rather than direct textual study. As such, this should not be the only book you use to study these matters. There are many issues, arguments, and viewpoints that have shared varying degrees of popularity throughout church history that will not be considered here. This does not mean that there are not commendable aspects in various viewpoints within the Body of Christ. Nor does it mean that this presentation of the storyline of Christ’s return represents definitive truth on the matter.

Ultimately, life in the Body of Christ works best when we reach for the whole truth together. We each bring our part of the story and our perspective, and as we present our part, we can learn much and be sharpened. A book of this nature cannot be comprehensive, nor can I present a detailed exposition of how I came to some of the conclusions here. I believe attempting to do so would contribute to the complexity that makes this subject intimidating to so

many. I remain thankful for all the scholars who have labored to serve the Body of Christ with their work. Any seminary student has many wonderful options to consider. In contrast, this book was written for the teenager hungry to know about the return of Christ, the college student who leads prayer or a bible study on their campus, and the parents eager to prepare their children for the days ahead.

## HOW TO READ THE BIBLE FOR ALL ITS WORTH

It may help to understand the process of scriptural interpretation used throughout this book. The title of this section also happens to be the title of Gordon D. Fee's and Douglas Stuart's fantastic book. Their book can help the reader understand my approach to interpreting Scripture. I'd also like to thank my friend Joel Richardson, author of *The Islamic Antichrist: the Shocking Truth About the Real Nature of the Beast*, for helping me form a framework for how to read prophetic scripture.

First, it would be helpful to understand that I see the revelation of Scripture as *progressive* in nature—that the Bible is best understood by beginning with the Old Testament and reading through to the end of the New Testament, allowing the storyline to unfold and build to its logical conclusion. However, a common approach to Scripture for some is to begin with the New Testament first, and rarely read or study what came before. I believe there is a grave problem with this approach: most of the New Testament writers assume their readers have read and possess some understanding of the Old Testament. Therefore, they sometimes use unexplained terms and make references to important passages containing central Old Testament ideas. They then build their ideas about the future on the foundation laid by the prophets who came before them.

Something amazing and slightly confusing took place when Jesus came to earth the first time. He began to live out and express the prophetic promises that described His arrival. However, after His death and resurrection, He ascended to the right hand of His Father before fully expressing all that the prophecies had described. In other words, He began something that He did not quite finish. The prophetic scriptures, however, often weave the first coming of Jesus and the second coming into the same narrative. The first-century apostles were convinced about Jesus' true identity—He was the Messiah and the Son of God. Therefore, they sought to explain the strange mystery of a “first coming” and a “second coming” to Jesus' new followers and a Jewish audience that

still, to this day, struggles with a Messiah who left half of His work unfinished until His return.

The New Testament, culminating with the book of Revelation, is best understood through these Old Testament eyes. If we let Moses speak first, then follow Israel's story, and then listen as the prophets tell us where this story is going, we are better equipped to understand the dramatic unveiling of the Old Testament's mysteries in the New Testament. The life of Jesus and the writings of His apostles make Old Testament mysteries clear to the New Testament believer. This, in turn, helps us understand the book of Revelation as it brings together the storyline of earth's restoration, man's redemption, and Israel's triumph by showing us the events surrounding the return of Jesus.

Second, I examined each individual passage in question using a *grammatical-historical* method of interpretation. In other words, I looked to honor the historical and cultural *context* in which each passage was written. I also tried to honor the intent of each author and what he was trying to communicate to the people in their own times. The Bible was not written to twenty-first century American Protestants. While we know this explicitly, we often implicitly read Scripture through our own cultural lenses.

We must take care not to read the Scriptures as if they were written to us. When it comes to the Old Testament prophetic voices, we often have the privilege of listening in on a conversation between God and Israel. At other times, we are listening in on a conversation between the prophets and Israel. We seek to understand each passage in a manner that honors each context by learning a little of the history and culture of that day. This opens up the Scriptures significantly.

Third, I've labored to build my understanding of the Bible from its *whole*, *not by the individual parts*. For example, one should not build a doctrine of the Father's heart for His people from the book of Job alone. Job's sufferings have to be placed within the bigger themes and storylines of the Bible. The grand themes of the Bible work together to tell us of one cosmic story that involves every human being who has ever lived, and it revolves around a Redeemer who sets the majority of His story within the little nation of Israel.

We are a part of an Israel-centric storyline involving the God of Israel who was born into Jewish lineage. Much of that storyline revolves around a covenant God initiated with a man named Abraham. God then acts and judges according to that covenant throughout Scripture. When Jesus' birth was announced, all involved exploded with praise, singing about the Abrahamic

covenant (Luke 1:55, 72–73). This era of history culminates with a final reference to that great promise (Revelation 7:9–10; 21:2–4). As we read and study these passages, we always want to be sure our interpretation of Scripture honors the whole of Scripture.

The prophets were masters of this principle. Nearly every Old Testament prophet takes time to do three things: (1) identify where Israel has broken her covenant with God, and the inevitable consequences; (2) calls them back to the “first things” related to the Law and the commitment they had made to live it; (3) tells them of the “last things” and God’s commitment to bring them into glory despite their disobedience. The exception to this pattern were the prophets who testified of the God of Israel to the nations (such as Obadiah, Jonah, and Nahum) and Joel, who used an immediate disaster to call Israel to repentance and prayer before telling them of the “last things.”

## SUMMARIZING THE STORY OF MAN’S REDEMPTION

Is it possible to summarize the whole storyline of the Bible in one sentence? I believe so. By working to understand the four major covenants of Scripture, I believe one can explain God’s plan for humanity in simple terms. I call this, the divine sentence. It synthesizes the four main themes of each major covenantal promise of God. One must have some understanding of the covenants to understand the sentence. Let’s take a moment and consider these four major covenants, starting with God’s covenant with His friend, Abraham.

The *Abrahamic covenant*, in Genesis 12, 15, and 17, is God’s declaration of His intention to save all the peoples of the earth through one family—Abraham and his sons. This is the only covenant God made with mankind in which He signed in blood for both parties—Himself and human beings. This covenant was completely unconditional in that God would do both His part and our part to fulfill the promises it contained. He does this ultimately through Jesus, the holy Seed of Abraham’s line.

God’s promise to Abraham is his family would dwell in a land that God gives them, and that his Seed, or Messiah, will finally rule the nations of the earth from that land. The Seed, Jesus, will be the head of Abraham’s family, later called the Hebrews, and will rule from that land, Israel, promised to him. Thus, this one family will bless every family on earth.

God’s covenant with Abraham precedes the *Mosaic covenant* that we read about in Exodus 19–24. After four hundred years, the family of Abraham had become the nation of Israel. They were seeking to inherit the land God had

promised to their ancestor Abraham and his children. God was not nullifying His previous covenant but adding to it (cf. Galatians 3:19). God established His Law (the Torah) and called His people to faithfulness in practicing it. Paul the apostle, in Galatians 3:19 and Romans 7:7, tells us why God did this—to reveal to His people how sinful they were.

It is one thing for God to declare that He is going to save us. Humanity's problem, ever since our rebellion in the garden of Eden, is our blinding pride. In other words, we do not believe that we need to be saved, but that all men can be good, or right, without God's help, leadership, or love. Therefore, He gave the Law to expose this lawlessness and mankind's hatred of righteousness within their own and every other human heart.

Many years later, a young man from the tribe of Judah within Israel became king of the nation. The covenant God made with this godly king is the *Davidic covenant* found in 1 Samuel 7:8–16. If we consider God's covenant with Abraham as familial, and God's covenant with Moses as nationalistic, then God's covenant with David was kingly in nature.

The greatness of the coming King and His kingdom are the focus of the Davidic promises: a King with a great name would come, ruling a great people in a great land, governed beautifully from a tabernacle of prayer and worship to God. If the Mosaic covenant reveals where Israel came from, the Davidic covenant reveals where they are going. The Abrahamic covenant, of course, revealed who Israel is. One question remained unanswered, however. How would God accomplish these things?

We find His answer in the *new covenant*. The Seed of the Abrahamic covenant, the One who would personify the Law incarnate, the King from the house of David, was Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth. Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah who would be the great King with a great Name, ruling a great people from a great nation. How would this Messiah make His people great? This is the gospel, the incredible answer to the ancient mystery of mysteries: How would a holy God take a sin-filled people and transform them into a great, or glory-filled people? How could Israel become the kind of nation worthy of her King?

The answer was, and is, shocking. The great King was also to be a Suffering Servant. This Servant would die, having committed no sin or broken any law, so that a way could be made for His people to come to terms of peace with His Father. He made, through the shedding of His blood, a “new and living way” (Hebrews 10:20) for His people to enter deep, intimate, and

loving relationship with their heavenly Father. His people would be cleansed, made new, the Law would be written on their softened and transformed new hearts, and they would be filled with new desire to obey, serve, and love their God. His people would receive His very Spirit within them, enabling them to “be Holy as He is Holy” (1 Peter 1:13–16) and empower them to live holy lives. His blood has brought all who believe in His covenant sacrifice near, and has given us new life and a new heart that we might be with Him forever. We have been brought into Israel’s story, adoptees in the family of God. We are now able to inherit and enjoy every single one of God’s promises.

Once we understand these covenants, we understand that Jesus’ new covenant is the how and the Abrahamic covenant is the what of our story with God. The Mosaic covenant, then, is the why, and the Davidic covenant can be considered the where. We now know who we are, where we have come from, where we are going, and how we are going to get there. This is what I call, the “divine sentence”! You can say it like this:

*God desires to save every family on earth through one family (Abrahamic), from sin and death (Mosaic) into an everlasting kingdom (Davidic) through the blood of His Son Jesus, the rightful King of the whole earth (New).*

Understanding these key promises and how they progressively work together in relationship to God’s purposes, helps us honor Scripture both in its immediate grammatical-historical context and its ultimate context, i.e., the great storyline of God. In this manner, we can honor the three principles of scriptural interpretation given above and gain much insight and understanding of Scripture along the way. Of course, all of these principles and themes are more clearly understood by God’s grace of illumining our minds or what Paul called, “the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him” (Ephesians 1:17). Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as our teacher (John 14:26) who would “guide you into all truth . . . and He will tell you things to come” (John 16:13). When we do our part in diligent study, we must also lean on Him to do His part—give us “skill to understand” (Daniel 9:22). We study the Scripture, always understanding that His part in teaching us is far, far greater than our part in reaching out to learn.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF HEART PREPARATION

Finally, the second purpose of this book is the preparation of our heart. This book is a teaching tool with a pastoral goal. I am not attempting to prove that

my view is the correct view, nor am I trying to convert readers to my viewpoint. Rather, I am seeking to introduce readers to my view of the end-time Lamb of God.

There is a time and a place for more precise theological and polemical works. I seek to help readers prepare for the unique dynamics surrounding the return of a jealous, wrathful King who will shake everything that can be shaken. This book will discuss what the Bible says is going to happen and why. It is the “why” that helps us prepare our hearts to come into a loving agreement with the leadership of Jesus. There is not sufficient space to prove my every assertion against every other lens and viewpoint within the Body of Christ. In this season of history, I see that there is an urgent need that demands our time and focus. More than knowing, debating, and proving the right end-time view, we need to know the right Jesus.

In seeking to know the right Jesus, which is becoming increasingly difficult as humanistic voices redefine Him to fit modern sensibilities, we must fight to love the right Jesus, and love Him for who He is. We must love Him in all that He is going to do. I see this as the critical need in the Body of Christ. We cannot study “eschatology” without “Christology.” This is His story, and it is about Him. Preparation for the days ahead is centered on the subject of the Jesus of the Bible. As you read this book, I am certain you will not agree with every point and every detail. My hope is simply that each chapter and each point forces us to wrestle in new ways with the truth about Jesus, and that, by the time we finish this book, we will love Him so much more.

# 1

## WHY STUDY THE END TIMES

### MY JOURNEY: ENCOUNTERING THE RETURNING KING

As a college student, I remember sitting in class and struggling to get through lectures on eschatology. I cared about two things: passing the course and moving on to what I perceived as higher and greater things in life and ministry. I did not enjoy eschatology, and it seemed unimportant and irrelevant to me. The disagreement around the subject, the seeming lack of conviction about it by my professors, and the apparent lack of its practical connection to the Christian life all convinced me to ignore the subject entirely. Thoughts of revival, however, excited me as I prepared to transition to my next season of ministry.

After graduating from college I became a youth pastor, and I wanted to mobilize youth to love Jesus and evangelize a few of their friends in the process. My biggest dreams involved seeing dozens of youth spending the rest of their lives in full-time ministry. I wanted to inspire young people to serve the Lord with all their hearts. The longer I labored, however, the more I was confronted with my limitations as a man and as a minister of God. As I came face to face with my shortcomings and the limited impact of my ministry, I became hungry to see the manifestations of God's power of which I had often heard. These explosions of His power always seemed to happen somewhere else to someone else, and they left a lasting impact on hearts and minds. I wanted God to encounter my little group of friends that way. With a little zeal and lots of idealism, I organized prayer meetings for youth and young adults with only one thing on the agenda: a historic breakthrough of the Holy Spirit upon our hearts, lives, and families.

We met regularly and hungered for God to come in a way that always seemed just out of reach. We were eager for God to answer our prayers for revival, but never confident we would see it. We reached for what we imagined as a high vision: hundreds of youth and young adults swept into a wave of revival power. The number in my ambitious mind was in the thousands, if I dared to confess it.

Toward the end of my time in youth ministry, I began to travel a bit. It was

during one of those trips that I had a life-changing encounter with God. The last ministry engagement on my itinerary that year was a Christian school where I had ministered many times, and I loved the students there. Staying overnight with a family very dear to me, I sat in their living room late one night, reading my Bible and seeking the Lord's heart for the students the next morning. Then the unexpected happened.

My quiet evening was suddenly disrupted by the surprising power of the Holy Spirit. His sudden breaking in of power and presence was unlike anything I had ever experienced. It was as if Jesus had stepped into the room. Terrified, I fell on my face, feeling something like a heavy weight upon me. The air above seemed to be moving in a circular motion and my entire body felt like it was on fire. Some unimaginable power was pregnant inside of me, and it was not a pleasant feeling. I wanted to cry out in my alarm, and while it seemed to go on like this for quite a while, it may have only been a few moments.

Suddenly, I heard the voice of the Lord deep within me, like a shout, and it was terrifying. He said, "*Tell them I am coming! Tell them My hand is on the door, and I am coming through!*"

I looked up, and saw a door high above me. The hand of the Lord was grasping the handle, and it was slowly turning. To this day, it is one of the most terrifying things that I have ever seen. Gripped with holy fear, I suddenly understood something I had never considered: *I was not ready for that Man to come through that door.* I began to weep, and a second thought entered my mind: *No one I know is ready for that Man to come through that door.* Another wave of weeping and sorrow overwhelmed me.

The presence that had been resting upon me—the weight, fire, wind, and glory—continued a few moments longer and then suddenly lifted. Shaken, I began to turn the pages of my Bible to any end-time passage I could think of and found my way to Matthew 24:32–33. I happened to be reading the New American Standard Version that evening, which translates the passage slightly differently than the New King James Version I normally used. I did not know this at the time, so imagine my surprise when I read the passage:

<sup>32</sup>“Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near;

<sup>33</sup>so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.” (Matthew 24:32–33, NASB)

As my eyes fell upon the passage, I began to weep again. His return was nearer than I realized, and I was not ready for it. I was so burdened—*no one* I knew was ready for His return. Yet, in His kindness, there was still time. As burdened as I was over my own condition, I was also confident in His mercy and desire to help me. His zeal for my friends, my family, and beyond filled me with a sense of safety and confidence in the midst of my new urgency.

## TREMBLING-HEART PREACHERS AT THE END OF THE AGE

My sermon had not gone as I planned. I was twenty-eight years old when I encountered the Lord related to His return. Because it happened in the context of praying for the students, I assumed the encounter was for them. The next morning, I preached what was, perhaps, the worst sermon ever delivered on Jesus' second coming. I knew next to nothing about the subject. I butchered the end-time passages. I had passion, but almost no understanding. Of course, this was one of the worst things I could have done. Later, it became clear to me that I could not base my convictions on a personal encounter, but only on the truth of God's Word; but those lessons were yet to come. I was still raw, tender, and unclear about what had happened to me. No one had responded to the message, and this was a first for me. I was completely confused.

I went home. A week later, I had an interesting phone call from a friend of mine who taught at the school. She had not attended the chapel service.

"Hi, David, I'm calling to ask you what you preached about last week."

Oh, great. A parent was offended, someone was angry, and I was sure that I had blown it.

"Why do you ask? Is everything okay?" I asked, cautiously.

"What? Oh, yes, totally," she reassured me. "No, I'm asking because of the response to your message!"

Response? There had been no response . . . she had to be mistaken.

"I don't understand," I said. Now I was really confused.

"David—I have never seen *anything* like I saw last week in all my years. After you left the students—well, it was like they were stunned. Every single one of them. They didn't talk, laugh, well—anything! The rest of the day! David, what *did* you talk about?"

I was completely shocked. As she finished describing the events that followed my sermon, I began to weep again, quietly. I felt the gentle presence of the Holy Spirit on me, reassuring me. Something bigger was going on. Now the Lord had my attention.

Then, a strange turn of events suddenly expanded my simple hopes and dreams into a very different ministry assignment. After hearing a clear call from the Lord to leave my position and move to Kansas City, Missouri, I eventually found myself on staff at the International House of Prayer. It was there I discovered and experienced biblical truths and stories truly worthy of the God more wonderful and glorious than I had ever imagined, and there that I embarked on a journey with my friends and co-laborers to discover what the Bible said about the end of the age.

Like children on an Easter-egg hunt, we searched Bible passages that I had barely skimmed in the past. I discovered parts of the Bible I hardly knew existed, and passages I hadn't realized were relevant to my generation. What I found shocked me and transformed my understanding of the God I serve. My perspective of the times in which we now live expanded over time, and even common passages brought new exhilaration. My heart came alive with every new discovery.

I became consumed by this exploration into the depths of the Word, and gradually realized that something great and unbelievably terrifying is about to happen, maybe during my lifetime or the lifetime of my children: the second coming of Jesus Christ. God has written, and is now bringing to pass, the ultimate drama, worthy of His signature. Because He wants each of us to take part, our challenge is to prepare for what is coming.

One Saturday evening, Mike Bickle, director of the International House of Prayer, was preaching on the book of Joel. He was focusing on Joel chapter 2 and God's desire to raise up "trembling-heart preachers" at the end of the age. These preachers would proclaim the knowledge of Jesus and His coming judgments, while the Holy Spirit would be causing hearts to tremble and respond. The Holy Spirit whispered to me, "This is your assignment. This is what I am inviting you into."

I responded, "Lord, if this is You, please confirm this in a way that cannot be exaggerated or misunderstood."

A few months later, I was speaking on the return of Jesus at our annual young adult conference. When I was asked to speak on the second coming, I smiled because I had not told anyone, including the leadership team, about my encounter with the Lord, even to this day. I paid attention. It brought great comfort to me that the room I was speaking in was mostly empty, since my last sermon on the return of Jesus had not gone so well. Even though I had more time to prepare, it was my second-worst sermon of all time on the return of

Jesus.

Later that day, a friend pulled me aside.

“Hey, you need to hear this,” she said, “I overheard something today that I think will encourage you.”

She had overheard two girls who were excitedly processing my sermon, saying, “Do you remember last night when Mike Bickle said the Lord was going to raise up ‘trembling-heart preachers’ at the end of the age?” the first girl asked.

“Yeah?”

“Well, it just happened to me! I just heard a preacher named David Sliker talk about the return of Jesus, and my heart is trembling inside! I’ve been trembling all day since I heard the sermon!”

My friend finished the brief account and smiled at me, completely unaware of my encounter with Jesus, or what the Lord had spoken to me months earlier.

“I thought that might encourage you,” she said cheerily.

It encouraged me greatly. The Lord had convinced me. Faith filled my heart. The Lord was going to raise up voices, messengers—moms, shepherds, businessmen, artists, writers, and more—who would help prepare hearts for His return. These voices would tell the news of His return around the world. I deeply wanted to be a part of what He was doing, and committed to devote myself to study and personal preparation for the days to come. Shortly afterward, I resigned my position over one of our training programs to devote more hours to studying the end times and return of Jesus. For a few years, it was a singular pursuit. I read everything I could get my hands on and dissected every Bible passage I could find.

## UNEXPECTED JOY: DISCOVERING MYSTERIES, FULLNESS, AND DESIRE

It stunned me to find that I could set my hope upon something far beyond revival, something that would affect the entire world. The return of Jesus will be the most glorious event in history, and will be the culmination of all our hopes and dreams in God. At the end of all things and during the darkest hours of human history, He will return to a Church experiencing her finest hour, a Church expressing her greatest maturity, power, and authority the world has ever seen. The Bible describes breathtaking events, staggering in their scope and might, and at the heart of this unfolding drama is a God who has planned

every twist and turn at the end of the age. From the beginning of time He has designed the greatest story ever conceived, and this breathtaking story is *our story*. Christ's ultimate triumph and exaltation culminates with the moment when He receives His blood-bought, long-awaited inheritance: the Bride of Christ. Mature in her love for Him, she calls Him home.

Who can imagine that the strength of all nations will be completely shattered? Who can imagine that in the wake of the greatest global trauma in human history, Jesus Himself will step onto the earth to be established by the Father as Ruler over all the nations? Who can imagine the manner in which God will bring such events to pass? God's chosen method is fervent, night-and-day prayer being lifted up to His throne, birthing the age to come. The manner chosen by God is one in which His people gather in humility and weakness to pray for the return of Jesus and to cry out for His true justice to come to earth. God is leading His people into a lifestyle of spiritual intimacy and intercession, prayers of longing for Jesus' return, and love for God and His perfect plan. These intercessory prayers of the Church will merge in their agreement with the intercessions of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The Church's loyal, wholehearted prayerful desire for union with Jesus will result in His return. Jesus the God-man will split the sky in answer to the intercession of His believers on earth.

Jesus is motivated by desire. In His heart is a deep yearning, an indescribable longing for true unity with His Church—each one of us. Imagine: the reason for the great shaking and trouble to come is the inner fire burning in Jesus to be with us. What does it mean to be with Him? True intimacy can only be defined by Him, the One who is love expressed in its fullest sense. His historic activities on earth must be examined through the lens of what it truly means to be with Him, walk with Him, and talk with Him in the age to come. I often pause to wonder about the life that awaits each of us in the kingdom of God when it comes in fullness to earth. The nature of our life with Jesus will be rooted in a kind of love far beyond anything we have experienced or can imagine. The practical outworking of that love and what it will look like is awesome to consider. Scripture is filled with pictures of our life with Jesus after His second coming.

I believe a study of the end times can be summarized in our efforts to fully discover the expressions of Jesus' perfect leadership and all-consuming desire to be with us. These exhilarating truths await every hungry heart and mind that longs for more than information or theological arguments. This is the glory of

experiencing truth in communion with the Holy Spirit. As we study the end times, we can discover by the Spirit of revelation the ways Jesus is moving, planning, strategizing, stirring, calling, inviting, praying, and waiting patiently.

Men and women move relentlessly into the depths of their wickedness, seemingly at odds with the dream of the great Shepherd. Jesus is unmoved, however, and fully committed to His Father's plan. The nations are rightfully His and will be fully His, despite the plans of His enemies who, even in their opposition, accomplish exactly what must be done for His plan to come to fruition. We cannot appreciate the full beauty and glory of who Jesus is until we discover how brilliantly He leads. Once we begin to uncover the mysteries of His plans for each of us, we cannot help but fall more deeply in love with Him. He does everything perfectly in order to be with us.

Discovering His plans was one of the most unexpected gifts I received from the Lord while studying the end times. Finding a sense of calling became something far more exhilarating. I was surprised by the delight, even the sheer joy, of uncovering long-forgotten mysteries hidden within the Word of God. These mysteries are hidden in plain sight, passages that have always been there, but I did not know to look for them. Discovering them set my heart ablaze. I encountered the Lord's vision of the future, a vision of fullness and glory that was beyond what I had set my small, little hopes on. I encountered the very fire of His desire, His longings, and His dreams so that I can never be the same. I don't think I want to be.

## FOUR REASONS TO STUDY THE END TIMES

Why then should we study the end times? Though there are many reasons, I want to focus on four that I believe are of utmost importance.

The *first* reason to study the end times is *the principle of fascination*.

Studying the end times is one of the best ways to gain insight into Jesus' brilliant leadership, discover what He cares about most, and come to love His methods, ways, and divine activities. As we do, we grow in a fascination with Him that helps our love for Him grow as well. Jesus' ultimate goal for every believer is *mature, voluntary love*. I define mature love as: "full obedience, full agreement, and full participation with all that the Holy Spirit is doing on earth under Jesus' leadership."

The grace of God empowers us to walk in full obedience to Him as we grow in Christ. Jesus desires far more than our obedience, however. He saved us out of Satan's reign of sin and death, and into empowerment to accept His

love and love Him in return. Love for Him is expressed through obedience to His words and ways. As we obey, He wants more than our “doing.” He desires our *understanding* of His words and ways, and to *enjoy* them. This means an obedience springing from a heart that loves His ways and *agrees* that His words are true and His ways bear fruit. This is deeper than knowing *what* Jesus commands, it is understanding *why*.

We may know intellectually that His thoughts are higher than ours, and often we are content with simply having that information, but we never explore *how*, *why*, or *what* those thoughts are.

He wants us to fully participate with what He is doing on the earth without fear or resistance. He wants to win our hearts with complete loyalty to His plans. As He does, He lovingly prepares us to engage in what He is doing with complete confidence and trust in His leadership. Details of His leadership often make little sense to an unrenewed mind still clinging to worldly wisdom. As He renews our mind by “washing it with the water of the word” (Ephesians 5:26), His words and ways make more sense to us. Trust and confidence in His love can then fill our minds and hearts. Over time, we become fearless, risk-taking friends of Jesus, willing to believe for the impossible and reach for the astonishing while unafraid of failure or disappointment.

This is the principle of fascination with Jesus. He also fascinates us with His beauty (who He is, what He is like, and how He leads) as we seek Him out. In this process, fascination with Him moves our hearts from disobedience to obedience, disagreement to agreement, and passivity to participation. His leadership expresses His love, wisdom, and power in our lives in small ways that point to the cosmic, global ways He will express it in the days to come. He wins us to His ways by revealing how His grand plan for the end-time earth touches our life in small, intimate ways now.

The more we understand Jesus’ leadership in the end times, the more fascinated with Him we become. The fruit of the gospel in every generation demonstrates that those who become enthralled with Jesus have lives pointing to His return and the fullness of His coming kingdom. When our hearts are connected to and fascinated by the end of the story, we realize that our own small lives have cosmic significance. This shift in perspective changes everything.

The *second* reason to study the end times is *the principle of preparation*.

Since I will give attention to this principle later in the book, I will be brief here. Repeatedly in Scripture, the prophets, messengers, and apostles sounded

an alarm to God's people: "*Get ready!*" The events that will happen before Jesus' return will be more intense and troubling than anything that has ever happened before (Matthew 24:21). The Bible offers clear descriptions of terrifying, destructive judgments that will take place. These will exact a terrible toll of lives.

Many wonder why this must be. Will it be because God is angry? Because God is desperate for vengeance? No, neither of these is true. God is kind and tender and loves mercy, and it is out of His great love for His people that He will bring to pass these things the Bible describes so graphically. We should study the end times to prepare our hearts and minds for what is coming. If we are prepared, we will run to Jesus with confidence when hell itself breaks loose on earth, not away from Him in terror or offense as many will do (Luke 21:26).

The best way to prepare for the coming storms is to fully embrace a life of knowing Jesus better, accomplished by spending more time with Him and in His presence. The God that pursued and is pursuing us loves it when we pursue Him! Knowing Him and being with Him transforms our hearts significantly. We have less fear, doubt, and insecurity, and more confidence, trust, and stability. This inward transformation only comes from living a life of prayer—simply talking with Jesus and being in His presence, and studying His leadership style, personality, thoughts, and emotions. Only when we become grounded in Him in a way that produces confidence, trust, and stability in us, will we have the strength and courage to stand steady when everything else is crumbling around us.

As we prepare, there is a secret agenda Jesus has for each of us stirring and boiling deep in His heart. His plan is for each of His believers to actively serve and point the lost and stumbling to Him in those days. He doesn't desire for us to simply survive or escape the end times, but for us as His close and loyal friends to lead confused, scared, and broken people to safe ground and salvation in the midst of raging storms. We do not prepare for *our own sake*—our lives are safe within His sovereign hand. We prepare for the sake of our children, our friends, our loved ones, and our neighbors. Right preparation involves a life that cultivates the first commandment (Matthew 22:37): that we love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. As we prepare in this way, we are cultivating the second commandment: to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Preparing for coming storms is really about learning to prepare others. This is His chosen way for us to express the beautiful and generous

heart of our King.

The *third* reason to study the end times is *the principle of reward*.

When Jesus comes, He will bring His reward with Him (Revelation 22:12). Those who have been faithful in their given charge in this age will receive the fullness of their reward in the age to come, when Jesus rules the nations of earth. To be faithful in our given charge requires knowing what our charge is. Cultivating intimacy with Jesus and reading the Word of God will help us discover what our charge is. We know from the Bible that the new believers in the early church faced conflict, hardship, and persecution for living what were perceived as radical lifestyles. Often throughout the New Testament Epistles, the apostles leading that new movement, brought comfort and encouragement to the new believers by reminding them of their coming rewards.

The perspective of the apostles in almost every letter of the New Testament is one rooted in the hope of another age. Their perspective is linked to the call to complete obedience in lifestyle as it relates to the judgments and rewards that accompany the future age. They knew a divine secret, and were called to share it with other believers: the rewards given by King Jesus will be related to the life we lived prior to His return. Faith given by God in our hearts leads to our salvation, but from that moment forward, we are judged and evaluated according to our works (Revelation 2:23). These works that matter to God are diligence and obedience to the gospel, which cause meekness and humility to grow within us. He cares about partnering forever with meek people to accomplish great things. We choose at the moment of our salvation to join a heavenly family. We then choose what we will do for the rest of our lives as part of this family.

The good news, of course, is that the same manner in which we were *justified* is the same manner in which we are *sanctified*. We have been saved by grace through no work of our own. We could never motivate God to love us, nor could we motivate Him to save us. How does this relate to the principle of reward? We were saved by grace at our new birth, and we are still saved by grace today (Ephesians 2:8). The grace of God that delivered us and gave us free and full access to His person, presence, and power is the very same grace that is helping us to work! As our thoughts are transformed by the truth of God's Word and the power of His Holy Spirit, our emotions and desires follow. As the grace of God works in us over time, our new thoughts, emotions, and desires lead to different choices. These choices are the "grace-empowered works" that the Lord desires to reward at His return!

This is the heart and soul of the gospel, the “good news.” While He will judge us according to our works, He is working within us to “will and to do according to His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13)! Our part, then, is to live a life continually saying “yes” to the grace of God by faith. Faith is our small part in the relationship, but our small faith—our “confident yes” to God—produces an overflow of the outrageous kindness and generosity of God. Therefore, we “work out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12), meaning that we continue to say “yes” to the grace of God and do not quit in discouragement or disillusionment. If we continue to live a life saying “yes” to grace, He will continue to pour it out extravagantly—and that same grace continues to help us live a life that says “yes” to the grace of God!

This truth can motivate us, stir us, awaken us, and dismantle our complacency and self-satisfied pride. It helps open our eyes to a broader reality that things on earth are moving rapidly into place for a revolution that will bring disruption to every institution on the planet. Jesus will come to rule the world, and He wants each of us to have a place of honor next to Him. He wants to give *everything* to us, a prize beyond anything for which we could have prayed or imagined. He will not give us our full reward if we only pray prayers of confession or need, and then live self-centered lives of indulgence and self-interest.

In love, He will reward us based on our authentic love—not just the emotion, but the kind of love that, by His grace, produces diligence, faithfulness, obedience, humility, tenderness, kindness, endurance, and compassion. Real love helps us by faith to voluntarily change the way we relate to Jesus, allowing us to have a richer, fuller relationship with Him. Real love for Jesus will receive its ultimate reward when He returns. We do not give ourselves wholeheartedly to Jesus and His plans because we “have” to. We give our all to Him—in prayer, fasting, serving, giving, and forgiving—because we want to. We *get* to. This is our honored privilege—with great reward from Him.

The *fourth* reason to study the end times is *the principle of confidence*.

The Scriptures are filled with references to the end-time plans of God. The powerful theme that runs consistently through them all is the *certainty of God’s victory*. The Lord is continually shown as One who is far above and beyond the might of any king or spiritual power that stands against Him. This theme is emphasized often to help our hearts rest. We know God’s intimate involvement and power to set the course of history towards His desired outcome; an

outcome clearly proclaimed in His Word, and it will never be in doubt.

God will do everything effortlessly to bring about His complete and total victory. This is the glory of beholding a God who is filled beyond measure with unsurpassed joy and power. His joy is bound to His complete confidence in His own abilities and might. Our God never feels powerless or helpless. The frustration that we feel when things don't seem to work out—when we have little to no power to change our circumstances—is not something that Jesus shares. He is filled with joy and complete confidence in His ability to triumph over all of His enemies.

Far more amazing is the parallel theme: the *certainty of our victory*. Jesus is more than able to bring about His own victory, but the story at the end of this age is about how He brings about ours. Yes! Of course the Almighty is going to triumph over His enemies! That is the effortless part. The breathtaking part involves the weak, the broken, the struggling, and the small. Christ's power, wisdom, and love all work together to bring His leaning Bride into the deepest place of love through the least severe means.

In the end, when all is dark and hope is fading—love will burn and hearts will come alive by the power of the Holy Spirit. The One who overcame the world of sin on the cross now serves and empowers a Church that will overcome. I believe the story of man's fall and redemption is really about the One who restores, who brings His people from the very brink of defeat and destruction and empowers them to overcome and stand victoriously. Our hearts were made for such a drama—to hear of this good news and long to play a part. Let us study the end times because it embodies the dreams of our hearts.

The incomparable leadership of Jesus orchestrates His victory over darkness. He will do this while simultaneously empowering and helping the Church to walk victoriously in the power of His love during the most dramatic time in history. Learning this now and responding to His enabling grace helps prepare the Church to participate in the coming revival rather than giving up or drawing back. This is a core truth of eschatology: *our lives and labors matter and will ultimately prevail*. The way that we live today will give us confidence and strength to continue on in love tomorrow. We gain courage when we see end-time prophecy fulfilled before our eyes. However, we must understand it before we can discern its fulfillment. This encourages us now and will comfort us greatly in the days to come. God is in control and He cares for us. This gives us courage to proclaim the truth and the knowledge of Jesus to others.

All four reasons for studying the end times are inseparably linked because of how God brilliantly leads our lives. To passionately devote our lives to knowing Him is to read, meditate upon His Word, and commit to a life of prayer and fasting. When we do, we take the Word seriously. To find Jesus in His Word is to discover what is most important to Him. More than anything else, Jesus longs to come to earth to dwell with His people, far more than He wants us to come where He is. He longs to shepherd the nations of the earth as His inheritance from His Father (Psalm 2:7–9). To discover and agree with His deep desire, we must confront what most people don't want to talk about; we must face a dilemma many hope is either an imaginary idea or a crisis that will affect someone else.

That dilemma is the great and terrible Day of the Lord that the Bible says will shake the entire planet, and will probably come sooner rather than later. We must face people's reluctance to contemplate and prepare for this Day. Earth is filled with people now who are unaware or unwilling to think about the coming trouble. Yet, the trouble will come, and those who are not ready for it will be overtaken and swept away. This great storm will wash away those who are vacationing, partying, and celebrating, trying to make sense of their lives in ways that never satisfy, bring sense or order. If they continue in their vain and empty pursuits, focusing on comfort and success while completely ignoring the God who comes to reward love and punish sin, they will not stand. For these the end will not be happy.

In the end times, some in the church may find themselves in the same dilemma: unable to stand. It doesn't have to be this way. Jesus did not die on the cross to have us abandon Him in bitterness and disillusionment. He was not bruised for us so we could quit in the midst of our struggles and trials. He died and rose again to awaken us to hope, and to the "excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:8–11). According to the apostle Paul, who suffered the loss of "all things" for Jesus (Philippians 3:8), there is no greater calling in life than experiencing great glory *and* pain so that we might know Jesus. Paul's reasoning was, "if, by any means, I might attain to the resurrection of the dead" (Philippians 3:11). Paul wanted two things out of life: to reach with all His might to know Jesus, and to receive the full reward his King would bring with Him when He returned. Jesus has promised both to all believers (Revelation 22:12) who give themselves to make this their life's primary pursuit and priority.

To study the end times is to make a *deep* resolution to discover what our

present and future King is like. It also is to make a *firm* resolution to ready ourselves for His second coming by ordering our lives to be prepared to serve with Jesus as His diligent friends. Finally, it is to make a *wholehearted* resolution to reach for the full reward He wants to give us. As we do, we will be motivated to live a life that reflects the values of Jesus and honors His ways. We must decide to make our lives about more than busy activity or discussing plans. We must strive to have lives that are authentic, fruitful expressions of what Jesus had in mind when He made us and saved us from death. He laid hold of each of our lives for a reason, and He desires that we, like Paul, would want to lay hold of that reason with all our strength. Studying the end times gives us a clear vision of how far the grace of God can take us. Saying “yes” with all of our hearts today will lead us into discovering the depths of God’s grace planned for us, individually and corporately, for the days and eternity ahead of us.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of this chapter stood out to you as truths you would like to go deeper into?
2. Why is it often so easy to dismiss the study of the end times as unimportant or unnecessary?
3. How can fascination with Jesus fuel our prayer life and our ministry?
4. What elements of the leadership of Jesus and His plan do you find fascinating? What makes them fascinating to you?
5. What is the responsibility of the believer related to the subject of “preparation”? What is the responsibility of the Lord in serving His Church?
6. What elements of the subject of “rewards from Jesus” are potentially troubling for believers? What elements of the subject are enjoyable and liberating?
7. What areas of your heart and life do you find yourself struggling with confidence regarding the leadership of Jesus?
8. What truths connect in a helpful, deep way in your heart that increase your confidence in the love and leadership of Jesus?
9. What priorities will shift and change in our lives if the return of Jesus happens within our lifetime or the lifetimes of our children?
10. How can study of the end times help equip us to endure and stay steady

through the storms of life?

## 2

# THE BIBLE WAS WRITTEN FOR EVERYONE

A few issues should be addressed before seeking to understand God's heart regarding the end times. For those new to the subject, these issues often come to mind immediately and can be boiled down to two questions. The first question is, "Can I study and even understand what the Bible has to say about the end times?" followed closely by, "How do these passages of Scripture apply to my life?" Some feel biblical prophecy is too difficult. Some lack motivation to wade through what seem to be irrelevant passages in the Bible. Some feel many sections of Scripture contain no information to help them better serve and love God. Some view studying the end times as a hobby for which they don't have time because of pressing needs in the here and now.

In studying eschatology, or any other biblical topic, we need to change our approach to the Word of God. Commonly, we can approach the Bible from a self-centered, needs-based perspective, using the Word of God as a self-help or self-improvement manual. If our normal mode of Bible study revolves around only what is important for our daily lives, we tend to view it as nothing more than a problem-solving tool, a source to which we run for encouragement when we feel sad or troubled. If this is our approach to the Bible, then prayer is often a search for personal comfort and a means to for overcoming obstacles. Fasting then seems a strange, unnecessary exercise, a quirky relic from the ancient fathers of the faith. While the Bible does help and encourage us, and prayer does bring comfort and help us overcome obstacles, both are so much more. When we understand more about the "so much more," we see fasting as a necessary and desirable practice.

I believe the Holy Spirit is changing the Church's understanding of these practices. A shift is taking place globally, especially among young adults. God is sparking hunger in them and stirring them to reach for more than easy answers and self-help philosophy. He is awakening an inward desire for more that motivates them to make lifestyle changes before God and man. They are encountering Jesus in a new way that produces radical passion for Him and a

yearning to experience the heights and depths of His love. This consuming inner fire is driving them to seek the heart of God with rare, single-minded determination. Perhaps like no other time in history, growing numbers of young people are embracing a lifestyle of prayer and fasting. Throughout history, there have been outbreaks of revival connected to regional pockets of people praying and fasting. Small gatherings of young adults have clung to the heart of God and, through prayer and fasting, moved God to birth revival and transformation in cities, towns, and lives. Are we witnessing something historic taking place before our eyes? Could it be that the Holy Spirit is orchestrating a prayer movement to contend for revival on a larger scale? If so, to what end?

The prophets and the book of Revelation give hints of a worldwide revival breaking out, a revival larger than any previously documented (Joel 2:28–32; Isaiah 42:10–12; Malachi 1:11; Revelation 7:9–17). God loves revival, but even large-scale revival is not God’s highest or final goal. There is more. There is something beyond the greatest revivals for which He wants us to contend and fight. While we may not fathom it, the answer is simple: the second coming of Jesus.

The Church in general may be passive about this event, but the second coming of Jesus has always been the top agenda item in the courts of heaven. The first- and second-century believers were consumed with the return of Jesus (1 Thessalonians 5:4). They would be shocked to know His return is not the primary thing on our minds today. Many differences between the earliest and recent generations of Christians are due to this different focus. Today’s Church has somewhat dismissed the second coming as something entirely dependent upon the whim of God, an event that will take place whenever He decides it is the right time. How odd it would seem to most modern Christians to walk into a church and find that its main focus was the second coming.

As odd as that may seem, however, there are churches today with such a focus, and God is orchestrating a change of perspective among both Christians and non-Christians. One of the top-selling book series of all time is the *Left Behind* series, a fictional account of the end times. One of *Time* magazine’s cover stories documented an increasing American obsession with the end of the world and Armageddon (July 1, 2002). More people are concerned about eschatology today than we might think, at least according to the numbers buying books on the topic. The statistics indicate the number of people today seeking understanding in this area far exceeds the number of people doing so in the

first-century church. The question is not *if* people are thinking about the end times, but *why* they are thinking about the end times.

The relevance of studying eschatology increases significantly when people believe they might be living in the end times. Biblical prophecies become far more compelling when we consider the possibility that we might be alive to see them fulfilled. But even if we accept that we might be living in the end times, the question of what to do with this information remains. The first answer is to change our approach to the Word of God. This change is central to understanding and studying eschatology.

The right approach is simple: we must understand that *the Bible is for everyone* and *eschatology is for everyone*. Anyone can go deep in God's Word, and anyone can understand the end times. Having confidence that the Bible and understanding of the end times is *accessible to us* and that *the Holy Spirit will help us* can propel us into a lifetime of fascination with and glorious addiction to the Word of God. Let's explore both ideas, starting with the truth that the Bible is for everyone.

## THE BIBLE IS FOR THE HUNGRY AND THIRSTY

But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty. (1 Corinthians 1:27)

Some people struggle with reading the Bible because they feel they lack the intelligence to grasp its complexities and depth. The Bible, however, was never intended to be a book for only the intelligent and the learned. It was written to be read and understood by everyone. It is meant to be the source of life, where all can enjoy the deep waters of God's heart, as well as learn about His complex mysteries and plans. When anyone receives heavenly wisdom from God, that wisdom is of a different dimension, above and beyond what the apostle James called, "earthly wisdom" (James 3:15). Such wisdom often frustrates and confuses those who are wise by the world's standards. It offends self-seeking minds. It is a total mystery to "lovers of themselves," as the apostle Paul called them, and to those who elevate self-preservation above all else.

Such people are like the Jewish religious leaders described in Acts 4 who confronted Peter and John about their preaching. Those men possessed some of

the sharpest minds in the Roman Empire—brilliant intellectuals who had risen to the top of an educated culture. Still, these wise men were frustrated, shocked, and offended by the heavenly wisdom proceeding from the mouths of two “uneducated and untrained men” (Acts 4:13).

What was remarkable about Peter and John, according to these religious leaders of the Sanhedrin, was simply that it was obvious to all that “they had been with Jesus.” Their speech was likely rough and simple to their cultured audience. Their garments were plain and their rough and calloused hands showed the years they had spent pulling heavy nets from the Sea of Galilee. Before them sat the greatest lawyers, thinkers, leaders, and philosophers of their people. In their younger days, they would have looked at each other and whispered, “What are we *doing* here?”

Not on this day. They stood before the Sanhedrin filled with the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:8). Jesus had given them a word of advice early on: <sup>19</sup>“Do not worry about what you will say, for what you will say will be given to you . . . <sup>20</sup>the Spirit of My Father will speak through you” (Matthew 10:19–20). Peter was a man who struggled with fear, but no longer. The words of Jesus burned in his mind and the Spirit of the Father was alive in his heart. Boldly, confidently, *powerfully*, Peter opened his mouth and spoke. The Sanhedrin, the top collection of Jewish minds, *marveled*. “And they realized,” Luke tells us, “that they had been with Jesus.” They could say *nothing* against what had been said and what had been done. The simplest of men stood against one of the great ruling councils on the earth. Their weapon was not eloquence or training. It was *intimacy with the Spirit of God*.

Our greatest problem in comprehending the Word is not the Word itself, or our lack of intellect, but our lack of true intimacy with Jesus. We cannot possibly understand words flowing from the heart of Jesus if we do not know Him. We cannot possibly relate to Him on an intimate level if we don’t connect with Him, and receive and experience His love for us. The words and passages of the Bible are confusing to those distant from God. Paul said the Bible is foolishness “to those that are perishing” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Our lack of comprehension of the Scripture is directly proportionate to our distance from God’s heart. Intelligence will never bridge that gap but intimacy with Jesus will.

Gaining knowledge and retaining more of it will never be enough to help us comprehend the Bible. Those who are wisest by the world’s standards often use their vast knowledge and keen logic to accomplish self-centered, self-

preserving, and self-serving goals. Men and women rich in worldly wisdom put their minds together and create world systems that empower sin, grant permission to wickedness, and establish webs of deception that entrap hearts in empty pursuits. James 3:13–16 reveals the truth of God: the results of man’s greatest exercises of reason are confusion and convergence of “every evil thing.” Those who are wise according to the world do what seems right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25; Proverbs 12:15) because their own way seems more attractive than the mandates of the Bible. Such people often read the Bible, embrace one or two teachings or principles that agree with their personal philosophies of decency and kindness, and then reject the rest as irrelevant fables and fanciful stories. According to King David in Psalm 2, *all* those who rule the nations will completely reject the Bible in the days to come.

The way of the Lord is to make the truth of Scripture accessible to all who sincerely want it. If we daily set aside time to read, pray, and even *sing* through the Bible, its secrets will be opened to us. The time we devote to something reveals the extent of our hunger for it. God has placed in each of us the keys to unlock His Word. God “has put eternity in their hearts” (Ecclesiastes 3:11), meaning He has placed in us a longing for Him and His truth. This inner longing for eternity is the hidden desire in the heart of every man and woman. This yearning, this hunger, is a gift from God and is meant to stir us, cause us to seek, and to ask. “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” promised Jesus (Matthew 7:7).

We must ask. We ask Him to help us understand. Our minds are untrained and unrenewed (Romans 12:2), and by nature our hearts are dull and unresponsive to the invitations of the Holy Spirit. As such, the Word seems foreign to us, its language of another age, and its truths of another reality. Because the truths of the Bible are so different from the ideas of the culture that we live in, we can be fooled into attempting to wrestle Scripture into submission to our own worldview and systems of thought. But Bible truth stubbornly resists our efforts with its corrections to our way of thinking. Eventually, we are forced to approach the Bible with contrition and humility because it overcomes us with its strength. Mankind cannot conquer the Bible; it will always conquer us. It forces us to ask for help in deciphering its mysteries.

When we finally surrender, not laying aside our intellect, but comprehending the manner in which the Bible surpasses it (Ephesians 3:19),

we are then free to turn to the only methods proven time and again to unlock the Bible: prayer and fasting. We ask the Lord questions in prayer. We fast, knowing that voluntarily weakening our physical strength awakens deep spiritual hunger. We pray for understanding (Ephesians 1:17) and the revelatory gift of the Holy Spirit to know the heart of Jesus. We ask what motivates Him and what stirs Him. Questions birth more questions, and we are driven to search the Scripture to find answers. Hunger increases as understanding comes. It consumes us over time until we can find nothing better to do with our time than read, sing, discuss, ponder, meditate upon, and study the Scripture. God becomes fascinating to us because He has captured our attention.

Daniel followed this pattern, and Daniel 9:1–27 shows us the wisdom of this pattern. At this time, Daniel was a much older man than the boy who had been taken captive decades earlier. He had read the prophecies of Jeremiah who ministered a generation before him. He understood from the scrolls that recorded those prophecies that his people were to remain in Babylonian captivity, separated from their homeland, for seventy years. However, though the meaning of the passage seemed plain to him, he knew there was more to be understood. Hungry and thirsty to know more about the meaning of the prophecies, he set aside time to pray and fast.

Daniel was not a priest, nor a professional preacher, nor a prophet. He had known and befriended his fellow, exiled priest and prophet, Ezekiel. However, Daniel lived a very different life in the professional world of government. He was a government official, a highly-educated administrator of the affairs of state, and therefore a consultant. Yet, the Scripture was important to him, and he wanted more understanding about the depths of what they were saying. Thus, he studied, fasted, and prayed, interceding for his people, asking the Lord in mercy to send them home.

Suddenly, this unwavering government official received his answer. While he was still praying, confessing, and making his case to the Lord, the angel Gabriel appeared with an incredible gift: *skill to understand*. This is what we are invited to ask for and pursue today. The angel Gabriel called it, “skill to understand”; the apostle Paul called it, “the spirit of wisdom and revelation.” We have been given the free gift of union with Christ by grace, and with it the fullness of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. To experience the glory of what we have been freely given, we can ask in prayer for “skill to understand” the Word of God.

We can receive help from God to understand His Word, just as Daniel received—and, as New Testament believers who enjoy the indwelling Holy Spirit, far more. We are not trying to receive secret, occult knowledge—the truths of the Bible are right in front of our eyes. Skill to understand is connected to the renewing of our minds, the transformation of our hearts, the increased activity of the Holy Spirit on our lives, and more. All of these things work together to clear the “fog” of confusion, the veil over our understanding that makes it hard to understand the Bible. It lifts and disappears.

## THE SPIRIT OF WISDOM AND REVELATION: THE TREASURE OF KNOWING GOD

In Ephesians 1:15–17, Paul prays one of the most important prayers in the New Testament for the Body of Christ:

<sup>15</sup>Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, <sup>16</sup>do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: <sup>17</sup>that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, <sup>18</sup>the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, <sup>19</sup>and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power. (Ephesians 1:15–19)

In this prayer, Paul prays that the Lord will fill His Church with revelation and spiritual understanding. He understood that the things of God are spiritually discerned. In other words, it takes God to reveal Himself to our human hearts. To fully appreciate and understand the mystery of God in Christ, *revelation* (understanding) and *wisdom* (application) are necessary—and both come from God. The Spirit of God alone can impart these realities to the human heart. Our own wisdom and understanding are insufficient for wrestling through matters of eternal significance. We must lean into God for help and strength to see what only He can reveal to us.

The essence of *eternal life* is coming into the knowledge of God (John 17:3). The gift of eternal life gives people an opportunity to be consumed by and obsessed with the knowledge of God. The knowledge of the Son of God

does not refer only to the introductory knowledge of Jesus that we receive at salvation, but also to *intimacy* (*understanding, agreement, and participation*) with God. This is the ultimate place where God is bringing His Church. True apostolic ministry, biblically, brings people into a depth of understanding and knowing the splendor and majesty of Christ Jesus.

Paul prayed that people would receive the spirit of revelation from the Holy Spirit. Our *greatest spiritual need* is for revelation (light) that overpowers Satan's attacks against us. More revelation equips us to remain steady under pressure, gives us clear perspective, and it bolsters us in humility and genuine meekness. Therefore, the value of the spirit of revelation is most evident when we understand the depth and intensity of the storms that are coming to the people of God and to the nations of the earth. Clear perspective and hearts anchored in truth will be more valuable than gold or silver in the days ahead. The resources that money can buy are insufficient to keep our hearts alive, unoffended, and confident in the love and leadership of Jesus when pressures mount up against us. A life built on the knowledge of God, fueled by a spirit of revelation, is one that will burn with love for Jesus when others falter in uncertainty and unbelief.

Biblical truth is more than right ideas; it has a component of supernatural power. Right ideas must have *divine power* (grace) when they touch us because they cannot change us by themselves. Divine ideas in our minds are good, but they *must touch our hearts with supernatural power* to truly be effective. Our mortal minds cannot understand or feel the power of truth without the Spirit's activity in us (1 Corinthians 2:14). Therefore, we are at the mercy of the Holy Spirit, and living right in His presence gives us access to ideas with power. Even the best eyes are useless if the person who has them is in a dark room.

If we can see what Paul saw, then we can embrace what he embraced. Seeing God clearly and knowing His heart intimately determines the quality of our life choices. The spirit of revelation is necessary to equip us to live wholeheartedly with God. It produces powerful things in us that include strength for holiness and happiness. The glory of this truth is its availability. It is for everyone: the hungry, the thirsty, the broken, and *the humble* can all seek grace from God to see the same beauty of God that fueled Paul's passion. In other words, if we can't live without experiencing more of God, we won't. We will give ourselves to His path into knowing Him, His words, and His ways with all of our heart. We will refuse to go our own way. The converse is also

true: if we are content to live without experiencing more of God, then we will.

The end-time mysteries and the strange prophetic declarations are not too hard for us to grasp. We can attain understanding and wisdom through God's gift of spiritual hunger. When we decide we want to unlock the Bible, God is delighted. He wants to allow us to unlock the deep places of His heart even more than we want them to be unlocked. He wants us to know truth and discover mysteries far more than we want to know and discover them. God can't wait to show us answers to our questions so He can share with us in the joys of discovery, the "Wow!" moments that knit our hearts to His. The more frustrating our pursuit, the more satisfied we are when we attain its goal.

God's ultimate goal is to do far more than simply give us answers, though. He is after our hearts. He wants our time, our affections, our attention, our hopes, and our dreams. He has set up a brilliant way to capture us and then consume us with a desire for more of Him. It is the joy of asking, the pain of hunger, and the internal burning of thirst that drive the desperate to ask, seek, and knock. Just at the moment when our frustration seems unbearable, He opens the door. Living water fills us. We receive far more than an answer to our question; we receive life, alive in our innermost beings.

We can take courage, knowing that understanding Scripture is possible for anyone, and it is the destiny of every true son and daughter of God. The scriptures we find baffling will make sense in time. The question isn't, "Can we understand?" It is, "How badly do we *want* to understand?"

## AN APPEAL FOR A BIBLE THAT MEANS WHAT IT SAYS

Hunger for interpretation is the most helpful instrument in Bible study, but there is another helpful tool to give us confidence in accessing God's Word. We must be diligent to take the Word of God at what some scholars call "face value." Other scholars make the same appeal, but instead call readers to a "plain-sense" (common-sense) meaning of the text. I referred to this principle earlier when I spoke of a *grammatical-historical* method of interpretation. Whichever phrase scholars choose, they are all calling believers to recognize that the Bible means what it says. This is not an appeal to take all passages literally, for when interpreting the Bible, it is important to bear in mind each author's intent and style. Figurative statements are meant to be understood as such, just as are the straightforward ones.

Symbols and poetry in many of the Bible's end-time passages can be intimidating, so it is important to remember that, just as understanding the

Bible is not limited to the intelligent, neither is it limited to those with degrees in Greek and Hebrew or those who can afford numerous study aids. Tools such as commentaries, concordances, and Bible dictionaries are valuable in Bible study, but are not indispensable. Comprehending the mysteries in the heart of God is unavailable only to those who have no hunger. Satan's strategy from the beginning of church history has been to use any means necessary to deny people access to the Bible. One of his chosen methods in our day is subtle intimidation. He attempts to convince the Church that much of the Bible is too symbolic or too complex to be understood by most people.

The truth about biblical symbolism is that there is far less of it than we think. Often the symbolism in the Bible does not negate the straightforward nature of what is being described. For example, the artifacts and furnishings of the tabernacle of Moses and the temple of Solomon described in the Old Testament were actual, physical objects that really existed. They also had symbolic meanings beyond their physical functions, and were thus both symbolic and literal. Exploring the symbolic meaning of literal things enables us to better grasp God's redemptive purposes for them. The symbolism of the objects always pointed towards more truth and understanding, all of which takes time to wrestle through and consider.

Another example of symbolism is found in chapter 4 of Revelation, written by the apostle John. John wrote to describe the vision he had of the throne room of God. What he described is not only a symbolic glimpse of God's throne room, but a very real throne room containing an actual throne. Sitting on the throne, John saw One he described as like jasper and a sardius stone in appearance. The throne John saw really has an emerald rainbow around it. While the external beauty John described is awesome to ponder, all the elements of that beauty are also symbolic of a deeper reality. Think of it this way: when a person smiles, that smile is a physical expression, but the external beauty of the smile also gives us a picture of, or symbolizes, what is happening within the person's heart. With both God and man, internal realities have external expressions. In the case of John's description of the throne room, the jasper radiance speaks of God's brilliant, undefiled purity; the sardius speaks of the fiery, burning passion fueling His emotions; and the emerald rainbow speaks of His tender, life-giving mercies toward us.

Reading the Bible in a more straightforward, simple manner often pushes us into a frustrating pursuit of understanding. We may feel as though certain passages could not possibly be true in light of what we *think* we know about

God and His nature. When some encounter difficult-to-swallow passages, they over-symbolize them and discount the simple, common sense meaning that may offend their sensibilities. Some rationalize that certain passages must be symbolic because they personally can't accept that the passages mean what they say. Those passages may not fit their paradigms or systems of thought. Take for example Revelation 19:11. Many think Jesus couldn't or wouldn't return on a real horse, so they dismiss the description as symbolic. Many don't want to think Psalm 110:5–6 means Jesus really will execute the heads of nations and “fill up the roads with dead bodies” after His return, so they choose to interpret it as symbolic—whatever conforms to their image of who they feel Jesus is supposed to be.

God's promise to all believers is that the verses we find most troubling will make sense as we pray, fast, study, and spend more time with Him. It is the common sense meaning of the scriptures that stirs true fascination with God, not someone else's symbolic interpretation of those scriptures. When we have an intimate connection with the end-time plan of God, the passages begin to come alive and make sense. The possibilities of understanding and knowing God become endless as He moves us beyond our notions of what we think *should* be and into the realm of what He knows *can* be. When we believe God is big enough to fulfill His prophetic plans as literally as they are described in His Word, He will become to us more awesome, more glorious, and more beautiful.

## THE QUESTION OF RELEVANCE

Once people conclude that they can understand the Bible, the next obstacle to overcome is the question of its relevance. If we accept that it's possible to understand the Bible, and in particular its end-time passages, some may still wonder *if* and *why* it is pertinent to do so. We question what is to be gained or accomplished. One might concede: the *Bible* is for everyone, but is the study of the *end times* for everyone? Studying the end times becomes relevant when we consider the current state of the world in light of what the Bible says will happen in the end times. Anyone who studies the end times will realize that it is quite possible that Jesus will return in our lifetime, or the lifetime of our children. Studying the end times becomes considerably more relevant as this real possibility sinks in, and we begin to radically change course and alter the way we live our lives before God and man.

Some believers are comfortable with the possibility of Jesus' return and the

end of all things as long as these events remain nebulous “maybes” that don’t disrupt their lives. When the possibility of Jesus’ return in our lifetimes upgrades to a probability, the end times and the second coming of Jesus become disruptive forces. Scripture passages pertaining to His return take on new meaning. Believers begin to feel a new sense of urgency and take far more seriously what the Scripture has to say about preparation and lifestyle. Everything about the way we live our lives is challenged as we wrestle through our doubts when beginning to believe He is coming sooner rather than later. Urgency related to these coming storms often provokes us to ask the right questions. Our life choices seem strange when contrasted with those of “normal” people striving for greater normality. Pressure to dial down our new convictions regarding the end times and our lifestyles comes from the most unlikely sources. In the midst of this struggle and as a result of our increased feelings of urgency, a focused, ever-growing prayer life emerges and becomes strengthened.

When probability grows into a *living conviction in our hearts and minds*, the question of relevancy—whether prophetic passages, particularly those in Revelation, are relevant to our lives—ceases to be an issue. We begin to live based on our conviction that the book of Revelation was inspired by God and given to us as a clear warning of days soon to come. When we have a personal conviction that He is coming very soon, whether in our lifetimes or our children’s, our hearts are gripped by a confidence both frightening and seemingly risky in nature. It is frightening because the events of the end times will be frightening. But it feels risky because the issue of the end times is controversial. Other people have made end-time predictions and ended up looking foolish, having lost their credibility. Fear of being wrong is as haunting as the fear of what some would call “irresponsible scholarship.” We wonder if it is irresponsible to hold such strong convictions about such a volatile and divisive issue, particularly when, according to some, every generation of believers thought Jesus would return in their lifetime.

Is this true? Has “every generation of believers” wrongly imagined that Jesus would return in their lifetime? Let’s take a moment to explore that idea from church history.

## “EVERY GENERATION THOUGHT JESUS WAS RETURNING”

Much has been written about the perspective of the first generation of believers, who seemed convinced the Lord would return in their lifetime. From

the strength and forcefulness of some of Paul's exhortations regarding their lifestyles in light of Jesus' coming, it appears that those believers lived in the *definite* camp, not the *possible* one. It seemed all the signs were in place for the return of Jesus, particularly given the speed with which the gospel was spreading across the Roman Empire. It seemed the return of Jesus in their generation was certain, just as it seemed entirely possible that the gospel of the kingdom would reach "the ends of the earth" (Matthew 24:14). In fact, at that time the remaining twelve disciples of Jesus had scattered themselves to the far reaches of the known world for that purpose.

Then something catastrophic happened that led to a change in the thinking of the first- and second-generation believers. Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70 after a failed Jewish revolt. The city, which had been under siege for two years, lay in ruins. The great temple, a source of national pride and the seat of Jewish worship, was completely destroyed, stone by stone, just as Jesus had prophesied (Matthew 24:2). Suddenly, all of the promises in the Torah that pointed to a glorious Israelite kingdom ruling the world in prosperity and victory seemed impossible. Then in AD 135, after a final Jewish rebellion against Rome, Jerusalem was wiped off the face of the map. There was no longer an Israelite kingdom to rule anything.

As the years unfolded after this tragedy, church leaders began to write of the end of the world as an event that would take place far in the future. Many did not know what to do with all of the passages in the Bible that involved Israel, a nation that had ceased to exist, and began interpreting those passages symbolically. Persecution eventually stopped, and the Church became a legitimate institution in society. The signs of the times appeared to have changed, and the world seemed headed for glory rather than judgment. Those in the Church seemed to accept that Jesus would not return in their lifetimes.

This mindset prevailed for the next seventeen hundred years of church history. Believers no longer thought much about the end times. The letters and books of church leaders and theologians from every generation of believers provide insight into what was on the minds of God's people in each generation of church history, and it wasn't the end times. Instead, rising conflicts over doctrine and the person and nature of Christ dominated the conversation for much of the next few centuries. Symbolic interpretation became the dominant characteristic of Bible study and writing because of various influential schools of thought. Catholicism in Western Europe competed with Greek Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe for influence in the courts of kings and rulers. In later

centuries, church practices and their impact on the nature of salvation led to the Reformation, but the reformers had no more use for the book of Revelation or eschatology than their predecessors. Throughout the eras of the famous missions and revival movements, the study of the end times remained on the back burner of Christian thought. Only recently has eschatology moved more into the forefront of people's minds.

I want to say this tenderly, but boldly: No, it is not true that every generation imagined Jesus was returning in their lifetime. Factually, empirically, objectively, the record of church history testifies of the exact opposite. The Church moved on from the subject of eschatology when Christianity conquered the Roman Empire and its emperor, Constantine.

As noted earlier, a quick check of today's Christian bookstore shelves and the staggering sales numbers for fictional and non-fictional depictions of end-time events reveal what is on the minds of those inside and outside the Church. More than ever, believers and unbelievers alike are thinking about the end of the world. When people raise the objection of what believers "have always thought," they are speaking from personal experience and a little bit of personal frustration. It *feels* like a long time, because the Church *has* been talking about the end times in waves and cycles for nearly seventy years. One group raises the question, gets weary of the debate, and then a younger group begins to ask the questions again. Each time there is a mixture of confusion on the topic along with opposition and error. Each time the older group gets weary, and the cycle begins again. What sparked this conversation?

A major catalyst for this wave of interest in the end times is one of the most prophetic signposts to date: the rebirth of Israel as a nation in 1948 and the return of Jerusalem to Israeli control in 1967. These two events are deeply significant. The destruction of Jerusalem was the main reason those in the early church stopped believing Jesus would return in their generation. Correspondingly, its rebirth has reestablished a context for Jesus' return and thus has sparked a revival of the study of end-time prophecy. A number of Old Testament prophetic passages would be irrelevant if there were no nation of Israel, no gathering place on earth for the Jewish people. However, when Israel came back into existence a few decades ago, a context was reestablished for numerous specific and literal end-of-the-age prophecies. These prophecies involve a specific place and a specific people. The City of David, Jerusalem, was chosen as the capital by its ancient namesake because David knew that the location was special to God. God cares deeply about this strategic little plot of

land, and has great plans for it. The return of Jews to the land of promise is a major signal to the Church of a change in season. It is the beginning of the sequence of signs and events that will culminate in the birth of another age.

With Israel's rebirth and Jerusalem's return to international prominence, hundreds of chapters of the Bible became relevant again. These passages have been a mystery to many and often completely ignored for almost two thousand years. Now they can be read and understood with more clarity. For example, when we read about the prediction of blessing for Israel, we can picture a real place on earth where this will happen. When the writer of a psalm asks us to pray for Jerusalem and the Jews who live there, we don't have to substitute any other meanings. We can better accept that such passages mean what they say and have considerable relevance to the time in which we live, as well as to the times quickly approaching.

That is the good news. The downside is that these passages, which we now understand as applying to real places and real people, involve more than promises of victory, blessing, and glory. They speak of trouble for Israel and the world unlike anything we can imagine. They involve a storm that will engulf the planet and seriously trouble every man, woman, and child. No one will move through the events of the end times without severe difficulty. Almost no one is prepared for what is to come. In our time, the drama begins with Israel. The signpost of unprecedented trouble—the sign heralding one of the most dramatic shifts in the timetable of God in all of redemptive history—begins there. Therefore, Israel is a helpful place for us to begin our search for understanding. It is one of our definitive answers to the questions of eschatology's relevance to our generation. Let us begin there.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of this chapter stood out to you as truths that you would like to go deeper in?
2. What obstacles do you find in your own life that make studying the Bible difficult?
3. What sentiments and statements have made the subject of the end times intimidating over the years?
4. What truths and ideas give you courage to study and work to understand the end times?
5. How have you worked through seasons where you lacked hunger and

thirst to go deeper in the Word of God, either because of busyness, distraction, bad priorities, losses, pressure, etc.?

6. I want to challenge you to make Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1:15–19 a regular part of your prayer life. Take some time, by yourself or with your Bible study group, to understand the prayer, what Paul was asking for and why. There are many resources online to help us understand this critically important prayer, beginning with [mikebickle.org](http://mikebickle.org).
7. What aspects of eschatology have felt irrelevant to you in the past? How has this chapter helped address some of those areas?
8. What truths about eschatology feel relevant to you and help fuel an urgency in your prayers and lifestyle?
9. Why do you think eschatology is more on the minds of Christians *and* non-Christians today than any other time in history?
10. What beliefs within the Church that are not from the Bible threaten to undermine a biblical view of the end times and the return of Jesus?

# 3

## THE RETURN OF ISRAEL AND JERUSALEM

It is my opinion that the most important, fulfilled sign of the times to date is the dramatic reemergence of the Jewish political state in 1948 in the land promised to them by God. This event, along with the sudden recapture of Jerusalem by the Jews in the Six-Day War of 1967, is unprecedented in its implications for the times in which we live. These two events have effectively set the stage by which hundreds of prophetic scriptures, which speak of Jewish control of both the political state and Jerusalem, can now be literally fulfilled. The rebirth of the Jewish state and the reclamation of Jerusalem stand as two of the most noteworthy signposts of the times in which we live. This has many important implications. Israel's current political and spiritual relevance establishes eschatology's theological relevance.

Since the Jewish dispersion by the Romans in AD 135, there was no foreseeable way in which these hundreds of prophetic scriptures could be fulfilled. The history of Christian interpretation of prophetic scriptures demonstrates that even the most able theologians had great difficulty discerning how the Lord would literally fulfill these promises which spoke of a people who had long been scattered throughout the earth and whose nation no longer existed. Yet, suddenly in 1948 after over eighteen hundred years, the United Nations (UN) sanctioned a sovereign Jewish state in the land of Palestine, part of the land that had been promised to this people by the Lord throughout history. Shortly thereafter, Israel reestablished control over Jerusalem with their supernatural victory of the Six-Day War in the summer of 1967. This event prepared the way for many of these end-time scriptures to see actual fulfillment.

The fact that over five million Jews are back in their homeland, controlling both the national government and the city of Jerusalem, should stand before us as an alarm and a bold prophetic statement concerning the times in which we live. Biblically, the end-of-the-age scenario is to be unfolded with Israel and Jerusalem at center stage. Israel has always been the reference point in

understanding God's purposes in redemptive history, thus Israel is the primary indicator for discerning the Lord's purposes at the end. Because of this, the reemergence of the Jewish state and the recapture of Jerusalem in the twentieth century stand as key prophetic signposts concerning the Lord's prophetic time clock.

## THE FALL OF ISRAEL AND JERUSALEM: AD 135

In AD 135 the Roman Empire suppressed a Jewish revolt led by a man named Simon Bar Kokhba who claimed to be Israel's messiah. After crushing the revolt, the Roman Empire sent most of the Jewish population into exile throughout the Roman Empire. In an act of utter contempt for the Jewish people, Emperor Hadrian renamed the land "Syria Palaestina," from which the common name "Palestine" is derived, and renamed the city of Jerusalem "Aelia Capitolina." The emperor also forbade any Jews who remained in the land from entering the city of Jerusalem.

The suppression of the Bar Kokhba revolt in the early second century marks, for many historians, the beginning of the modern Jewish *Diaspora*, or "dispersion." For the next eighteen hundred years the Jews found themselves, for the most part, weak and scattered throughout the earth, with their former land under the direct control of foreigners. The political entity called "Israel" had ceased to exist. The Roman and Byzantine control of Palestine remained until the early seventh century when Muslims took control of the land. Arab forces then took Jerusalem in 638; though under Muslim rule Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem. During the next thirteen hundred years, the land would be predominantly under direct Muslim rule.

An astonishing thing had happened to the Jewish people. They were without a homeland, national identity, or perceivable way of returning to the land they called their own. In spite of this, they miraculously retained their cultural, religious, and ancestral heritage, even amongst the nations. This historic occurrence is, in itself, an incredible supernatural sign. No other people group in history have been separated from their homeland while retaining their unique and distinct identity for more than two centuries. Yet the Jewish people, scattered and lost amongst the peoples and cities of the earth, were able to retain their Jewishness from generation to generation. The fact that there were Jews to return to the land at all in the early twentieth century speaks volumes of God's faithfulness to His promises concerning Israel and Jerusalem.

The eighteen hundred years that Israel had been dispersed from the land

caused Christian interpretation of biblical prophecy to suffer greatly. The Church's theologians, many of whom were truly brilliant and godly men, could not foresee how God could literally fulfill all of His promises to Israel if they did not truly exist as a nation. Therefore, beginning with men such as Clement and Origen of Alexandria, the Church sought to "spiritualize" the biblical prophecies regarding the nation of Israel. It was not until the mid-1800s that a small group of theologians began to once again look at the possibility of literal fulfillment of these scriptures. This idea began to stir among some preachers and teachers of that day as well. What if the prophetic passages and promises of the Old Testament were not for the modern church at all? What if God still remembered the nation of Israel and all of His promises to her and the Jewish people? Could God still save them, though they were scattered with no land? The prophet Isaiah gives us insight to answer this question:

<sup>14</sup>But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me. <sup>15</sup>Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you." (Isaiah 49:14–15)

The prophet Jeremiah also spoke of a time when the people of the nations would pray for Israel and declare the intention of the Lord to save her people:

<sup>7</sup>Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations: proclaim, give praise, and say, "O Lord, save Your people, the remnant of Israel!" . . . <sup>10</sup>Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock." (Jeremiah 31:7, 10)

There are many passages in the Old Testament that speak of the ultimate destiny of Israel and the Jewish people. Were these passages only speaking of the redeemed of Israel? Or was there a national salvation and redemption that all could look forward to in the plans of God? The apostle Paul answered that question simply and succinctly in his letter to the Romans in AD 60:

<sup>26</sup>And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; <sup>27</sup>for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins." (Romans 11:26–27)

Paul spoke of this prophetic promise of God as a future reality and not as one that had been fulfilled thirty years before, at the cross of Christ. There would be a coming redemption and deliverance of the Jewish people, and this idea began to emerge again among believers in the mid-nineteenth century.

It was around this same time that many Jews, specifically those in Eastern Europe, began to seek to reestablish a Jewish state in the land of Israel. This movement, known as Zionism, would steadily gain a platform and serious consideration until the establishment of the independent Jewish political state after World War II. During this time many Jews began to return to the land of Israel, a process known as *aliyah*, in hopes of fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe. Between 1880 and the final establishment of Israel in 1948, millions of Jews returned to their homeland from throughout the nations of the earth.

During World War I the British foreign secretary issued what is known as the “Balfour Declaration,” a statement calling for the establishment of a Jewish state in the land of Palestine. This declaration received great Arab opposition and riots broke out against the Jews in the city of Jerusalem. However, despite explicit Arab hostility and opposition, in 1922 the League of Nations established a British mandate in the land of Palestine with the sole intent of securing a national home for the Jewish people. For nearly the first time in thirteen hundred years, the land was not under Arab-Muslim control, and the government of Palestine was expressly seeking to reestablish a sovereign Jewish state. For the course of the next twenty years the British government was unable to find a way to appease both the Jews and the Arabs in the land, and declared their withdrawal from the land in May of 1948. There appeared to be no hope of coming to terms with a Jewish state in the land of Palestine.

## ISRAEL’S RESTORATION AND ZION’S HOPE: 1948 AND 1967

What seemed like a dying hope was suddenly and stunningly made a reality when the United Nations sanctioned a resolution to partition just over half of the land of Palestine for a Jewish state. Against the counsel of his most trusted advisors, President Harry Truman became the main political figure that “tipped the scales” and stood for a sanction in the UN that a new state would be established on May 14, 1948. For the first time in over two thousand years, there was an independent, sovereign Jewish nation. Israel was apportioned close to half of the land of Palestine, while the other half was given to a Palestinian (Arab) government. Against all odds, in the face of incredible opposition when there was seemingly little political ground to be gained by

such an act—and much to lose related to the Arab rage and rejection of the Zionist idea—the UN had re-established the nation of Israel. Incredibly, a nation that had been wiped off the map by the Roman Empire had received new life, as well as renewed significance. Essentially overnight, the political and spiritual landscape of the planet shifted dramatically.

Many do not see the reemergence of the Jewish state as God's orchestration because men who were not after God's glory established it. These will argue that the actions of Israel before and after their sovereign control of the land cannot ultimately be for God's glory. What could be special about the military and political leadership of Israel—pragmatic, sometimes brutal Jewish atheists who have been at times openly hostile to the spread of the gospel and the name of Jesus? We will examine this question shortly. It seems clear, however—even though the reasons for Israel's establishment were primarily political and not religious—that God's sovereign hand was leading these events in human history to bring about His purposes.

We must seek a biblical perspective in order to rightly interpret the days we live in. Understanding the reestablishment of Israel as God's sovereign dealings in the midst of human history enables us to rightly evaluate current events related to our study of the end times.

In other words, the people within the nation still need salvation: they must acknowledge their sins and seek their own true Messiah of the Jewish people, Jesus, son of David. They must do what God commanded before He will move to save them from their enemies and utter destruction at the hands of the nations, even as the prophet Hosea spoke centuries ago:

<sup>15</sup>I will return again to My place till they acknowledge their offense.

Then they will seek My face; in their affection they will earnestly seek Me. (Hosea 5:15)

Now that Israel has been reborn, the stage is set for them to actually do as a people what the Lord prescribed so long ago. The ancient words and promises can now be fulfilled. For while the land returned to Jewish hands in 1948, a more spectacular thing would happen more than a decade later: the City of David, Zion itself, was about to return to Jewish control as well.

In late spring of 1967, fifteen years after the UN sanctioned the sovereign Jewish state, tension had mounted to a breaking point in the Middle East. The Arab Palestinian, Jordanian, Syrian, and Egyptian governments were on the verge of war against Israel in order to reclaim the land for the Arab

population. In the face of growing hostility, the Israeli government took hasty action to attack the surrounding nations in order to gain an upper hand.

The Six-Day War began on June 5 as Israel launched preemptive air strikes on the Egyptian air force, nearly crippling the enemy force gathered against them in just one day. Not long after these air strikes, Israeli ground forces began to move in unified force. Over the next few days, the heavy offensive action of the Israeli army in the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and West Bank regions of Palestine led to Israel's capture of much of the land, and to a complete control of Jerusalem. Only three days after the beginning of the war, June 8, 1967, the Israeli Defense Forces marched into the "old city" of Jerusalem through the Lion's Gate to capture both the Western (Wailing) Wall and the Temple Mount. Three days later, June 11, a ceasefire was signed and Israel had gained control of both Jerusalem and the lands that had been sanctioned to the Arab-Palestinian government.

This conflict, though brief in duration, is of great importance to any who are examining the Scripture and signs of the times. It is an astounding fact that within one generation the nation of Israel reemerged from two thousand years of dispersion and gained control of the capital city, Jerusalem—the city from which the Bible prophesies that Jesus will reign forever. These events were critical for a modern emergence of conditions into which the end-of-the-age scenario can be fulfilled according to Scripture. In other words, once Jerusalem fell to the Jews in 1967, for the first time in 1,832 years, the prophetic scriptures could now come to pass as they were written. Right before the eyes of the nations, our God sovereignly and miraculously established the essential context for the last days and the end of the age. This event alone stands as one of the most astonishingly open and prominent displays of His power and leadership over history in our generation.

## GOD'S ZEAL FOR ZION: PRESENT DAY

Watching the nation of Israel always gives us insights into the Lord's plan. This nation has always, and will continue to stand as a "case study" on the way God deals with humanity. As His chosen people, the Jews uniquely demonstrate through their history the way in which God interacts with the nations of the world. They stand at the very center of His redemptive purposes, and the sudden emergence of the Jewish state should not go unnoticed to the believer desiring to discern the signs surrounding the Lord's return. According to Paul, it is instructive to remember two key points: the fathers of our faith

were Jewish men; secondly, from these men, “according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God” (Romans 9:5).

To paraphrase, we daily live out a Hebrew faith, and the God of that Hebrew faith who is over all things is a Hebrew. The Man who, according to the flesh, descended from the line of David had been without a nation and a city on the earth for those eighteen hundred years.

This is an incredible point! Paul reminds us all that the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and the flesh He took on was Jewish! Also, Paul is reminding us that the God-man who ascended and now sits at the right hand of the Father never forsook His humanity. He is still fully God, and fully man. Therefore, He is still fully Jewish. He is still the son of David and the Son of God, as Revelation 5:5 reminds us as well.

In our day, a city Jesus loves deeply has re-emerged despite opposition and impossible odds. This is the city that David and Jesus called, “the city of the great King” (Psalm 48:2; Matthew 5:35). Jerusalem is His city, and as such, He has deep emotions and desires for the city and its destiny. He expressed those deep emotions in Matthew 23:37–39 when He lamented the city’s rejection of Him. He is jealous for Jerusalem to be what Isaiah called, “a praise in the earth” (Isaiah 62:7). All through the prophets, we find passage after passage about Jerusalem and God’s desire to make that city great on the earth.

The prophet Zechariah described God’s emotions for His city in this manner:

<sup>2</sup>Thus says the Lord of hosts: “I am zealous for Zion with great zeal; with great fervor I am zealous for her.” <sup>3</sup>Thus says the Lord: “I will return to Zion, and dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Jerusalem shall be called the City of Truth, the Mountain of the Lord of hosts, the Holy Mountain.” (Zechariah 8:2–3)

Thus, the primary importance of Israel and Jerusalem lies primarily with the subject of God’s affections and stated intentions for this geographic location. It is easy for us to imagine the zeal and jealousy of the Lord for human beings, His most precious and special creation, but it is difficult for us to imagine that God has zeal and emotion about a geographic location. The end-of-the-age drama is directly played out in context to events that are centered upon Israel and Jerusalem. God longs to orchestrate events all across the globe in relationship to this land and people—so that He might return to the earth and

dwell here forever. It is important that we understand that God has great zeal and passion not only for the Jewish people but also for the Jewish people in this specific geographic location. His emotions and desires are related to the people He will be dwelling with—He cares about them—thus He cares about the place that He is preparing for them.

The next point of emphasis on the importance of Israel and Jerusalem, mentioned already, is that the unfolding of these events can be seen as actual fulfillments of biblical prophecies about the end of the age. In other words, some of the very events we see unfolding before us today are fulfillments of prophetic testimonies concerning the last days. A stunning example of this is in Isaiah:

<sup>6</sup>I have set watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they shall never hold their peace day or night. You who make mention of the Lord, do not keep silent, <sup>7</sup>and give Him no rest till He establishes and till He makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth. (Isaiah 62:6–7)

In this promise, the Lord speaks through the prophet Isaiah to the city of Jerusalem, “I have set watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they shall never hold their peace day or night.” Again, the context of this passage is the Lord’s desire to bring about the fullness of righteousness in His people Israel in the end times. In light of this sovereign decree, the Lord promises the city of Jerusalem that He will initiate a “setting” of watchmen, or intercessors, who will not hold their peace day or night. We have examined this prophetic promise in light of the global prayer movement and the emergence of night-and-day prayer ministries with a burden for Jerusalem. There is more to this promise unfolding before our eyes, however.

The Lord continues the promise by addressing the watchmen specifically: “You who make mention of the Lord, do not keep silent, and give Him no rest till He establishes and till He makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.” In this verse the Lord gives a specific charge to the intercessors He has established in the city of Jerusalem as well as those with hearts to join them in prayer throughout the earth. Any throughout the nations can participate in the exhortation of the Lord to continue in prayer. The charge of the Lord is that the intercessors would continue to come before His presence and cry out to Him that He would release all that is in His heart for the city of Jerusalem. God’s ultimate desire is to both establish Jerusalem as the chief city in the earth, and to make this city a praise throughout the whole world.

Let me emphasize this again. This promise is *literally being fulfilled in our day* and in our time. This is above and beyond the global emergence of night-and-day prayer ministries that have a burden for Israel. Now in the city of Jerusalem itself, for the first time in over two thousand years, there are believers interceding before the Lord day and night that He would release His purposes for the city. The Lord has been faithful to His promise that in the end times He would establish intercessors in Jerusalem who would give Him no rest in intercession. This is happening even now as three houses of prayer in the city each operate as small fulfillments of His promise.

Many other events in the Bible related to the end times can only take place if Israel is a sovereign state with control of Jerusalem as their capital. In the coming days, emerging trends related to Israel and Jerusalem will continue to reflect the prophetic destination of current history. This will awaken more and more believers to a new sobriety related to the times in which we live. The prophetic scriptures reveal the end of the story in a way that greatly informs us as we watch history flowing in the exact direction God said it would. We can tremble and be encouraged as these events continue to prove the scriptures true. No context is more startling to witness this than the events that surround the nation of Israel. The closer we come to the end of this age, the more clearly we will discern the things which God spoke about so long ago.

This phenomenon has been ongoing for some time. One hundred years before Israel was formally re-established as a nation, theologians began to shift in their understanding of prophetic scriptures. The regathering of the Jewish people to the land during the late eighteen and early nineteen hundreds marked the beginning of a fulfillment of prophecies directly related to the end of the age. God began to awaken the hearts and minds of some to connect with what was just beginning in their day.

Isaiah declares that the Lord will “set up a banner for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah” (Isaiah 11:12; Ezekiel 37:1–12). Most of the prophetic scriptures about the regathering of the Israelites will be fulfilled after the second coming, after a time of great trouble for the Jews, which Jeremiah called “Jacob’s trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7). However, there is also the scriptural reality of a gathering before the trouble that would shake the nation. For example, there is no purpose for the nations to surround Jerusalem with great rage to destroy it (Zechariah 12:1–4) as part of Satan’s rage against the Jewish race (Revelation 12:17) if there are no Jews inhabiting the city at that time.

The Lord spoke clearly concerning the reestablishment of the Jewish state (Isaiah 66:7–8) prior to the trouble and the regathering of the Jews to Israel. We are seeing in our time other prophetic scriptures coming to pass, including the revival of the Hebrew language (Zephaniah 3:9), the resurgence of their military (Zechariah 12:6), the reoccupation of the city of Jerusalem (Zechariah 12:2–6), the re-emergence of a remnant of Jewish believers in Jerusalem (Romans 9; 27; 11:5), and the hatred of all nations against Israel (Zechariah 12:2–3). All of these things are now, and the timing of the beginning of these passages' fulfillment points to the urgency of the hour in terms of what these events imply for the earth.

Many other scriptures cannot be fulfilled apart from the Jewish control of Israel and Jerusalem. One of the most important prophetic scriptures in regards to God's dealings with Israel and the nations at the end of the age is Daniel 9:24–27. Not only does this passage give specific timing indicators for the end, but it also gives insights to the necessity of Israel's control of the land in the last days. From this passage we understand that Israel will be back in their land with a functioning temple and will make a covenant with a coming world leader the Bible calls the "Antichrist." Daniel is told that "he [Antichrist] shall confirm a covenant with many [unsaved Israel] for one week" and that "he shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering" (Daniel 9:27). There are two things implied for this passage to be literally fulfilled.

First, in order for "the many," or the unsaved state of Israel, to make a covenant with this Antichrist, a sovereign, political state under the control of Jews must be in a position to make that covenant or treaty. Secondly, this passage tells us that the Antichrist will "bring an end to sacrifice and offering." If we believe in the future literal fulfillment of this prophecy (which we should because of the precision with which earlier parts of this prophecy have already been fulfilled in Jesus) then we must conclude that there will be a functional temple in the city of Jerusalem where the daily sacrifices and offerings according to the law of Moses are made.

Another passage that necessitates the people of Israel being in the land for its literal fulfillment is of Jesus' final words to the leadership of Jerusalem. In Matthew 23:37–39, Jesus speaks His final words to the political leadership of the city and declares, "from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Matthew 23:39, NASB) In other words, Jesus is declaring that the Jewish people will not see Him return to the city of Jerusalem until the Jewish leadership declares that He in

fact is the one who has been sent from God for their deliverance. This, of course, demands a re-emergence of the political Jewish leadership in the city of Jerusalem before Christ's return.

There is also much trouble ahead for Israel, Jerusalem, and her people. Those two prophetic passages above alert us to the lateness of the hour *and* illustrate the dangers that await us all. Israeli political leaders will ally themselves with the false messiah while other major Israeli political leaders will later welcome the true Messiah into the city. This is dramatic! The battle for the heart and soul of Israel reflects a coming conflict for the whole earth. We cannot see Israel's destiny apart from the destiny of the nations; nor can we understand the nations' destinies in God apart from Israel. Israel will find herself in the very center of the storm—even while the storm has grave consequences for every nation on earth.

## THE FUTURE OF ISRAEL: JACOB'S TROUBLE AND RESTORATION

Each and every day newspaper and television broadcasts are littered with stories about the controversy surrounding the nation of Israel. The problem of Jews in the land did not end with the declaration of their sovereign state in 1948, nor with their military victory to recapture Jerusalem in 1967. Rather, with each passing day, the controversy seems to escalate as the nations which surround Israel grow in hostility toward the Jewish population in the land. The rapid growth of a diabolical hatred by many nations of the earth toward Israel shows a global movement of humanity toward the prophecies of the last days found in Zechariah 12–14. With each passing day it becomes clearer how all the nations that surround Israel will “lay siege against Judah and Jerusalem” (Zechariah 12:2).

The passages in Zechariah 12:2–3 give two distinct images which will mark Israel's relationship to her surrounding nations in the last days. Just a quick glance at the headlines makes it clear that the manifestation of these truths is fast approaching. First, the Lord declares He will “make Jerusalem a cup of drunkenness to all the surrounding peoples” (Zechariah 12:2). As a “cup of drunkenness,” the city of Jerusalem will one day become a magnet for the rage of the nations that surround Israel. In other words, the Arab nations that surround Israel will become drunk with rage against the Jews in the land with no reason or logic behind their obsessive, diabolical anger toward God and

His people.

Secondly, the Lord “will make Jerusalem a very heavy stone for all peoples; all who would heave it away will surely be cut in pieces, though all nations of the earth are gathered against it” (Zechariah 12:3). This image shows us that all the leaders and most peoples of the earth will gather against the “heavy stone” of Jerusalem. They will seek to cast it away both physically and politically, hoping to rid the earth of the Jewish people who have been uniquely chosen by God. These two verses tell us *what* is going to happen, and they also give us a hint about *why*: *God will use Israel as His means of exposing the truth about what is in the heart of all mankind toward Him.* This theme is echoed in many places throughout the prophetic scriptures.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke of God’s “controversy with the nations” (Jeremiah 25:30–32). Though the nations have rebelled against Him, in His mercy He will “plead His case with all flesh” before the great end-time judgments come crashing down on the wicked. God will use unusual means to gain a global audience. He will plead His case and win the hearts of many people with love. As the Zechariah verses declare, *Israel* will become the global flashpoint by which all nations will learn of God’s plans, rage against them, and ultimately rebel against Him. How will God accomplish this? Jesus prophesied something powerful and important in Matthew:

<sup>14</sup>“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24:14)

There are many implications of what Jesus is communicating in this verse; some we will discuss later, and others are beyond the scope of this book. Think about what Jesus is saying: *one message* about the *kingdom of God* is going to fill the earth before He returns! Earlier, we explored some of the difficulties for many believers on the subject of eschatology. One is the profound lack of agreement regarding this subject across the Body of Christ. How will such unity in one message arise from the church in the last days?

Full examination of the answer is again beyond the scope of this book, but we can introduce a few ideas that will help us understand the trouble that awaits Israel. The apostle Paul gives us clarity in Ephesians 3 and 4 when he speaks of “the fullness of God” experienced by “all the saints” (Ephesians 3:16–19), and how the maturity of the fivefold ministry brings maturity to the Church (Ephesians 4:11–12). This leads to what Paul called, “the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:13). Jesus

summarized: believers will experience and express from God, to God, and to others the *same love* as the Father has for the Son (John 15:9–17; 17:26). All these passages demonstrate what a historic end-time revival could look like with a mature *quality* and *depth* of the Bride’s love for Jesus just before He returns (Revelation 7:9–17).

Now, however, we are exploring the *downside* of this glorious future move of God in His global, historic breakthrough of the Holy Spirit. The earth will hear the message of Jesus, His cross, and His kingdom. The gospel of the kingdom is a comprehensive presentation of the “good news” for all mankind involving who Jesus is, what He has done, and what He is going to do on the earth when He returns. He will establish His kingdom headquarters on the earth in Jerusalem and Israel. If we agree that the verses above (and many more) speak of a historic move of God causing the “gospel of the kingdom” to fill the earth in a catalytic manner, then we have to think about the implications of announcing it with signs and wonders to nations and leaders that despise the Jesus of Christianity and the God of Israel. They will be hostile to the idea that the King of the earth is coming to Jerusalem to reign over them and their people.

This pronouncement, accompanied by the Holy Spirit’s power, will unveil a real and present danger to the “status quo” of the nations and systems of power that enable wicked men to retain control. The return of Jesus, the rightful King of the whole earth, is only good news to those who love Him. For those opposed to His agenda, whom King David mentioned in Psalm 2, the second coming of Jesus will provoke rage, hatred, and incredible resistance to God’s agenda for the earth. The current increase of anti-Semitism that is spreading across the earth is a mere hint of where the course of history is going. Yet, the end-time rage of the nations now mounting against Israel runs far deeper than hatred of the Jews. It is and will be about hatred of Jesus. He is the Messiah and God of Israel. The end-time rage against Israel will be all about and against Him, and His plans.

Essentially, what will transpire at the end of the age is an open manifestation of man’s hatred of God and the people of His choice. By raging against His chosen people, the nations of the earth will declare their hatred of God. To hate His perfect leadership is to hate Him because His ways and His person cannot be separated. Though this hatred is subtle now, it will become full grown, publicly displayed, and championed globally. This drama is not truly about the nations’ controversy with Israel. This is about God’s

controversy with the nations. Prophetic preaching with great power, sounding forth from a unified Bride who is mature in her love of Christ, will be the means God uses to provoke and revive Israel, disrupt and distress the nations, and “plead His case with all flesh” (Jeremiah 25:31).

The story of Jacob’s trouble is not, however, the story of Israel’s destruction. Quite the contrary, from heaven’s perspective the storyline is about Israel’s restoration and exaltation as the premier nation among the nations of the earth. It is the story of how the Bride of Christ serves that purpose with all of her heart. It is ultimately the kind of story that captures and moves our hearts at the deepest level. A small, forgotten people, hated and despised by the nations and because the true identity and nature of her King is unveiled, becomes threatened on every side by wicked, murderous, self-seeking, *powerful* men. The whole earth counts her down and out.

But not the Church; not the people of God. The friends of the Bridegroom, who will love His people deeply, loyally, and *sacrificially*, will rise up in her defense. Think about this. A radical transformation of the culture of the Church is coming. A Bride that does not seek her own good, or fight for herself. A body of believers that stands so confident in love that they can fully give themselves to fight for the destiny, greatness, and future of another. Very difficult times are ahead for Israel. The Church will not impassively look on from a distance hoping Israel will make it. The Bride will be like her Bridegroom. The Church will fearlessly enter into the trial and trouble of Israel and fight for the nation when no one else will. Jacob’s trouble will become *our* trouble. Israel’s restoration and exaltation will be one of Jesus’ greatest victories and one of our greatest joys.

By the grace of God and the brilliance of His leadership, the Lord is going to use the Church to *cause* the coming crisis through anointed preaching with power. The Lord will also use the Church to *solve* the coming crisis through anointed prayer with authority. All of this will be dynamically interwoven into the incredible storyline of Israel in her time of greatest trial. The trial will be severe and difficult to endure. Yet, the Messiah’s love for her will prevail and bring her into her great destiny—which we discuss later.

It takes only a brief glance at the headlines over the past few years to understand that the context in which these prophecies will be fulfilled is unfolding before our eyes. The surrounding Arab nations are becoming bolder in their proclamation of hatred for the Jewish people in the land of Israel, and anti-Semitism is rapidly escalating globally. Radical Islamic organizations

have come to power in several nations surrounding Israel. They are expressing only a down payment of this irrational drunkenness from a wine that will be drunk by all the nations surrounding Israel. The former president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, openly stated that one of his chief goals while in office is to wipe Israel off of the map. It is shocking to comprehend that a prominent world political leader could publicly call for the utter destruction of another nation. This is not only tolerated, but internationally agreed with by some.

It is crucial that we understand the events of our times in their significance for end-time studies. Israel's return to the land and recapture of the city of Jerusalem are clear signposts of the time in which we are living. Another trend emerging alongside the signposts of Israel and Jerusalem is the response of Satan against her (Revelation 12:1–17) as expressed in part through the rising threat of radical Islam. This will shake all who dwell on the earth as radical Islamists show us how quickly nations of the Middle East can arise in unison against Israel. Their demonized hatred of Israel and the Jews is a key component of the end-of-the-age drama—a drama that ends with a violent, global clash where, according to some current players in the drama, one side or the other is annihilated.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of this chapter stood out to you as truths you would like to go deeper in?
2. Why did God establish Israel as the centerpiece (other than His Son) of His plan for the nations?
3. Why would the preservation of the Jewish race—apart from a national identity—be considered proof of God's sovereign involvement in the affairs of Israel?
4. Why does God continue to remain faithful to Israel—and what does this mean for our own relationship with God?
5. Why is Israel's destiny entwined so intimately with the destiny of the nations?
6. Why does the Bible invite us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem—and what are the implications for our hearts as we take this invitation of Psalm 122:6 seriously?
7. Why is it difficult to pray for and carry a biblical concern for Israel

within our hearts?

8. Why do some go *so* far in their identification with and concern for Israel —why do some emphasize keeping Jewish feasts and customs?
9. What does authentic, biblical, Holy Spirit-fueled love for Israel look like at the end of the age?
10. What elements of the storyline of Israel described at the end of the chapter move your heart, and why?

# 4

## HOW SERIOUS IS THE PROBLEM?

Jesus listed many key signs in Matthew 24:4–8 that will indicate the end times are near, and He called these signs “the beginning of sorrows.” The signs themselves will be difficult enough for some to endure. They will include deceptive leaders, wars, ethnic conflicts, famines, plagues, earthquakes, and a significant increase in the persecution of believers. To the generation that witnesses all these signs, they are a warning that the events Jesus highlighted as the worst moments in human history are soon to come. These dramatic events will mark the turning point of human history, as mankind embarks on a descent into trouble and judgment. According to Jesus, it will be a time of “great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:21).

The Bible leaves no room for speculation as to whether other events in world history could have qualified. Historic events involving great death and horror have occurred throughout history and have affected many around the world, but not *everyone* in the world. Regarding the coming events, Jesus said if His Father had not chosen beforehand to cut the time frame short, no one would survive (Matthew 24:22). The Bible is very clear that every single person on the planet will experience the coming trouble. Jesus described “men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth” (Luke 21:26). Paul described a mass exodus of sincere believers from their faith in Jesus (2 Thessalonians 2:3) due to the horror of those events. The truth is, nobody in heaven or on earth has ever seen anything like what the Bible says will happen during the end times.

### IS GOD ANGRY WITH PEOPLE, NATIONS, AND CULTURES?

Within the Body of Christ, arguments against the wrath of God ebb and flow. Historically, in seasons when the wrath of God has been emphasized, the call to holiness for the sake of God’s glory was also preached. These are important messages, but if they are communicated without the other emotions within God’s heart toward mankind, they can make our relationship with Him toxic in

nature. We lose confidence and tend to draw back in compromise. We perform to win the affections of a misperceived, cold, stern, and disappointed God. I understand why many young preachers have zeal to bring correction to this kind of ministry culture from our not-too-distant past.

Attempting to get someone to be committed as a servant of God before they are secure in His love almost always produces some form of external holiness. True holiness flows out of passion, which comes from a free acceptance of the love of God. Passionate holiness (a red-hot heart with fiery gratitude) has life, joy, and compassion versus religious holiness which has fear, judgment, criticism, insecurity, and condemnation without passion or joy. One tries to conform outwardly to principles. What we honestly want is to connect authentically with the truths of the gospel by connecting to God's heart and *feeling* the power of being loved, valued, and *enjoyed* by Him. We are essentially saying, "I want You God because You want me: we love You God because You first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

However, we are approaching a "high tide" season within the Body of Christ related to false teaching on the subject of the wrath of God. The overcorrection is beginning to flow into outright error and deception. An overemphasis on God's enjoyment of humans and their worth and value to Him (also beautiful messages!) has given way to a mixture of humanistic, man-centered, self-centered ideas alongside the gospel. The fruit of this error is a denial of God's wrath against ungodliness, unrighteousness, and His anger against the injustice of nations and leaders. Some resist the message of the end times and the second coming of Jesus because of their confusion about the wrath of God.

The doctrine of God's wrath is, today, the most hated biblical doctrine. It is equally the most neglected and misunderstood. Hating this doctrine results in the false notion that good men are in conflict with an angry, unreasonable God instead of concluding that evil men are in trouble (debt) with a good God. The tragedy is that this doctrine also has the most potential to inspire the deepest level of love based on the principle of Luke 7:47, "But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little." The opposite is also true: he who realizes how much of a debt he owed and how much he has been forgiven—the same loves much!

The corridors of human history echo with the cry "*unfair*" because of this doctrine. What is surprising is when we discover the corridors of our own hearts also declare this when we wrestle with the subject. We want to let

God's Word break down these lies within our own hearts and rejoice in the truth of who God is, not who we want Him to be. We cannot understand the measure of God's love without it. If we can see the great trouble that man is in related to his hatred of God, we will see the great solution in the heart of the God that *loves* His enemies (Matthew 5:44). Those who are set against the Lord are loved—but they *are* His enemies. As long as we are dull and insensitive to the blazing wrath of God, we will remain dull and insensitive to our absolute protection from it by the gift of righteousness. When understood properly, the weight of this doctrine is meant to produce a depth of gratitude to God in our hearts unto abandonment.

One of the reasons we find it difficult to believe that God is angry with human beings—captured by the famous (unscriptural) maxim, “Love the sinner, hate the sin”—is because we are not gospel-centered in our thinking. Sentimental ideas about God and man include reducing sin to a set of *behaviors* God is displeased with, rather than seeing sin as a fundamental part of our fallen nature. We simply do not understand how drastically the fall of man in the garden of Eden distorted God's intention for what human beings were originally created to be. We think in terms of behavior and earning love and respect; therefore, God can hate our behavior but love us.

The state of a fallen human being outside of Christ is more drastic than that, however. In other words, we minimize God's wrath because we minimize man's sin—and therefore we are ignorant of how serious our problem is. Fallen man is sinful by *nature*. Behavior is an expression of what is broken and distorted at the very core of a man's being who is not in Christ. We aren't just sinning—and we aren't just sinners. We are *dead in our trespasses and sins*, as Paul states clearly:

<sup>1</sup>And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, <sup>2</sup>in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, <sup>3</sup>among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, *and were by nature children of wrath*, just as the others.  
(Ephesians 2:1–3)

Paul is very straightforward in laying out the seriousness of the problem. He does so again in Romans:

<sup>32</sup>who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:32)

When man acts according to his nature, he does not simply practice unrighteousness, he approves of others who practice the same things. In other words, man allows the emergence of a culture of unrighteousness amongst a people. The culture that forms and takes root becomes a complex system built around man's pride, love of darkness, and hatred of God. An example of this would be when a man becomes addicted to pornography. He approves of others who share the same addiction. It isn't the *behavior* that represents the greatest problem: it is the normalization and acceptance of things that were once shameful. The approval of wicked practices causes them to become accepted within a wicked culture. Then, the corrupt value system takes root in that culture and creates a context of *permission* to express deeper, darker, more shameful sin.

In this case, a culture of pornography is the kind of culture that gives way to immorality. Immorality and unfaithfulness gives permission to human trafficking, abortion, and more. The "Pandora's box" of ungodliness, opened up by the unrepentant man who approves of other unrepentant men, gives way to a society built on the complexities of corruption that cause sin to run far deeper than someone's immaturity or bad behavior. There is a whole rotten web of corruption that Jesus wants to remove from the planet. Yet, in our sentimental, man-centered view of love and mercy, we minimize the problems facing the Church and the returning King.

I ask young people all the time: how badly do you want to see human trafficking end? It's an easy issue to care about. However, very few young people give thought to what birthed such practices. Therefore, very few young people give thought to what it will take to remove it. Sometimes, a cancerous tumor within a body is so entrenched and connected to the body that removing it can be extremely traumatic to the patient. Mankind, by nature, has allowed a cancer to flourish around the world that is going to be very painful and traumatic to remove when Jesus returns to the planet.

Let's return to the issue of behaviorally-oriented thinking. The essence of the gospel is that it proclaims a free gift from God given solely by grace apart from any work or behavior of the individual. In other words, we cannot motivate God in any way to love us. He set His love on us—fully, freely, and

finally—as an act of mercy and kindness that we can never earn. In fact, this is still true about us: God is motivated from within Himself to love us, but not by our behavior. The problem with “love the sinner, hate the sin” is that it reduces the problem of sin *and* reduces the love of God at the same time. It does so by pitting the love of God against wrath and anger. Love is seen as “acceptance” and wrath is seen as “rejection,” which God would never do to the lost. Didn’t Jesus spend lots of time with sinners, gluttons, and tax collectors?

Besides culturally misunderstanding who was seen as an undesirable “sinner” according to Judaism in the time of Jesus, these sentiments misunderstand the very nature of love. Love and hate are not the opposite; in fact, passionate hatred can be knit to passionate concern for someone’s state of being. One can hate who someone has become *because* they so deeply love them and care about their future. One can hate something more than a crack addict’s behavior. One can hate the very core of what makes a crack addict stay bound to his addiction—the corrupt, deceitful heart within him that lies to him and impacts his choices. Biblically, the opposite of love is *not* hatred; it is *fear*. (C. S. Lewis once said that it was “indifference.”)<sup>43</sup>

A student of mine aptly defined “wrath” as “a deep agitation of the soul.” Her conclusion was brilliant. “It *hurt* God to love us when we were lost. He loved us so much, *and* hated who we were and what the fall had done to us. His soul was *deeply agitated* at our condition and He was pained over the state of our lives.”

What was great about this student’s insights is that she understood something profound about the “hatred” of God. Before and after salvation God continues to relate to us according to our *nature*, not according to our *behavior*. Prior to salvation, we are enemies of God *by nature*, dead on the inside, powerless against sin, rejecting God’s love, despising Him in our hearts. Our hearts, made to be loved by Him, find our identity and satisfy our desires in broken ways that leave us far more broken and dysfunctional. The One who made us, formed us, and loves us is jealous for so much more. He wants more for our lives, our hearts, and our futures. It *hurts Him to love us*. Why? Because we were His *enemies*.

Jesus said it beautifully in Matthew 5:43–44:

<sup>43</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’ <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who

spitefully use you and persecute you.”

Jesus gave us the picture of how His Father loves those who are His enemies. As long as they hate Him, curse Him, and seek to use Him for selfish gain, they remain His enemies and are estranged from Him. Yet, while still calling them His enemies, Jesus *loves them*. He prays for them. He blesses them with rain and even helps them prosper at times. The saying that Jesus referenced (“Love your neighbor, hate your enemy”) likely came from the *Talmud*, or the rabbinical interpretation of the *Torah*, or the law of Moses. There are many passages within the Law and the Prophets that speak of God’s hatred for the wicked. Therefore, the rabbis may have seen that as permission to hate those whom God hates.

However, Jesus revealed the true heart of God. God does not apologize for being angry at “ungodliness and unrighteousness.” He will not apologize for hating what man has become, and the wicked world systems he has built. He has every right to hate a culture where the womb of a mother is one of the most dangerous places for a baby to be. Yet, at the same time, with the same heart, He loves passionately, jealously, and dangerously. There is no conflict or contradiction for One who is holy in love; He does not love like we do. God is not like us at all.

The fires of His love that burn within Him are what stir His deep feelings about humanity, sin, righteousness, justice, and restoration. It is *because* He loves that He is angry. He is angry with enemies that He loves *because* He is jealous for more for them; so angry, that He declared war on all sin, wickedness, and rebellion. To win the war, He became His enemy, and died for His enemy so that there could be peace between the two warring factions. We must never reduce this kind of love to something humanized, weak, and sentimental. This kind of love burns with a fearsome intensity that ignites our hearts to thanksgiving forever. The problem is serious, but the solution is staggering.

In the same manner, the jealous love of God loves the peoples of the earth but hates the systems they have built—systems that oppress the poor, murder the innocent, violate the eyes, and corrupt the heart. The storm that is coming is one birthed in the heart of God. Unprecedented trouble is coming because of God’s unprecedented anger. God is angry, but He withholds most of it today—He “stores up wrath for the day of wrath” (Romans 2:5). There is a day of reckoning coming, however. A day of wrath so great that many will be swept

away by it. It is a storm unlike anything experienced before in history.

## IS GOD ANGRY WITH AMERICA?

We might ask, “*how do we know when God is angry?*” Is God angry with our nation? This idea is also resisted by some—it seems impossible for a glad God to be angry with America. However, Romans 1:18–32 tells us how we can know the answer to this question. When we see the things Paul lists in Romans 1:18–32 worked out in a society, you can be assured that God is angry. What Romans 1 proceeds to say is “USA Today,” or, for that matter, what we would find in any newspaper in any city, any day of the week. Therefore, we can confidently conclude that God is angry with our nation today. He is not just angry with our nation, but with individuals. This does not mean that God does not desire to remove us from being recipients of His anger. It simply means that the evidence for God’s anger is in what He allows to happen within society. God reveals His anger in small ways (“giving men up” and “giving men over”) to point to the fullness of that anger in the future (Romans 2:5).

This helps us understand the seriousness of the problem for our own nation. It helps us understand why these events will be so intense. Why, then, does the coming storm have to be so violent, so massive in scope? The answer is not because God is severe, but because the condition of the earth will have become so severe that no other course of action would suffice. Sin will be at its height (Daniel 8:23), and darkness and wickedness will be at their worst (Revelation 9:21). Joel described this time as a “day of darkness and gloominess” (Joel 2:2), which is a fair assessment of the eventual fate of God’s enemies. It is important to remember that the book of Revelation, which gives much information about the great trouble that will come, is not about how mad God will be at people, but about how bad mankind will have become, and God’s just and necessary response to that wickedness.

In early September of 2005, 80 percent of New Orleans was under water after being devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The reason some people gave for staying behind when the call went forth to evacuate the city was that they could not imagine how bad the conditions were going to be. In many ways, it is still unimaginable. Practically overnight, one of the most powerful cities in the world was stripped of its strength. One of the many shocks to people was the transformation of a first-world power into a third-world reality in a day. Many involved in the aftermath said it was the worst thing they had ever seen, and

that they were struggling for answers.

A few days later, *Time* magazine mocked the explanation that the hurricane was God's judgment on that city for its sin.<sup>2</sup> The article's author compared that kind of thinking to ancient superstitions that linked natural disasters to angry gods. For a believer, however, there should at *least* be one question in our minds: was God involved at all? In this season of history, we cannot be definitive about why calamity and natural disasters happen unless the Lord speaks clearly to His Church. However, we know God controls the forces of nature. Can a believer appeal to simple "fate" or some kind of cosmic accident that caught God by surprise? Some of what has taken place over time is the "groan" of creation due to the impact of mankind's sin (Romans 8:19–22). Nothing, however, happens without the knowledge of God, who oversees all of history. We are forced to deal with this fact: according to Jeremiah, God has a controversy with the nations because of *sin* and hatred of His leadership and His appointed Messiah (Psalm 2:1–3; Jeremiah 25:31). We believers are confronted with a God who will, without hesitation, bring shaking and judgment to get the attention of His people and the nations of the world, in the hope that they will repent.

We must understand that if and when God brings shaking and judgment upon a region or nation, there is far more on His mind than the people He is angry with. Judgment is for the purpose of capturing the attention of any and all who embrace any form of darkness, wickedness, or compromise. Natural disaster and trouble from God's hand in the prophetic books of the Bible were viewed as a mere whisper of the Lord; a roar from the lion would come soon afterwards (Amos 3:8). The events of the past few decades—terror attacks, tsunamis, hurricanes—are but preludes to and small hints of the events that will confront us in the end times. The problem is not God. Jesus is unmoved by our definitions of who He is or who we think He should be. He is a King and a Judge who loves us as our Husband. His deep love for all of us motivates Him to declare war on darkness, sin, and wickedness. He cannot and will not coexist with His enemies, He will not make peace with them, and He will not ignore them in the name of grace. He is in a war, and His victory prize will be all the people of earth who are wholly given to His heart.

## THE BEGINNING OF BIRTH PANGS: TROUBLE THAT ALERTS THE CHURCH

Thus, the intensity of what strikes the nations will increase immensely in the years to come. Such events will become more frequent and more severe. These “birth pangs,” which Jesus also referred to in Mark 13:8 as the “beginning of sorrows,” are the beginning of a birthing process. This process will end with the birthing of a new and glorious age in which the risen and beautiful King Jesus will rule the nations in wisdom, power, majesty, and splendor. However, the birthing of this new age, an age so gloriously different from the present age, will not happen easily. The birthing process will be painful and difficult. Jesus said in John 16:20–23,

<sup>20</sup>“Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. <sup>21</sup>A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. <sup>22</sup>Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you. <sup>23</sup>And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you.”

When we see what has been in the heart of God for us all along, we will forget all the pain and trial we endured before then. We will rejoice after the pain of labor that a human being has been brought into the world. When the new age has been birthed and we have seen Jesus return, we will be filled with a joy that can never be taken from us. In that day, we will relate to the Father face to face, and He will give us whatever we ask, whatever our hearts desire. This “asking” in that day will be as the intercession of Jesus in Psalm 2:8: “Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession.” The Son relates to the Father through intercession! This is how He loves to relate to the Father. The thing that delights the Son will thrill us as well—approaching the Father in intercession and asking Him for our hearts’ desires.

The labor pains before the birth, however, will be intense. There is no romanticism in the heart of a mother about to give birth. She can only prepare herself to endure what is coming. In the same manner, we must not romanticize the end times. They will be the darkest days the world has ever seen. Jesus never exaggerates and He used the word “anguish” to describe the kind of

trauma *believers* will endure before the birth of the new age. While the world rejoices in its wickedness, believers will weep and mourn, understanding the nature of the coming storm. The birth pangs, these “contractions” that are even now taking place throughout the world, will come with greater frequency and intensity. Eventually, the labor process will move from its early stage to the “breaking of the water” stage, in which a flood of trouble will come, and lead into the heavy labor period. The heavy labor period will in turn lead to the birth of another age.

The early signs Jesus listed are even now unfolding before our eyes. He spoke of false deliverers (messiahs) who would arise in His name and deceive many, and false teachers who would use pressure and manipulation to force loyalty and gain a following. He warned that we would hear of wars and rumors of war. In addition to these events, there will be natural catastrophes, such as famines, pestilences, and earthquakes “in various places” (Matthew 24:7). All these events will constitute what Jesus described as “the beginning.” They will be the beginning of sorrows, but more sorrow will follow. On the heels of these international traumas and natural disasters, there will be a marked increase of persecution and tribulation for believers. People in all nations will hate Christians.

Even though all these events, which are just the beginning, may seem unbearable and fearful, Jesus encouraged believers not to be troubled. “The end is not yet,” He said, after He spoke of the wars and rumors of war that will grip hearts with fear. Even as nations and ethnic groups rise against each other, civil disorder, racism, anti-Semitism, and economic conflicts and aggression break out, and military and political conflicts flare up, we are not to fear. Matthew 24:6 records Jesus saying, “See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.” Jesus meant that believers should not be troubled like the rest of the world because we will have a framework for interpreting these events which will mystify everyone else. We will understand that God is on the move, orchestrating these events, as things move closer to the end. Even though we will be hated by all nations, we can stand unafraid and secure in God’s love for us and His perfect plan.

The Bible explains what will cause all nations to hate all believers. It is related to the identity and destiny all believers have because of their relationship with Christ. The Bible speaks of “the Bride of Christ” in describing all believers as a group. The Bride of Christ refers to the Church as a whole, the Body of Christ. The Bride is meant to be and will be the equally-

yoked companion of Jesus, and she will intimately partner with Him to rule in justice and righteousness. The Bride of Christ in her fullness will be meek and lowly, simple yet lovely, and possess a passion and power that comes from voluntary weakness and God-given purity. To know Jesus fully, she must first drink from the cup of hardship and suffering to learn self-denial and sacrificial love.

## THE RISE OF THE COUNTERFEIT BRIDE: GREAT FALLING AWAY

In contrast to the Bride of Christ, Revelation 17:1–7 describes a monstrous figure named “Mystery Babylon,” a woman “arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication.” This “woman” is given the title of “Mystery Babylon” by the Holy Spirit to interpret for us what she represents. She is not a literal woman, but a symbolic representation of a global religion to come that will be mysterious in nature. Her second name, “Babylon,” indicates that she represents the world system of human wisdom and not authentic faith birthed from heaven (James 3:13–18). “Babylonian,” or earthly wisdom, is “earthly, sensual, and demonic,” James said. “For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there” (3:16). This mysterious Babylonian religion will appeal, at its core, to the self-seeking and self-centered nature of mankind.

This woman also represents a corporate people who will be the antithesis of the Bride of Christ. John described this woman whom he saw in his vision as a beautiful counterfeit of the Bride. She will entice the wicked nations of the world to choose her and her wickedness over Jesus and His righteousness. Her goal will be to seduce all mankind into partnering with her to rule the world in wickedness and self-indulgent sin. She is described as being rich and as glorifying herself and living “luxuriously” (Revelation 18:7). Her power will come from her deceptive appeal and alluring lifestyle, promises, and golden cup of sinful pleasures. She will embody the spirit of our current age: self-indulgence, self-gratification, and self-worship. She will appeal to the growing universal desire for peace and safety (1 Thessalonians 5:3), pleasure, comfort, and luxury (2 Timothy 3:1–4).

This woman will be extremely alluring. Even John said he marveled at her deceptive beauty when he saw her in his vision (Revelation 17:6–7). She

personifies a coming false religious system that will have economic might behind it. Economic prosperity will come to those aligned with this false religious system, but the prosperity will be temporary and short-lived. The unifying nature of the system personified by “Mystery Babylon” in Revelation will bring together many different faiths previously in conflict with one another. A false sense of peace will come through false unity and agreement among sinful, wicked men. The shallow, surface promises it makes will be ultimately empty; but many will be lured by the hope of peace and safety. Many will believe that what we’ve all hoped for—world peace—has come at last. They will be perplexed when Christians speak out against the peace and security that has finally been attained.

Christians who are connected to the heart of the Lord in that hour will know what is really going on. They will recognize it as the false “calm” before the coming storm, and will boldly preach truth throughout the nations. They will expose this religious system as a fraud. They will speak against the “scarlet beast” that this evil woman of Revelation will be riding as she attempts to maintain her influence (Revelation 17:3). The scarlet beast will be the Antichrist himself, though people won’t realize it at the time. Christians will expose sin and warn of Jesus’ second coming. The reality of Jesus dealing with His enemies brutally (Psalm 110:5–6) will upset many, and Christians will be seen as “enemies of the state” and considered threats to the perceived peace. It will be a dark and troubling time for the Church. John described this religious system, this “false bride,” as being “drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (Revelation 17:6).

The apostle Paul wrote of something else that will happen during this period of time. He called it “the falling away,” or the great apostasy, a time when many would become offended at God and leave the Church (2 Thessalonians 2:3). It will be part of the progression of events about which Jesus spoke in Matthew 24:9, when all the nations will hate Christians. In verses 10–12, Jesus described the unfolding drama of that day: “And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.” Those in the Church will have to guard against slipping into bitterness and offense towards God. Those who do not know Him intimately will not understand His heart and the reasons for His actions when the trouble comes, and therefore will be offended at Him. They will not like the message their fellow believers preach.

There will be betrayal and hatred. People's love will grow cold in an atmosphere of increasing rebellion against God and His ways. Many will leave the Church; and many others will be martyred for their stand.

## A TIME OF TROUBLE LIKE NO OTHER: THE GREAT TRIBULATION

As all of this unfolds, the final period of mankind's earthly existence will begin, the "breaking of the water" will occur, and the heavy labor period will commence. The heavy labor period is what Jesus called the Great Tribulation. It will be a time still more intense and troublesome than even the trauma of the birth pains. All that has happened up to the time of the Great Tribulation will have been a mere prelude to the shaking that will next affect the entire world. Revelation 6:8 gives a picture of the early death toll during the final years of trouble, conflict, and judgment. One-fourth of the world's population will die. With earth's current population, that means 1.5 billion deaths. Based on population growth projections for the next several decades, this number could grow to more than two billion people. This massive death toll defies our imaginations and offends our minds.

The horrific description continues in Revelation 9:15, one of the most chilling verses in the Bible. Many do not know how to deal with it. It says that one-third of what's left of the planet's population will be taken in yet another traumatic event. In today's numbers, that means 1.5 billion more people will die.

This time of great tribulation for the Church will also be the nation of Israel's most difficult hour. In chapter 13 of the book he authored, Zechariah predicted that during the tribulation, two-thirds of the Jewish people would be brutally slaughtered. The prophet Jeremiah called this time of tribulation for the Jews "Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30:7).

So, combining the numbers described in Revelation 6 and 9 and Zechariah 13, it appears that, according to the Word of God, half the world's population will be swept away in a sudden flood of judgment in the last hours of history. It seems reasonable to many people at this point, to close the Bible and become offended with God; after all, God is identified by John as the One orchestrating these events. Another reasonable response for some is to dismiss these passages, or their interpretations, as hype or the workings of an overactive imagination. It is difficult to cope with these passages of the Bible that seem to

portray the God we love as cruel, brutal, and vicious. The truth is that God is none of these things. He is loving, kind, merciful, beautiful, forgiving, gracious, slow to anger, and perfect.

It can be so hard to reconcile the truth about God with the disasters that will come, that Christians everywhere simply avoid entire chapters of the Bible they don't understand. The often-asked question is how a loving God could initiate the slaughter of all those men, women, and children. Asking this question, however, reveals the extent to which we are uninformed about and unaware of the nature and depth of man's hidden hatred of God and His ways.

God's judgments against stubborn wickedness are because of His goodness and commitment to being in relationship with each of us forever, not because He is angry. Part of the problem is that most people want a God who requires nothing of them, who is easy to figure out, and who allows Himself to be under their control. They do not want a King who is inflexible toward rebellion, unmoved by the arguments and whims of people, and incapable of compromise. Thus humanity is not ready to be ruled by Jesus. It must be prepared.

Jesus described this reality by telling a parable to those who thought the kingdom of God would "appear immediately" (Luke 19:11–27). He told them the story of a nobleman who went to a far country "to receive for himself a kingdom and to return." Jesus was talking about Himself. The nobleman organized his servants and set them about his business. In the meantime, the citizens of the nobleman's kingdom declared their hatred of him, and expressed through their messengers that they would no longer submit to his rule over their lives. After a time, the nobleman returned, settled his accounts with his servants, and dealt with the ones who would not have him as king. In Luke 19:27 He said, "But bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay them before me."

The coming King Jesus, who, through the parable, was stating clearly how He would conduct His affairs when He returned, made this terrifying statement. He will deal with His servants first, either rewarding them or punishing them. Then He will deal with His enemies. Both His servants and His enemies face a problem: the King coming back to claim what is His is not who some think He is. For example, the final servant described in the parable did not really know the nobleman, and served Him out of fear. Just as this servant's perception of the master differed from reality, many people's perception of Jesus differs from reality. And just as the servant's misconception affected his choices and

lifestyle, so do many people's misconceptions affect how they live. Many today live in a lazy, half-hearted way before God, with the excuse that His commandments are too difficult or don't make sense to them. Ultimately, they will face a much greater difficulty in the coming days.

Jesus' enemies, the nations, will not receive Him. They will hate Him then as they hate Him now, though they will have had the opportunity to hear the truth and receive the King. Jesus said that the "gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations" before the end comes (Matthew 24:14). All the nations will have had a witness, and will have been given the opportunity to turn from their stubbornness and submit to the King before He comes to judge. Despite the opportunity given them, Isaiah 63:1-6 says that when the time comes, not one nation will have chosen to stand with Him. He will be forced to slay them all, even as they declare war on Him to keep what they feel is theirs (Zechariah 12:3; Revelation 16:14; 19:14).

The greatest problem facing humanity, including the Church itself, is that almost no one believes these events are real events that will actually occur. Some do not believe in the Jesus of Luke 19:27, Psalm 110:5, and Isaiah 63:6. Even worse, many of the people who do believe these biblical predictions depict real events to come, also believe they will not be on earth to experience them. Or they believe the end-time passages are relevant, but not for them. They view the passages as being relevant only to unbelievers who ignore God, and they reason that the Church has nothing to fear because believers will be long gone when the trouble comes, having left this wicked and sinful world to its fate at the hands of a wrathful God. This perspective of the end-time events to come is tragically erroneous, and will result in many being unprepared for the trials ahead. The Bible is clear that no one will be exempt; no one will emerge unscathed from what is coming. The greatest storm in the history of the world will affect everyone, and almost no one is preparing for it.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of this chapter stood out to you as truths that you would like to go deeper in?
2. Is God angry? Why is He angry *or* why is He not angry with the human race?
3. Why is the anger of God a difficult subject to consider, and why do many presently reject the doctrine of the wrath of God?

4. Do you agree that the subject of God's wrath is "the most-hated doctrine" in the Scripture? Why do you think this is a true (or untrue) statement?
5. How do believers (and unbelievers) neglect or misunderstand the doctrine of God's wrath?
6. How does a distortion of the doctrine of wrath shift our understanding of "the bounty of God's love"?
7. How does someone wrestle with the subject of the wrath of God and the truth about God's nature and maintain a heart that is unoffended at who and what God is like?
8. I encourage you to give yourself to a study involving the emotions of God toward His enemies. Start by finding the verses that tell us how God feels about His enemies, and work in a small group to discuss how different scriptures describe different facets of who God is—and how those different facets relate without being in conflict.
9. Does God "love the sinner but hate the sin"? If so, how does this work if those who are not in Christ are, "by nature children of wrath" according to Paul in Ephesians 2:3?
10. What do we do with the death toll that specific scriptures talk about related to the subject of the second coming? How should we respond to such potentially offensive interpretations of the passages in question?

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Joyful Christian* (New York: Touchstone, 1977), 38.

2. Nancy Gibbs, "Where Was God?", *Time* (2005), accessed: December 16, 2013, <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1105669,00.html>.

# 5

## WHO CAN ENDURE IT?

The question of the ages is: who can endure the great and terrible Day of the Lord? Preaching to the wicked, corrupt nation of Judah thousands of years ago, the prophet Joel asked them a question: “For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; who can endure it?” (Joel 2:11). In his vision of the sixth seal judgment, John saw many people crying out, asking a similar question: “For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” (Revelation 6:17). It is not easy, initially, to ask ourselves this question. The question of the prophet seems to be at odds with what we perceive to be the truth of the gospel and other modern ideas and sentiments being communicated variously in the Body of Christ.

### WRESTLING WITH THE INTENSITY OF THE MESSAGE IN A CULTURE OF POSITIVITY

It seems, as we survey the Body of Christ today, that very little modern preaching prepares us to wrestle through the more difficult passages of Scripture. There is a prevailing desire for positivity in preaching that leaves us inspired, motivated, encouraged, and feeling great about our future. We want to know that everything is going to be okay, and that things are all going to work out for us. It is rare to hear sermons on sin, hell, or the wrath of God. One might hear sermons on the fear of the Lord, or enduring trials and troubles—but these ideas are often lost in the sea of positivity that encourages today’s modern Western Christian.

Positive preaching is not a bad thing. The good news is truly great news on an emotional level, not just a spiritual one. It is not at all wrong to feel good about life and our future after hearing an encouraging sermon. What I am addressing is the prevailing culture that modern positive preaching has created; it has made it very difficult to preach whole sections of the Bible. There are areas of truth about God and His leadership that are critical for our spiritual growth and development. To preach on sin, hell, or God’s wrath—or even to

preach from the prophets at all—is considered very negative in some circles. Of course, these messages will never be the most popular messages. However, they are still necessary if one is to seek biblical teaching that honors the whole counsel of God.

Ultimately, we will need to confront our own cultural sensitivities related to how we even *define* “positive” and “negative” preaching. I wonder if God shares our definitions and ideas of which portions of Scripture are positive, and which are negative. The Holy Spirit may help us in days to come with wrestling through the lenses by which we habitually view the Scripture. Even so, it is important that we understand that emphasizing one portion of the Word of God and neglecting another leaves us woefully unprepared to fully engage with the leadership of Jesus, both now and at the end of the age.

Is the question of endurance at odds with the gospel? Jesus spoke of offense—“love growing cold” (Matthew 24:10–12)—as one of the primary issues believers would face just before His second coming. Paul spoke of a “great falling away” from the faith in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Then there is the most troubling passage in 1 Timothy 4:1–2:

<sup>1</sup>Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons,  
<sup>2</sup>speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own consciences seared with a hot iron.

What is indeed troubling about this passage is the intensity of Paul’s language. The Holy Spirit was saying many things to the Church in those days. The Holy Spirit yearns jealously regarding our journey in Christ. Yet, out of all that Paul wrote, he communicated an emphasis of the Holy Spirit on a point that is unusual in Scripture. To my knowledge, this is the only use of the word *rhetos* (which means “expressly”) in the entire New Testament. This is an important point to the Holy Spirit, and therefore it must be an important point to us. The premier preacher of the gospel and of grace is telling us something that significantly matters regarding our future:

1. Enduring in the faith can be difficult.
2. Some will depart in deception.
3. Others will depart in offense.

These truths are not in contradicting the gospel—they affirm the whole of it.

The good news has been proclaimed and the grace of God is available to all. However, some will refuse to believe the good news, reject the free offer of God's grace, and will continue on toward their own destruction. Others will believe the good news, and receive the grace of God, only to refuse to endure later on. Jesus spoke about this in the parable of the sower and the four soils (Matthew 13). Some will receive the gospel with joy, but quickly depart from the truth because it never took root in them. Others will receive the gospel with joy, but depart later under pressure, offended by the leadership of Jesus. Still others will receive the Word and long to respond, but are choked out by the "cares of this life" and the "deceitfulness of riches."

It is this parable that underscores the urgency of the question in Joel 2:11. It was a question that was asked, in its time, to God's people. I believe it is a question that has great relevance for the Church today, and we must wrestle with its implications together. Why? Because the question was asked in context to the Day of the Lord—the time frame in which the end-time judgments of the Lord are poured out upon the earth. Some say this great and terrible Day happened in the past, which is partially true. Israel experienced in her history a terrible day of judgment because of her sin and hardness of heart toward the Lord. However, the Day that the prophet Joel was talking about has global implications. The details of the book of Joel involve all the nations of the earth, the final and ultimate reckoning of the Lord against them, and the aftermath when God restores the earth in righteousness and fills it with His glory. Ultimately, the question of enduring the Day of the Lord was intended to be wrestled with by Israel in Joel's day *and* by the generation alive just before Jesus' return.

## CALLING FOR A HISTORIC AND WHOLEHEARTED TURN TO GOD

The question, "*who can endure?*" (Joel 2:11) is a hard one and we are meant to feel its weight as we read it in Scripture. The question is meant to emphasize the intensity of what Jesus described: a time so severe and traumatic to the world, that we are supposed to wonder if any will be able to bear the intensity of it. We are meant to ask ourselves what we should do and how we should live so that we can endure it.

These questions are meant to burst from our hearts and summon a holy fear of God to arise in us—of the God who would ask such a question through His

prophet. We are meant to tremble at the implications of this question, and to understand that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10).

In the last chapter, we talked about God and His anger with nations and cultures that stand in opposition to Him, thus allowing injustice to flourish. The beauty of the book of Joel is that it gives nations a practical way forward. How does a nation, a people, a culture, deal with the anger of God? In His mercy, God has provided answers for us through Joel: “‘Now therefore,’ says the Lord, turn to Me with all of your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” (Joel 2:12). As a nation, the Lord has given us a way forward because He is kind and has mercy available for us. As human beings, we are ignorant of our truly desperate and sinful condition. Without Jesus, we are sinful to the core, foolish, and shortsighted. Apart from Him, we are by nature self-destructive. In His kindness, God stops our self-destructive tendencies through His judgments, in essence saving us from ourselves and protecting the faithful and righteous—so we can enter into our destiny with Him.

God has warned us that destructive judgment is coming, but has emphasized that there is still time and hope for nations, peoples, and cultures that want to respond to His mercy. If we will turn away from our part that is responsible for this judgment, and turn to Him with all of our hearts, He will preserve and protect us. That’s what He longs to do. I want to emphasize that I am speaking here about nations and cultures, not individuals. The question of endurance must be wrestled through on a corporate and community level, not just on an individual level.

For the individual follower of Jesus, the key to enduring is a wholehearted turn to God. A wholehearted turn to God is much more than an initial turning, a momentary turning, or a partial turning. It involves fully turning away *from* one thing and fully turning *to* something else.

In Joel’s day, Israel turned to all kinds of short-term solutions rather than to God to deliver them from trouble. Today, many in the Western world turn to all kinds of self-help solutions to make themselves feel better. They are building houses on sand, houses not founded on biblical truth or upon the rock of Jesus’ wisdom (Matthew 7:24–27). At the end of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave clear, basic instruction on what a godly lifestyle looks like. Many appreciate the brilliance of this teaching, even as the Jews were “astonished” in that day Jesus taught them; but very few take His words seriously enough to really change their lifestyle accordingly.

The problem the Church faces is that the coming flood, the Great Tribulation about which Jesus warned, will be far beyond disruptive. It will be destructive. Only those who do now what Jesus instructed in Matthew 5–7 will remain standing in the midst of it. The ones who remain standing and endure will be the ones described in Revelation 7:9–10. This is the only answer to the question of “who can stand?” posed in Revelation 6:17. It is for those who wholeheartedly turn to God and are martyred in the Great Tribulation because of their faith. Later in Revelation, it is said of them, “they overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb [Jesus] and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death” (Revelation 12:11). How do you survive a flood? Jesus told us in Matthew 7:24–27 that the way we survive a flood is by building our houses on a solid foundation, which means living a godly lifestyle of prayer, obedience, and fasting.

The ones who will stand will have, by the time of the tribulation, fully turned from the wisdom of this world. They will have fully turned from a self-indulgent and self-gratifying culture, and they will not be fooled by the false promises of the counterfeit bride. They will have no interest in personal glory and no illusions about the futility of worldly gain. This life will hold no allure for them. They will have built their lives on the rock of truth, and will hold tightly to what is real, even if it results in death. Death will have no sting for them. In that day, during the trouble that comes, they may die—but they will taste the sweetest victory before the throne of the Lamb. They will enjoy their great reward when Jesus returns to earth. There is great promise, reward, and blessing (Joel 2:14) for those who fully turn to God with all of their hearts.

Turning to God with all of our hearts means making a sincere commitment to reach for God with all of our might. There may be times when we fall short, but we will not be denied by God. We must keep reaching, even after our failures. We must allow His great love to spur us on. After we commit to turn to God with all of our hearts, we need direction about how to do so and how to walk out our commitment.

## BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE POOR IN SPIRIT

This brings us back to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, He described the lifestyle we are to live out. Living the way Jesus told us to live is the way we turn and walk out our commitment. We are meant to rend our hearts and not our garments (Joel 2:13). To “rend the heart” means to pay the internal or emotional cost of really turning to Jesus and doing things His way.

An outward pretense of contrition does not matter to Him. Spiritual or high-sounding language is insufficient.

Only a true internal change will accomplish anything. Matthew 5:3–4 records what Jesus said about the blessings of being “poor in spirit” and in “mourning.” A person who is poor in spirit or who is mourning has grasped the gravity of a situation. They know they are in a crisis, and they know they have no resources within themselves to bring change or relief. They know there are no earthly solutions to their problems, and no self-help book can save them. No positive message can be uplifting enough. They have come to the place of true barrenness, and they recognize they are in a state of true spiritual poverty. Coming to this place of “spiritual barrenness,” is the best gift from God that any of us can receive—simply because we won’t allow God to rescue us until we realize we need to be rescued.

Our “lack” is not a lack of spiritual resources. Peter reminds us that we have been given “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). We received the fullness of the Spirit and the love of God on the day we were born again. In terms of what we have received from God by grace, and what we have access to in Christ, we have need of nothing. However, we do not walk in the fullness of what we have received. We are not experiencing the heights of what is possible in the grace of God. This is “spiritual poverty” for *the one who is in Christ*. To mourn is to recognize this and feel the pain of longing to go higher, deeper, and broader in the love of Christ. It is a holy dissatisfaction that churns within us and utters the beautifully disruptive cry: “There must be more!”

Recognizing our spiritual poverty is a true gift from God that is available to anyone who wants to receive it. Those who receive this gift will also enter into the blessing that comes from mourning (Matthew 5:4). True mourning is birthed by God in the hearts of those who turn to Him. Those who mourn see the true condition of things and yearn deeply for change. The person who sees the smallness of what *is* compared to the greatness of what *could be*, according to the Word of God, truly mourns with a passion for change. The possibilities in God are glorious, and those who mourn are blessed because they will eventually be comforted when the possibilities become realities.

What they desire—to be satisfied by God alone—will come to them in time. In the meantime, however, there will be much pain and struggling. All who desire the breakthrough of supernatural power from God called “grace” must willingly embrace the pain. God’s grace brings true life and spiritual

wealth internally, both now and in the age to come. The pain of the delay and the lack of internal reality produce meekness and humility (Matthew 5:5), which Jesus is producing in us. Jesus said that when we have meekness, we will “inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). He was not speaking metaphorically. Those who are meek will actually inherit the earth.

In contrast, the Israelites did not understand the depth of their problem after the locust plagues completely devoured their crops. They thought the problem was a resulting lack of natural resources: food, drink, and fuel for their lamps that resulted from the locust devastation. They had no idea that God’s judgment was their real problem. Their prideful and complete disregard for God, their compromise, and their embrace of spiritual darkness had set them on a collision course with God’s judgment. They had no way to save themselves from the storm of judgment that eventually overtook them.

The current plight of the nations, particularly in the Western world, is the same as Israel’s. In America, some people think the problem we face is economic. Some think it is a lack of education, and others think it’s a poorly trained and unequipped military. It is none of these. The real problem is that, as a whole, Americans are living a lie. Some believe the country to be a “spiritual” nation with a Christian foundation, but there are precious few people living the godly lifestyle described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. There is next to no righteousness or passion for God in the political sphere or in the marketplace. Sadly, there is little in the church. Only when we Americans recognize and acknowledge our lack of passion and authentic righteousness, will we have any hope of finding the solution: turning to God. Our wickedness has made us enemies of God. Our only hope is to truly “rend our hearts”—not put on an outward show of contrition or humility with no basis in reality. In other words, America does not have an economic or political problem. We are in the midst of a profound spiritual crisis. America has a problem that we refuse to acknowledge.

## THE MEEK SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH

Jesus’ solution for the coming crisis seems unusual to our strength-focused mindsets. We want power, gifting, and resources to solve our own problems. He wants us to voluntarily embrace weakness in asking Him for help. Our religious culture creates many spiritual-sounding phrases that actually war against God’s value system. One example would be, “God helps those who help themselves.” Nothing could be farther from the truth. God helps those who

can never help themselves. It is wisdom, to recognize and acknowledge our true condition before Him, which produces mourning. Mourning simply means that we are not okay with our broken lack in Christ.

Mourning produces humility—the realization that there is a more excellent way than our own. If we embrace Jesus’ anointed pattern for living and fully agree to live His way—praying, fasting, obeying, and studying the Word of God with intensity—we will begin to think like Him and evaluate our lifestyle based on His value system. Embracing the life of a servant cultivates “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” (Matthew 5:6), and we become fully committed to His plan. Those who live Jesus’ way will endure the coming trial and stand. Equally important, they will be trained in that process to rule with Him.

To rule with Jesus, we must learn how to rule like Jesus. God delights in mercy, so we must learn to delight in mercy. When we realize how mercifully God deals with us despite our weaknesses, we become more tender and kind to others who are weak. When we grasp how much God loves us, we begin to love others better. When we comprehend the depths of God’s kindness, it becomes rooted in us and we are more kind.

God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness” (Joel 2:13), and He will gladly receive those who turn or return to Him. This offers hope and assurance to those who truly want to turn to Him and reject sin and wickedness. God’s kindness is never intended to give us license to continue in sin. His mercy and graciousness are intended to give us the courage to break our ties with darkness and turn to Him with all of our hearts. Better still, as we fully turn to Him, He will turn toward us (Joel 2:14). When God turns toward a people, the result is an outpouring of revival and the release of spiritual power. It is possible for God to relent from His judgment to a measure if people turn to Him, and He may even leave a blessing behind in the process (Joel 2:14)!

God is calling the Church to pray and contend for a widespread turning of hearts. The Lord is summoning an entire generation of young adults to gather in what Joel called a “sacred assembly,” or a solemn assembly (Joel 2:15). Gathering in this manner is what the Bible instructs us to do when facing times of trouble. God’s simple solution is for His people to gather and hold prayer meetings. Every time Jesus spoke about the end times, He included a mandate to prayer (Matthew 24:13; Mark 13:33–37; Luke 21:34–36). Prayer is the solution Isaiah gave to the king in Isaiah 8:16–18. The king of Judah was facing a crisis. Armies from the north were coming to invade his nation and

remove him from power. His nation was caught in the middle of a power struggle between the two superpowers of that time. He weighed his political options, trying to figure out which nations had the military strength to help him escape this dilemma. Isaiah told the king to forget about these untrustworthy nations and turn to God. Isaiah encouraged the king to rally the people to pray. Imagine having to tell the president of the United States that his only hope against a major military enemy is to hold prayer meetings!

Those who turn fully to God, gather in prayer, and ask for mercy, take on God's burden for the sin and wickedness of the nation. Mourning and weeping come forth in our hearts and spirits from this place of prayer. A unity with God comes with the turning of our hearts, especially as we join our hearts in unity to His and care about what He cares about. When He finds a people loyal to Him, He will "show Himself strong on [their] behalf" (2 Chronicles 16:9). God shows Himself strong by turning and relenting, and possibly leaving a blessing behind. The eyes of the Lord are scouring the earth, searching for the ones who will turn away from darkness and turn to Him so that He might show Himself strong on their behalf. Regarding His second coming, Jesus Himself asked, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). Jesus was asking if He would find anyone who "believe[s] that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

Though great trouble will come to the Church and to the nations, it is not God's desire that any should perish. He does not want to lose a single soul to the fires of hell. Paul said God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). Peter said God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Peter was not speaking about unbelievers. He was speaking about believers in the Church, and God's desire that none of them would perish in the great falling away from the faith that will come. The issue of who in the Church can endure the coming trial was heavy on Peter's heart as he wrote his letter to the Body of Christ.

## KNOW THIS FIRST: THERE WILL BE RESISTANCE

The first thing Peter wanted Christians to understand is that in the end times scoffers will come and contribute to the falling away of some in the Church. They will scoff at the promise of the return of Jesus and will be the worst enemies of those seriously preparing for the end times. For those of us

determined to live the kind of lifestyles that will equip us to stand, accusation and scoffing will come from the most unexpected sources—even friends and loved ones. According to Peter, the reason they will accuse and scoff is because they will “walk according to their own lusts” (2 Peter 3:3). The agenda for their lives is different from Jesus’ agenda. The message of His coming is disruptive and uncomfortable because they will need to make big changes and shift all their priorities. For people committed to their own agendas and lifestyles, this message will provoke anger, and they will express their anger by scoffing at and mocking the message and the messengers. Peter wrote of such scoffing and their reactionary words: “Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:4). Because of their self-centered agendas and their anger at a message and messenger that disturb their lives, they will choose to “willfully forget” the nature of God and His divine timetable.

Despite their scoffing and mocking, God still loves them. He loves everyone because He has created them. Peter explained that the delay in Jesus’ coming will be because of His mercy. He will not forget His promise, for His name is Faithful and True (Revelation 19:11). He delights in keeping His word and following through on His commitment to us. However, He does not desire anyone to perish. He will delay His return as long as He can justly make a way for as many as possible to repent and turn to Him with their whole hearts.

As scoffers come against us, we must guard ourselves against falling away. God has told us beforehand what will come so that we can prepare. “Beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:17–18). Some in the Church have fallen away already. Many more will not endure the coming times. To endure, we must hold fast to His truth and be determined to grow in grace and the knowledge of Jesus. Paul prayed in Ephesians 1:17 that we would receive from God the “spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him.” Our only hope of standing until the end is to break away from the deceptions of sin and the error of wickedness. We must give ourselves to lives of praying, fasting, and growing in the knowledge of who Jesus is and what He is really like. Only that will save us from becoming offended and falling in the coming days.

In Luke 21:34–36, Jesus said, “But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that

Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

If we want to stand, to endure what is coming, we must “take heed to ourselves.” We must examine our hearts to determine if we are weighed down by distractions, self-indulgence, worry, unforgiveness, or fear. We must receive from God an accurate picture of our spiritual condition. The only answer is to pay attention to what is going on around us and view it from God’s perspective. Once we see things from His perspective and understand that the Great Tribulation is coming and we understand the reason why, we must pray.

We must gather in worship and prayer, humbling ourselves before Him and turning from any and all sin in our lives. If we do this, He promises to hear our prayers from heaven, forgive our sin, and heal our land (2 Chronicles 7:14). This is the way He “counts us worthy” and the only way to partner with God in His desire for mercy. His heart is to show the nations mercy, and not bring judgment. He is searching, however, for those on earth who will agree with Him in intercession. Intercession is the one and only thing that will cause Him to decrease the severity of what is coming. It is the only thing that will cause Him to open up pockets of mercy over regions and cities in the midst of judgments. Part of God’s glorious plan for the Church is to draw her into His plan to bring great revival to the land, both before and in the midst of unprecedented judgment.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of this chapter stood out to you as truths that you would like to go deeper in?
2. Is there a “culture of positivity” that makes it difficult to preach or share certain portions of the Word of God?
3. How does “partial engagement” with portions of the Word of God leave us unprepared to engage with His leadership?
4. What does it mean to wrestle with the central question of the book of Joel? (“*Who can endure it?*”)
5. How can a nation, culture, or group of people wrestle together with the question of Joel 2:11? How should the Church wrestle with the same

question?

6. How should an individual non-Christian wrestle with the question of Joel 2:11? How should an individual Christian wrestle with the same question?
7. Jesus promised that the “poor in Spirit” would be “blessed.” What does it take to recognize our true spiritual condition and ask God for help? Why is this often so hard for us to do?
8. Have you felt in different seasons in your life a longing for “more”—more understanding, more of God’s presence and power, more of God’s love experienced and expressed, etc.? What have you done about this longing?
9. Why does God want large-scale prayer gatherings, like the ones described in the book of Joel? Isn’t our personal prayer life enough?
10. Why do “scoffers and mockers” pretend that everything will be the same, and nothing will ever change? What does this gain them and how can we avoid this personally?

# 6

## GOD'S GREAT PLAN FOR THE CHURCH

Having a basic understanding of God's goals and what He will accomplish helps us understand eschatology. Understanding His objectives is vital to grasping why His judgments will be so intense. God's ultimate objective is dynamically connected with Jesus' relationship with the Church, the Bride of Christ. The Father's desire has always been to present His Son with a Bride, which He will do at the end of the age. The Church's story in this present age will end with the most glorious wedding—ever. Ephesians 5:25–27 gives a picture of who we are to Jesus and what it is for which He is diligently working:

<sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, <sup>26</sup>that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, <sup>27</sup>that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.

Everything God is doing and will do has to do with His desire to present the Church to His Son, Jesus, as a pure, spotless Bride. Jesus, for His part, is working diligently to sanctify and cleanse His Bride through God's Word, which, when internalized, changes our desires, emotions, and thoughts. When our minds are filled with Scripture, we think and feel differently. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, partners with Jesus to cause our hearts and minds to come alive in a new way, when heavenly truths take root. Jesus will have a Bride equally yoked to Him. To be equally yoked with Jesus, we must be transformed to think, act, and love as Jesus does. "Equally yoked" is another way of saying "mature love." As Paul spoke of this in 2 Corinthians 6:14:

<sup>14</sup>Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion

has light with darkness?

The Lord's desire is for deep fellowship and intimate friendship with us. Our future involves full obedience, full agreement, and full participation with the plans of God.

## GOD'S DESIRE FOR INTIMATE PARTNERSHIP WITH MAN

Some students of the Word understand that Jesus desires a pure, spotless Bride, but they often do not know why. Intimate partnership with mankind is the highest delight of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The awesome news of the gospel goes far beyond the forgiveness of our sins. The glorious and unbelievable destiny of all believers is to have intimacy with God, to partner with Jesus as His Bride, and to gain access to the deepest places of God's heart.

Being equally yoked means bearing a burden together, like two oxen under a yoke, helping one another pull the weight by sharing the burden equally. The idea is not that we will be as Jesus, but that we will be like-minded and like-hearted to go with Him where He goes. As an equally-yoked partner, we will bring in a fullness of joy by being like-minded (Philippians 2:1–4), “having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.”

Sharing Jesus' burdens as we share His heart and His thoughts is what makes us an equally yoked partner for Him. The concept of being Jesus' equally yoked Bride goes much deeper than the earthly example of a believer marrying another believer. The idea is that true intimacy develops when *those who love one another share the deepest places of their hearts with each other and are like-minded in their values, desires, and priorities*. Passion runs deeply when the same amount of love given is also received. In the earthly example, if one person is fiercely loyal to Jesus and passionately pursuing Him, but her spouse is lukewarm, there will be a fundamental discrepancy in how they each live their life before God. Where there are two visions, there is division. Seeds of discord will be sown in their relationship and it will lack intimacy.

The journey of becoming equally yoked in love and partnership with Jesus moves us from a place of fundamental *disagreement* with His leadership to a place of profound *agreement* and affection as we submit to His leadership in our lives. The Father's desire has always been to orchestrate the events of history to produce a Bride worthy of Jesus who is full of all glory, honor, and

praise. All the pressures of history, combined with the greatest pressure still to come, will produce a people—a Bride—worthy of the One to whom they will be given and the glorious inheritance they will receive as a result.

What kind of inheritance will the saints receive? God promised Abraham in Genesis 15:1 that *He, Himself*, would be Abraham's "exceedingly great reward" and inheritance. Intimate friendship with God and union with Christ is our primary and greatest reward for knowing and loving Jesus in this age. Intimate friendship with Jesus connects our lives to other aspects of our inheritance and reward as well. Paul spoke of the relationship between our redemption, inheritance, and partnership with God in Ephesians 1. The indwelling Holy Spirit is the "guarantee of our inheritance," which we enjoy now in part and in fullness in the age to come. This partnership that Paul spoke of involves what Jesus promised in Matthew 5:5: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

This is one of the most dynamic promises in Scripture. It carries the hint of refining and transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit that enables us to receive it. Meekness is an attitude of the heart. We walk in meekness as we are renewed in our thinking and refined in the manners in which we use our strengths. God, and more of His presence, person, and power, becomes the answer to our need and the need around us. Our own gifting becomes secondary to the supply of the Holy Spirit in other people's lives. Our ability to embrace these truths by grace is connected to our ability to lay hold of our full inheritance from God. Daniel 7:27 also describes this inheritance:

Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him.

Daniel had seen a troubling vision of the saints being overcome by a powerful enemy. He said the vision left him "grieved in my spirit within my body, and the visions of my head troubled me" (Daniel 7:15). He asked an angel standing by if what he had seen was true, and the angel gave him the interpretation of the vision, which had to do with a great and powerful enemy who would make war against the saints and prevail against them (Daniel 7:21). We know this formidable enemy who will arise in the days ahead as the Antichrist. The glorious part of the interpretation was that although this man prevailed against the saints for a season, the Ancient of Days came "and a judgment was made in

favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came for the saints to possess the kingdom” (Daniel 7:22). The good news of which we can be confident is, though we will suffer, the story will dramatically shift in our favor at the critical hour, and we will have victory. All the kingdom, dominion, and greatness will be given to us as the Bride of Jesus Christ, the One who will come to earth to rule all “peoples, nations, and languages” (Daniel 7:14).

As we continue to examine the inheritance of the Church in the age to come, let us consider what Paul wrote. As he addressed the Corinthian church and answered their internal problems, he made an incredible statement:

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life? (1 Corinthians 6:2–3)

He shared this information with the Corinthians because they were going before unbelieving judges to settle disputes and lawsuits. Paul appealed to them by contrasting their current practices with that for which Jesus would prepare them and all other believers: judging the nations with wisdom and righteousness. Our God-given authority will not come automatically or easily, but will be accomplished in our natural maturing process under the leadership of Jesus. As we grow in the knowledge of Him, we will be prepared to rule with Him. As we become like Him in our thoughts, emotions, and value systems, we will become able to rule like Him.

The Lord is faithful to prepare His people for the trials to come. The angel in the book of Daniel went on to assure the prophet in Daniel 11:32–33 that there would be many who will be strong in the Lord, do great exploits, and understand the leadership of God in the end times. They will help prepare the people throughout the nations in that day. As a result, they will endure great trials, but they will also inherit a great reward. Daniel 11:35 assures us,

And some of those of understanding [prophetic messengers instructing the Church in the end times] shall fall, to refine them, purify them, and make them white, until the time of the end.

However, their ultimate fate is glorious, as described in Daniel 12:3:

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.

The trouble coming to the nations will come in part because of Jesus' strategy to take a lukewarm, compromising, half-hearted and double-minded Church and refine and purify her until she is equally yoked, fully given to His leadership and ways, and mature in her knowledge of Jesus and His heart. He will purify us and we will come to trust Him completely, fully confident in Him, even during the severity and trauma of the end times.

According to Paul, there are two ways to lay hold of the knowledge of Jesus and become like Him. The first is by entering into the "fellowship of His suffering." The second is by experiencing the "power of His resurrection" (Philippians 3:10). Some believers want the power of His resurrection without sharing in the suffering of the cross. However, Jesus knows that the best way for us to experience the deepest love and rise to the highest level of obedience is for us to experience shaking, discomfort, and struggles. This is how we learn to successfully overcome obstacles. He knows that the ones who love the most intensely will fight the hardest to win, and so He has ordered our lives accordingly.

## BEAUTY PREPARATIONS

With Jesus as the leader of our lives, we enter into the knowledge of Him through the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death (Philippians 3:10). Through the manifestation of His glory and power in our lives, as well as the fire of tribulation, we are perfectly conformed to His likeness. It will be through an unprecedented outpouring in both dimensions—tribulation and glory—that what can be called the "beauty preparations of the Bride" will be completed. Esther 2:9–12 gives a picture of what "beauty preparations" for a bride look like. Beauty preparations in Esther's day called for a six-month treatment with oil of myrrh, the burial spice that represented death; and a six-month treatment of fragrant perfumes that pleased the senses and transformed the atmosphere of a room. The book of Esther says that when her beauty preparations were finished, Esther's turn came to go in to see the king and learn if He would delight in her and call her by name (Esther 2:14). When Esther was presented to him, the king loved her more than all the other women, set a crown upon her head, and gave her favor and grace in his sight more than any other (Esther 2:17).

The story of Esther is a prophetic picture of the beauty preparations that the Church, the Bride of Christ, will experience. These preparations will reach their maximum intensity at the end of the age. The Great Tribulation (oil of

myrrh) will come in the midst of an unparalleled manifestation of God's glory and power (fragrant perfumes). Though the tribulation will be worse than ever in history, the Church will do "greater works" than the ones Jesus performed (John 14:12). The meek and humbled Bride will be unified with Jesus. Even now, she is being prepared to operate in unprecedented power in concert with the Holy Spirit. The prepared Bride will partner with Jesus to loose His judgments on the nations of the world, and will rule in authority with Him for one thousand years. Psalm 149 says, "He will beautify the humble with salvation," and in their glory they are joyful, as their praises become a weapon of judgment, vengeance, and punishment in the hands of God to humble the arrogant nations.

Only God can orchestrate the events of history to produce a Bride worthy and capable of walking in this high level of anointing and authority, and only He can prepare His people to judge angels and the peoples of the earth. Jesus' Bride will be fully mature in love. She will burn with the love of the Father alive in her. This was the prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17:26. He prayed that the same love the Father has for Him would be in us as well. Some assume God will answer this prayer by "snapping His fingers" and making us instantly mature and fully in love with Jesus. Some assume this life and this age are about choosing which team we want to join based on our definition of salvation, and that after we "pick teams," those who have chosen God will at some point be made obedient and wise automatically.

However, God has a bigger plan and a more effective process to which He is fully committed. This life is about so much more than picking teams. It is about the journey God desires and requires of each believer in order to know Him completely: a journey of the heart. Our hearts begin cold and become warmer and warmer until they are on fire with love for God and wholeheartedly in love with Jesus. God never forces any of us to take the journey. It is a voluntary journey that produces a voluntary, pure, unreserved love for Jesus. The depth to which we fall in love with God will be proportionate to the amount of time and energy we spend learning about and giving ourselves to the journey He has designed and ordained for each of us. Mature love and deep intimacy are not automatic. How much more so a relationship with the transcendent God!

It is impossible to love God wholeheartedly without help, but He helps us by His grace. God uses many means to help us. One proven method is allowing us to endure trouble and difficulty. Through the fire of tribulation and the

journey of preparation, God lovingly stabilizes our minds, hearts, emotions, and wills. When we fully understand His perfect plan, our love for Him will be intense, fiery, and eternal. We will continually cry, “Great and marvelous are your works . . . Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Revelation 15:3; Romans 11:33). The Church will emerge from the fire of trouble and hardship as a fully mature and stable Bride, totally dependent on Jesus and trusting Him completely (Song of Songs 8:5; Haggai 2:7; Hebrews 12:26).

Walking through the fire of tribulation will also produce tenderness and humility in those who refuse to be offended by God’s leadership. In addition to changing the way we love God, the fire will change the way we love and relate to one another. Jesus desires for us to love one another in a drastically different manner than we usually do. He said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Sacrificial love flows out of a heart tenderized by this divine process, and it is the highest form of love. It only comes from someone who has experienced death to self, self-preservation, and selfish ambition. God works in us to develop a love that is *holy*, not just pure, and utterly different than any other kind of love we’ve known. John called this kind of love “perfected love” (1 John 4:17), a love that only comes from abiding in Jesus.

Paul also spoke about this love. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he wrote, “But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away” (1 Corinthians 13:10); and, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Often people interpret these two verses to mean that we will receive a download of divine information. They imagine an exciting day when perfect knowledge will come and they will know all things. These verses do not refer to our receiving information. They are right in the middle of the love chapter. They are about relationships. When love is perfected in us, we will relate to one another like Jesus relates to us, with holy and pure love. We’ll have no ambition, envy, or pride; nor will we compare ourselves with others. Those who currently struggle to relate to others will be enabled to develop true relationships and know others intimately. Our love will be sincere and meaningful because our love and the love of others will have been perfected.

Love is perfected as we walk through difficulty and pain, as we continue to tenderly trust God’s leadership. We gain godly perspective and learn true

meekness, which allow us to value one another and relate to one another as Jesus values and relates to us. Possessing perfected love means having the capacity to know and be known deeply in our relationships with God and one another. Ultimately, we will approach relationships with tenderness and sincerely love mercy, do justly, and walk humbly (Micah 6:8). We will love and serve sacrificially and selflessly, putting the interests of others above our own for the sake of love. It is crucial that we learn to walk in this kind of love as part of our training and preparation to lead the nations to and with Jesus.

## SALVATION TO THE UTTERMOST

The glorious destiny of all believers is to be with God for eternity. Unfortunately, many people live mostly for today. They live in fear before God and man because they feel they have much to lose by submitting to God's leadership. At the same time, they are content to hope God's eternal destiny for them will somehow work itself out later. This is not God's desire for any of us, and Jesus is completely committed to His Father's plan to produce a pure and spotless Bride. God's plan for the Church is far better than we can imagine, and far better than what most people labor for in their daily lives. God's plan involves more than just our initial salvation. It involves our being "saved to the uttermost." The author of Hebrews wrote, "Therefore He is also able to *save to the uttermost* those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

Jesus lives to make intercession for all believers. He fights for us night and day and prays to the Father continually for us, that we would be "saved to the uttermost." Jesus contends for much more in our lives than only our initial salvation from hell. Our prayer to accept Jesus Christ and receive salvation is but the beginning of our journey to "uttermost" salvation. Salvation in its fullest sense means to be delivered into safety. When David appealed to the "God of his salvation," uttermost salvation was on his mind. He was thankful to God, who delivered him from all his enemies.

Jesus is the safe Savior. Though loving Him can seem risky and does involve intense trials, He is still our safest choice. We don't always believe this. We often speak in bold but empty phrases and clichés about victory, but are unwilling to risk moving out of our comfort zones or releasing our false notions of safety to go where He leads us. Our places of comfort thus become our prisons. Believers gripped by hidden or deep-rooted fear find it difficult to encounter Jesus as He truly is: Savior, Bridegroom, King, *and* Judge. They

find it easier to explain away the violent passages of the Bible—the judgment passages—than to wrestle with the idea of a God who will bring severe judgment.

Jesus' passion to have an intimate relationship with us now, in this age, flows out of His knowledge of our destiny in the age to come. As we continually inquire of the Lord and wonder what lies ahead for our lives in this age, we must remember that everything we do in this age is laying the foundation for what will happen in the next. The early church's apostolic leadership urged believers to stand fast and endure trials and the fire of testing in light of what lay beyond this life. Their message was a timeless one and applies to us as well. Peter called it our "living hope" and "the end of your faith" (1 Peter 1:3–9), which is "the salvation of your souls." Salvation to the uttermost means complete deliverance from a world under the dominion of a demonic system. This demonic system is the enemy of western culture, and promotes a gospel of self-indulgence and fleshly delights. John warned in 1 John 2:15–17 not to "love the world or the things in the world" for "the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever."

The world and all its external enemies don't compare to the most treacherous enemy of all—our own wicked and deceitful hearts (Jeremiah 17:9). Salvation to the uttermost involves being healed from our brokenness and our false, soulish mindsets that affect the way we live before God and how we relate to Him. Jeremiah cried out for such a healing work of God to take place, no matter how painful the process would be (Jeremiah 17:14). He endured persecution and pressure from his countrymen because of his preaching (Jeremiah 17:18), but he chose to submit to God's leadership, as painful and costly as he knew it might be. Jeremiah's submission to God's leadership meant he had to accept what the Lord said He would do: "I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings" (Jeremiah 17:10).

The maturing process through which God takes us is often painful and hard. Those living on earth when Jesus returns will undergo the most painful and difficult testing of any generation. Only possessing the kind of faith that pleases God will enable them to stay steady, unshakable, and unmoved by the fire of testing. The kind of faith that pleases God, according to the writer of Hebrews, involves two things. First, we must believe in the existence of God; and second, we must believe in the true nature of God. The writer of Hebrews

says, “for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (11:6).

Believing in both the existence and the true nature of God, that He is a rewarder, empowers us to press on in the midst of obstacles and testing. If we believe that He *is*, that He exists, we will be forced to reconcile with Him, sooner or later. Reconciling with Him will lead us to discover that He is a *rewarder*. For those who diligently seek Him; for those who come to the Father through the Son; for those who stand fast with endurance; and for those who rejoice even in the midst of trial and testing and do not draw back; there will be a *great* reward (Hebrews 10:35–38). Peter said our inheritance will be “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” (1 Peter 1:4–5).

We must believe God is a rewarder and desires to “keep us for salvation” by giving us supernatural understanding of who He is. If we believe He is good and will reward us if we seek Him and do not draw back, our faith will have great reward indeed. Peter explained:

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, 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 [return to the earth] of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6–7)

When we are grieved by various trials, but trust God despite our grief, renewal is produced in our hearts, and we are prepared for eternal glory (2 Corinthians 4:16–5:8). Afflictions work for us, not against us, according to Paul, in that they prepare us to receive our rewards (2 Corinthians 4:17). Through affliction, God builds a faith in us that will enable us to stand the coming tests and trials. Even in the darkest hours, we must not lose heart. Our God who will orchestrate the most intense and troubling time in history is the same God who is working and will continue to work for us. Our faith will not be genuine until we’ve endured these “momentary, light afflictions” (2 Corinthians 4:17). They last for a moment; but our reward from God will be everlasting. As we keep our eyes on our future reward, we will be empowered to stand steady in obedience and tenderness, even while many are swept away by the troubles of the end times.

## THE ETERNAL DESTINY OF THE SAINTS

In describing one of his most important visions from heaven, the prophet Daniel said, “the Ancient of Days came, and a judgment was made in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came for the saints to possess the kingdom” (Daniel 7:22). He was not referring to some distant, heavenly reality. The kingdom of which Daniel spoke was earth and its nations and peoples. The Father Himself has said, “He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son” (Revelation 21:7). Together with Jesus, we will be entrusted with utmost responsibility: walking in unprecedented power and authority, yet remaining free of any corruption. It will be the first time humans will possess this much power and not be swayed or corrupted by it.

Throughout history, people have demonstrated that when they possess power, they often become self-serving, greedy, and spiritually bankrupt. In our deception and arrogance, we have used power to elevate our own needs, forsaking mercy and compassion, and ignoring the poor, needy, and helpless. When He returns, Jesus will demonstrate what righteous leadership looks like. He will lead the people of earth in perfection and righteousness, and His saints will be there beside Him.

This coming kingdom will be established as Jesus and the saints of the Most High labor together to rebuild, restore, and renew the “broken places” (Isaiah 61:4–7). We will partner with Jesus to redeem and heal the land (2 Chronicles 7:13–14); and bring it into the fullness of God’s original design prior to the fall of mankind (Romans 8:18–25). God’s original, never-forgotten mandate to humanity will be fulfilled: to fill the earth with His glory and subdue it (Genesis 1:28; Isaiah 6:3; Habakkuk 2:14). Jesus and His Bride also will fulfill the Great Commission of discipling all the nations of the earth (Matthew 28:18–20), and teaching them to observe all that He commands.

While God is pleased with the Church’s efforts throughout history to disciple all the nations, only Jesus will be able to complete the Great Commission before presenting the kingdom back to His Father (1 Corinthians 15:24). Jesus will disciple and train every sector of society to follow His perfect pattern of living given in the Sermon on the Mount. He wants to do this in full partnership with His Bride. He will express His global leadership as the rightful King of Jerusalem, His capital and Israel, His nation (more on this in the next chapter). We have the privilege of joining with Him in this great future for the nations of the earth. Even our ruling of the earth with Jesus will

be only the beginning of the beginning of our eternal journey with Him. What comes after that is beyond our imagination. Truly, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of this chapter stood out to you as truths that you would like to go deeper in?
2. Why does the Bible use bridal language, or the picture of marriage, to describe our relationship with Jesus both now and in the age to come?
3. Why does God desire to use difficult circumstances, troubles, and trials to purify our motives and prepare us for our destinies?
4. How does trouble and hardship work with the grace of God to prepare us for our future and destiny in Christ?
5. How seriously and personally have you taken the promises of “inheriting the earth”? What do those promises mean to you?
6. The biblical promise of “inheriting the earth” is connected to the biblical promise of “leading the nations” in the age to come. What does “leadership of the nations” mean, and how will it look for believers?
7. How can believers grow in trusting the Lord’s leadership over our lives? What areas are you struggling in to trust the Lord’s leadership currently?

## GOD'S GREAT PLAN FOR ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS

No tactician or strategist can match the brilliance of God. God's amazing end-time plan will fulfill every biblical prophetic promise and decree He has determined through the actions of believers and unbelievers. The remarkable part is that when God's plan for this age has come to fruition, He will have perfectly orchestrated thousands of years of history without ever once violating anyone's free will. God allows wicked sinners who hate Him and curse His name to choose their way, and He enables tenderhearted lovers of Him to grow in love. Both groups are allowed to make their choices freely, and still—God will have His way. Nothing surprises God. Every person's choice, for good or evil, contributes to the fulfillment of His plan. Even in the darkest moments of history, people will follow God's prophetic script perfectly, though He will never violate our God-given freedom to make our own choices.

We must trust that God's plan will unfold exactly according to His desires, and we must accept that God will be in total control of all the coming events. Nothing escapes God's eye, and He will never be thwarted by people's best attempts to overthrow Him and replace His leadership with their own. God will continue moving forward with His plan, and whether we like it or not, all of us are participating and will participate in it.

When Israel became a nation again more than fifty years ago, it was secular-minded men who made that decision. The free-will actions of carnal-minded, self-serving leaders accomplished God's sovereign plan. It was one of the most significant prophetic events in history and a key part of God's plan for Israel. The same was true of Jesus' crucifixion. Though wicked men, acting of their own accord, executed the Savior of the world, it all happened exactly as God had planned. The same dynamic is happening in our day. As in the cases of Israel's reestablishment as a nation and Christ's crucifixion, God's sovereign plan for the end of the age will happen just as it was always meant to.

## BIBLICAL PROPHECY AND INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE: SOVEREIGNTY AND FREE WILL

There are many end-time passages in the Bible—over 150 chapters. Some of these passages help us understand that God sees what the leaders of nations are planning even now in the secret places of their hearts. We also see how God's plan will unfold. Sinful and wicked people will make their plans, but God in His mercy will invite them to reconsider. He will give them every opportunity to turn away from their fruitless schemes and embrace His plan. Ultimately, when some freely choose to refuse His invitation, even their refusal will be an essential part of God's plan.

In the context of the end times, we must understand that the men about whom biblical prophecy speaks will not be so bound by destiny and the plans of God that they have no free will. While God will know their actions and choices, these men will not be forced to choose as they will. Nothing is so rigidly predestined that fate and God's will are the only things steering the course of history. In His sovereignty, God has indeed determined the primary events in His eternal plan. He will surely accomplish what He has determined, regardless of what people or demons do. However, He has also chosen to give us a dynamic role in determining to some measure the quality of life we will experience in both the natural and the spiritual realms, now and in the age to come.

Our choices indicate how responsive we are to God's grace and how intimately we are in relationship with Him. The depth of our prayer life and the level of our meekness influence our choices. God opens doors of blessing and closes doors of oppression in response to our prayers. There are blessings God has determined to give, but He'll only give them if His people rise up in prayer and ask for them. In keeping with His Father's nature and character, Jesus will continue to rule the world this way after His second coming.

Some confuse God's foreknowledge with predestination; they embrace a doctrine of inevitability and relinquish their ordained partnership with God. God has indeed set the primary events of the future, such as the promised ultimate victory of Jesus. God also reveals many aspects of the future because He already knows what will happen. This does not mean, however, that we have no choices to make in our lives.

Consider the example of how a human father understands his young children. He knows with a certain amount of accuracy what his children will

choose to do if left alone. He could write a checklist and a time line of what choices they will make and when, and then explain their thought process behind each choice. However, the father's foreknowledge does not mean his children are bound to his predictions, even if every prediction were to come true. The children could still choose to cooperate, share, get along, and clean up after themselves. But he knows that they most likely will not make such choices because of their lack of maturity. God knows us thousands of times better than a parent knows his own children, and He knows exactly where history is headed, but this does not mean every aspect of the future is predetermined and unchangeable.

In His desire for us to participate in shaping history, God has given us the gift of prayer. God leaves some aspects of the future related to our quality of life surprisingly open-ended, and says in His Word that we can impact the future by praying and interceding, whether alone or corporately. This is a stunning truth that is communicated throughout Scripture. For example, James 4:2 says, "you have not because you ask not." In Ezekiel 22:30 the Lord said He was searching for a man among the Israelites who would "stand in the gap" by interceding and praying for Israel, "that I might not destroy it; but I found no one." In 2 Chronicles 7:14 He says,

If my people, who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Both Joel 2:12–14 and Zephaniah 2:1–3 also leave an open-ended possibility before the people of God regarding their future if they choose to gather and pray with repentance and meekness.

People who fervently believe prayer changes things become the most dedicated intercessors. By praying and interceding, we partner with God in His governance and leadership. Partnering with God through prayer gives dignity to our lives and labors, and greater meaning to our relationship with Him. God does not want us to settle for a one-sided relationship, wherein we expect an all-powerful God to call all the shots and who condescendingly allows us to come along for the ride. In a way, God does condescend to us, but He does so in meekness and humility because He loves us and wants to spend time with us. He values who we are and our friendship, and so He has provided a way for us to join with Him in His labors. God does not need us to help Him; He wants us to help Him and longs for time with us.

Because God wants us to choose to love Him and be with Him, He doesn't force us to do either. In His astonishing humility, God has bestowed upon sinful, broken men and women the dignity of having roles in shaping history according to the choices they make. God watches patiently as people chart their courses. At crucial times He intervenes with warning or judgment, always out of love, and gently invites them to turn from the path of destruction and follow His lead. At all times people are free to accept His invitation or continue on. What we often perceive as harsh or severe actions on God's part, are in reality the actions of a God who perfectly understands the hardness of people's hearts. God acts only to the extent that is absolutely necessary to get the attention of men and women. If their hearts are very hard, He will increase the severity of the warning or judgment. It is important that we remember, especially when studying the end times, that God always warns and brings judgment out of kindness and love, not anger.

God judges to preserve and protect what is good, to remove obstacles to love, and to bring justice by correcting things that are wrong. Again, He never violates our free will. However, because people are free to make choices, they must live with the consequences of their choices. In the coming day of final judgment, we each will have to answer for every choice we have made, either for or against God.

## ISRAEL'S DESTINY: SERVING AND TRAINING THE NATIONS

Israel is at the center of both the grand scope of God's sovereign plans and the individual's response to His leadership. God is moving world history towards His intended conclusion. People can choose to say "yes" to His leadership over the direction of human history, or war against His plans and attempt to establish their own leadership. Israel has a beautiful and glorious destiny as the nation that will serve the nations of the earth. The question for the Jewish people is whether or not they will respond to this "irrevocable calling" on God's terms (Romans 11:29).

What is the "irrevocable calling" upon Israel? The call of God upon Israel is similar to God's call to all of mankind before the fall of man in the very beginning. It involves God's glorious kingdom being established in its fullness and blessing the whole earth after the return of Jesus.

The kingdom of God is one of the most fundamental and important concepts

in all of Scripture. It is knit to the revelation of the Father in heaven as King, on His throne and presiding over an ordered reality established through His sovereign power and by His sovereign decree. The primary way that God the Father reveals Himself to His creation is through the conveyance of kingdom and His identity as King.

Mankind's initial task, as commissioned from heaven, was to establish dominion over the earth (beginning with an established territory surrounded by hostile forces) in partnership with a heavenly King, and subduing it to prepare for the King's coming to earth in fullness. Man was delivered (saved) from oblivion by a Creator and established in (saved into) a garden kingdom that was limited and incomplete. The labors of man in full partnership with God would extend the boundaries and quality of that early garden kingdom to the ends of the earth.

Israel's task, given in the days of Moses, was to establish their nation as holy before all other nations and in partnership with a heavenly King; to be a light to the Gentiles and to provoke them to jealous pursuit of the God who extravagantly blesses their obedience to His Word and ways. Israel was delivered (saved) from Egypt, escorted into a wilderness journey, then given (saved into) the land of promise (surrounded by hostile forces), which they were to tame and prepare for the coming of God's glory.

Man's failure and fall to accomplish his given task in the garden created a leadership crisis amongst the human race. In God's plan of redemption, the human race would be rescued by one of their own, a Man who would be King. This son of David is the King of the Jews, and upon His return will accomplish both the tasks given to Adam and to Israel, leading to great blessing and glory for the whole earth (Romans 11:12). Neither mankind (the nations of the earth) nor Israel had the ability to fulfill their tasks. The beauty of God's leadership is that He sent His Son, Jesus, to accomplish both tasks on behalf of the human race!

Apostle Paul spoke about these "mysteries" in Romans 9–11. In Romans 9, Paul establishes God's sovereign right to do as He pleases according to His mysterious plan. Then he explains in chapter 10 Israel's inability to play her part in God's purposes. In Romans 11, Paul tells the glorious story of Israel's destiny despite her current condition: all Israel will be saved, fully delivered from her enemies, and fully obedient to her King (Romans 11:26–27).

In the fullness of their destiny and purpose, they will serve the nations of the earth in a greater measure—but first God determined to bring salvation to the

Gentiles after Israel's "fall," or failure to recognize Jesus as their Messiah. The Gentiles could then humbly serve Israel—provoking her to jealousy to receive the fullness of her salvation initially, and afterwards provoking her to humility and gracious thanksgiving.

When we agree with God's plans and purposes for Israel, we are agreeing with a significant aspect of His purposes for us in salvation as well. It is crucial that we learn to pray according to God's heart for Israel. We must not be given to unsanctified sympathy and affection for the Jews apart from God's desires and plans. He desires to bring her into her fullness through great fire and testing (Zechariah 13:9) during what Jeremiah called "Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30:7) in which, according to the book of Daniel, her own power will be "completely shattered" (Daniel 12:7). We are called, in the coming days, to be *bold about God's plans for Israel's testing while standing with her in prayer for her salvation and destiny.*

Israel, having been "provoked to jealousy" by the predominantly Gentile church at the end of the age, will in turn *provoke the nations of the earth* under the leadership of Jesus to walk out the commandments of the Lord (Sermon on the Mount). The nations will flock to Israel to learn from her so that they might walk in the same blessing and abundance:

<sup>2</sup>Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; *and all nations shall flow to it.* <sup>3</sup>Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; *He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.*" *For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.* (Isaiah 2:2–3)

The detail by which God has orchestrated, is orchestrating, and will orchestrate His plan on multiple levels—beyond human comprehension—is staggering. Paul hints at its complexity by just scratching the surface of what God is working to accomplish in and through Israel, a people elected (chosen) and called for this sovereign purpose. God called Israel, fully knowing they would fail and fall—and in fact their failure and fall were factored into His very plan.

The depths and riches of God's glorious plan causes Paul to spontaneously exult and rejoice in deep worship, gratitude, and affection for God. No one can fully comprehend Him, counsel Him, and add or subtract a thing from His

astonishing plan to break in, fully deliver, and save those who wait for Him alone. No one has any resources, ideas, or attributes that can add to or improve upon what the Lord has done, is doing, and will do in fullness. The completeness and greatness of our God is incomparable in His brilliance and might. Amen!

## WHY DO THE NATIONS RAGE? PSALM 2 AND THE DESTINY OF THE NATIONS

In Psalm 2 we see a picture of the nations moving and planning together to break away from the rule of God and the One known as “His Anointed,” Jesus. While the plans of God for Israel and the nations are glorious for those who are in Christ, many leaders across the earth will rage against Him and resist His plans. King David gave us a vivid picture of the coming rage of the nations against God in this Psalm. The nations David spoke of in the Psalm are representative of the nations that will exist in the end times. These nations in Psalm 2 make a bold declaration, saying, “Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us” (Psalm 2:3).

The sinful kings and world leaders in the end times will make similar declarations that reveal their hidden contempt for God and His ways, and will indicate the state of affairs in which the world will be found in the end times. The nations will attempt to separate themselves from biblical morality, and replace it with their own version of morality, one involving a relativistic celebration of human might and potential. Their vain plots will also involve setting in place their own king to rule the world.

God will see all their plans and their monstrous rage toward Him that lies behind those plans. He will respond to their schemes in five ways, according to Psalm 2:4–6.

First, “He who sits in the heavens shall laugh.” Those in power will become intoxicated by their power and importance. Their egos will become inflated because of the immense influence they will have in world affairs. Pride, arrogance, and vanity will cause them to make bold declarations of independence and self-determination. God, however, will see the futility of these leaders’ efforts, knowing they are doomed to fail. He will see it perfectly, even if the saints on earth do not, and it will not at all concern Him.

Those who don’t understand or believe that God’s plan will prevail, will see the temporary prosperity of the wicked and manipulative leaders, and will

wonder whether or not God sees or cares about what is happening. Even now, when disaster strikes or trouble comes and we are in despair, our first reaction often is to question whether God sees or cares about what is happening. Many give themselves freely to compromise because of their despair, certain that God has abandoned them. The truth is, God always sees and always cares about what happens to us. He also knows what evil is being planned against Him and His people, and His first response will be to laugh at their foolish and preposterous plans. Though He will laugh, His laughter will not be out of delight at the choices and plans of the wicked. He will mourn the condition of their hearts and their eventual fates. His laughter will be due to the impossibility that any of those plans could actually work.

The second way God will respond to the schemes of evil men, according to Psalm 2, will be to “hold them in derision.” Though the wicked will appear to prosper for a season, God will patiently watch and wait for the right time to unfold His own plan. What may look like inactivity on God’s part will not be; nor will His delay be an indication of His approval or emotional distance. God is far more emotional than we could ever know or understand. He laughs at the futility of the plans of weak men who are bold in sin, heading for destruction. And He will hold them in derision because of their stubborn, hard-hearted rebellion against His offers of blessing and true life. God’s derision speaks of the tone of His laughter. Derision means “contemptuous laughter.” The Hebrew word for derision conveys the idea of mocking with babble or unintelligible words, much as someone might contemptuously mock a visitor to their nation who does not speak the language.

It is interesting that God will respond again with babble to the unified efforts of mankind to rebel against Him. The last time people united against God was the time they gathered to build a city and a tower “that would reach the top of the heavens” (Genesis 11:4). God’s response to their vain and empty plot to exalt and celebrate themselves was to confuse their language. He caused them to babble, and the name of the tower and the evil city that had opposed God came to bear the name “Babble.” God accomplished two things by confusing the language of those people. The practical result was that the people’s unity was disrupted because they were unable to communicate with one another. Beyond that, God revealed His contemptuous mocking laughter at their foolish pride.

Some interpret God’s response as a desperate one due to His fear that their unity would enable them to succeed in their ridiculous scheme. This, however,

was not the case. It would have been impossible for anyone to build a tower high enough to reach the top of the heavens. To match the heavenly city described in Revelation 21, these people would have had to build a tower that exceeded 1,500 miles in height. God does not exaggerate, and He has described a city that will come out of heaven to earth and will be 1,500 miles high. Human beings begin to feel the limits of the atmosphere at five miles, approximately the height of Mt. Everest. Orbit, or what we call outer space, is reached at 800 miles. The city God will give us in which to live will be beyond anything people could ever attempt to build.

Imagine if every three-year-old in a city gathered together in rage against their parents and defiantly declared a plan to build a skyscraper where they could live apart from their parents. We would consider their plans useless babble. This is what God thought of the plan to build the Tower of Babel. If this plan was impossible, we may ask why God chose to disrupt the people's unity? He did not use "babble" to frustrate their task, but to frustrate their unity in prideful sin and rebellious self-exaltation. Had He not intervened then, sin would have prematurely escalated before the appointed time. The unity of these people would have enabled deep darkness to destroy any hope of redemption.

The Bible speaks of the escalation of sin in the end times. Throughout the Bible, there are references to the simultaneous maturation of the Church in righteousness and the escalation of sin and wickedness in the final generation. God's derision means He will move to frustrate the unity of the sinful nations and their evil agreements. In the right time, He will allow this unity to happen again, allowing sin to return to its former course, but without any capacity to destroy the hope of redemption. While the escalation of sin will come close, Jesus will put an end to it upon His return.

The third way God will respond to the schemes of evil men, according to Psalm 2, will be to "speak to them in His wrath." When the time is right, God will intervene in world affairs. He will reveal His displeasure with, and His mighty wrath against, wickedness and unrighteousness. He will indeed speak. God has always used prophetic messengers and preachers as a means to speak to His people. Amos 3:7 says, "Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets." God reveals secrets to His messengers, not because He feels He must, but because He wants us to understand that He does nothing in a vacuum. God wants us to understand why our choices and actions matter, and why He responds as He does to them. God

gives us divine information so we can consider different options and make better choices. Before any great outbreak of divine judgment, God will always speak to at least one of His messengers and then send him or her to warn of what is coming.

Right now God is calling and preparing prophetic messengers all over the earth. The end times will come soon, and He is preparing people to be messengers, to sound the alarm and warn the Church and the nations. God gives prophetic messengers supernatural insight into His heart and motivations, so they can deliver messages of wrath with tenderness and without accusation. As ambassadors of God, they must precisely and carefully speak as God instructs so as to represent Him accurately. In order to fulfill the difficult role of a messenger, their hearts must be closely knit to the heart of God in intimacy and friendship.

In His Word, God gives details about what will happen in the end times for two reasons. First, He wants godly believers to gather and pray for mercy. Second, He wants godly believers to warn the wicked of what will come so that they have the opportunity to repent. Joel 2:15 describes prayer meetings, or “sacred assemblies,” convened so the godly can contend for mercy and appeal to God to lessen the severity of the coming judgments. Even in His wrath, God speaks clearly as a good Father, so we have all the information we need to make wise choices about how we spend our time and order our lives.

The fourth way God will respond to the schemes of evil men, according to Psalm 2, will be to “distress them in His deep displeasure.” After God speaks His warning, He will act. He will not stand by patiently forever. He will act at exactly the right time, and His actions will be perfect. This will produce the most amount of love and repentance in the hearts of men and women, but will use the least severe means to do so. God’s deep displeasure with wickedness and unrighteousness, and His desire that all people would turn to Him births His judgment. God’s judgment will distress the leaders of the nations and frustrate their plans to replace God’s rule with an earthly leader of their choosing. His judgment will also play a huge part in accomplishing His plan for the Church. God’s shaking of world systems through various natural and supernatural means will also prepare all the nations to receive God’s true King, Jesus.

Jeremiah 25:30–31 communicates the depth and intensity of God’s warning and then His subsequent actions to distress these nations, kings, and leaders:

<sup>30</sup>The Lord will roar from on high, and utter His voice from His holy habitation; He will roar mightily against His fold. He will give a shout, as those who tread the grapes, against all the inhabitants of the earth. <sup>31</sup>A noise will come to the ends of the earth—for the Lord has a controversy with the nations; He will plead his case with all flesh. He will give those who are wicked to the sword.

This imagery speaks of the Lion of the tribe of Judah—Jesus Himself. He will roar as a lion and declare His ultimate victory because His victory is sure. Obtaining it will be as effortless for Him as a person treading grapes. Before His final battle to settle this controversy, Jesus will plead His case with all people, hoping to win their hearts. He will desperately fight to deliver as many as possible from the sword of judgment before He executes His final judgment.

God will prepare the earth to be led by Jesus. In some ways, He has been preparing the world to follow His Son for thousands of years. As the second coming draws nearer, however, the activities of God’s preparation become more intense. Lines will be drawn more clearly and all will have to choose whether or not they will join the family of God. Many will join, but many will be offended and refuse to join. Natural disasters, wars, famine, widespread death, and supernatural shaking will all grow more intense as time runs out for each person to decide the course he or she will take. It will be a time of great distress to “all the inhabitants of the earth.” Even now, time is of the essence. Psalm 2 is clear about the end times. The nations will completely reject God’s leadership and sovereignty and fully embrace darkness and wickedness.

As God expresses His displeasure by bringing the greatest shaking in history, most will grow either in their hatred of God or their love for Him. The distress of the shaking will reveal many things, and it will become clear who loves God and who hates Him, as well as what God loves and what He hates. God will make very clear what delights Him and what displeases Him in order to clarify the battle lines for the final conflict between Jesus and the nations. As God’s plan for the world unfolds, the only people who benefit will be those who have chosen and continue to choose wisely.

God’s instruction to everyone has always been to make wise choices.

<sup>10</sup>Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth.

<sup>11</sup>Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. <sup>12</sup>Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled

but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him. (Psalm 2:10–12)

We must embrace the wisdom of God and gain a proper perspective of reality. As God prepares the world for the rule of the great King, it is wisdom for us to serve and embrace that King now—in intimacy and rejoicing—rather than kindle His wrath. It always will be better to trust Him, and not lean on our own understanding, regardless of how bad things get. Jesus is the Anointed One, the blessed leader. We cannot improve upon His leadership. If we try to do so, we will become like the doomed leaders and kings who will reject Him and attempt to take matters into their own hands. As they wrestle for the right to control their own destinies, they will seek to remove every obstacle—the ultimate obstacle being God. They will discover that attempting to remove God as leader will cause them to lose all control and will only accelerate their own destruction.

The fifth way God will respond to the schemes of evil men, according to Psalm 2, will be to give the entire earth to Jesus.

<sup>6</sup>Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion. . . . <sup>7</sup>“You are My Son, today I have begotten You. <sup>8</sup>Ask of Me, and I will give you the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession.”  
(Psalm 2:6–8)

Once God’s plan for earth is fully revealed, all Jesus will have to do is ask, and God will give Him the nations to rule. The God of the universe longs to give the nations to His Son. The full destinies of the nations rest in the hands of Jesus, who was begotten, or manifested, in the flesh. Paul said, “Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory” (1 Timothy 3:16). That God became flesh for the sake of love and to identify with us is an incredible mystery; but this mystery also contains the greatness of the world’s destiny in God’s glorious plan. The mystery of godliness is wrapped up in what Paul calls “the mystery of His will,” or the ultimate purpose of God for all the nations. In light of this mystery, the significance of Jesus ruling the earth after He returns becomes clear. This mystery is the reason the Father and Son labor, and why they are intent on incorporating us into their plan.

The ultimate plan of God is to “gather together in one all things in Christ,

both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him” (Ephesians 1:10). This means the ultimate goal of God’s plan is to bring heaven and earth together in Jesus. Jesus spoke about this “restoration of all things” in Matthew 17:11, as did Peter in Acts 3:21. The restoration of all things will satisfy God’s longing to relate to men and women face to face again, as He did in the garden of Eden long ago. Joining the realms of heaven (the supernatural spirit realm of divine power and presence) with earth (the natural physical realm of human expression) will enable God to live together with us again, for all eternity.

God purposefully created the universe with two realms. The material world expresses the glory of the Lord (Romans 1:20), but is inferior to the spirit world (Hebrews 11:3). According to Paul, our resurrected bodies will be given to us so we can inherit something incorruptible: the kingdom of God in fullness (1 Corinthians 15:50). Our new, resurrected bodies will facilitate our interaction with the heavenly realm and all of its glory.

Currently, believers are received in heaven without a material body because they do not need one there. But when heaven and earth are joined, we will need resurrected bodies to exist in the kingdom of God. Jesus will not claim only the physical ground, but will restore earth, subdue it, and fill it with the glory of His Father. He will bring all people and nations into agreement with God, heal them, and prepare them to interact with His Father. Those who have endured in faith will receive their resurrected bodies and have the privilege of working with Jesus as He restores and subdues earth and then fills it with glory. We will get to help Him make His Father’s dream a reality.

The healing, equipping, discipling, and preparation of the world will be a progressive work, not an instantaneous one. Those people living on earth will enjoy a thousand years of perfect leadership, as Jesus prepares them for the manifest presence of God’s glory to fill the earth. After Jesus and the saints have ruled earth for a millennium, Jesus will give the kingdom to His Father. The people of earth will be ready and the last enemy of God, death, will have been conquered (1 Corinthians 15:24–28). Only Jesus, who is fully God and fully man, has the capacity to restore all things, and bring together the fullness of heaven and of earth. Jesus can exist and move in both realms, and will therefore lead the nations into this fullness with might, glory, power, riches, wisdom, and blessing (Revelation 5:12).

Right now, every human being on earth is being presented with a choice. Will we say a wholehearted “yes” to the leadership of Jesus and the plans of

God? Or, will we rage and reject His leadership and look to go our own way? In the sovereign plans of God, there have always been two groups before Him. He moves history forward for the benefit of all, longing to include everyone in the blessing and glory of His plans. In His brilliance, He includes everyone. Whether men love God or rage against Him, all may freely choose to participate in His plans or resist them. Meanwhile, Satan will be working diligently as well, setting up all he can in order to maintain his man-given place of dominion and influence in the nations of the earth.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of this chapter stood out to you as truths that you would like to go deeper in?
2. How do you grapple with the mystery of the sovereignty of God and the free will of mankind? How did the relationship between the two look to you before you read this chapter? How has your perspective changed in light of this chapter?
3. What does it look like for God to have a plan for whole nations and people groups, while allowing individuals to choose whether or not they participate in these plans? How does the nation of Israel help us understand this mystery?
4. Why would God choose a Jewish man to be the King of kings—and why did He have to *become* that Jewish man?
5. What would it look like for the nations of the earth to worship *the God of Israel* and love and serve the *King of Israel*?
6. Why will all the nations of the earth reject the leadership of Jesus from Israel? What will their rejection mean for the people within those nations?
7. How will God respond to the rage and resistance of the nations to His plans?
8. How would you explain the destiny and calling of Israel?
9. How would you explain the destiny and calling of the nations of the earth?
10. What is, “the kingdom of God”? What does it mean for this kingdom to be, “already here, and not yet here”?

# 8

## SATAN'S PLAN TO KEEP HIS PLACE

While God's ultimate plan for the world in the age to come is glorious and wonderful, the short-term destiny of the nations is not. Satan, the enemy of God and man, desires a prize just as God does. The prize he hopes to win is a permanent position of earthly power and control. Satan has had great influence in the world and its people since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden, and he will fight to maintain his control. In choosing the way of sin over obedience to the Lord, mankind gave the world over to Satan's influence at the time of the fall, and continues to give him power and influence to this day. Satan has authority because sinful, carnal people have given it to him and he works furiously to exercise and maintain it.

Jesus called Satan the "ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11); and Paul called Satan the "god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4, ESV) and the "prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2). The apostle John said the "whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one" (1 John 5:19). Luke 4:5–6 gives an example of Satan's power, a power so great that he offered it to Jesus:

<sup>5</sup>The devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world. . . . <sup>6</sup>The devil said to Him, "All this authority I will give You . . . for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish."

Jesus didn't contend with Satan then, but both understood that Satan's position was the present reality and that all would be changed at the second coming of Jesus. Thus Jesus was not threatened by Satan's control or bothered by the offer. He and His Father have always had a plan to take back what is His, and Jesus has always been committed to doing it His Father's way: through meekness, pain, and enduring hardship. Satan's temptation was to offer Jesus an easy, shortcut path to rule the world without the pain of the cross. This temptation was not easy for Jesus to refuse, as the Bible describes later in the garden of Gethsemane.

Though Satan's power is great, it is not greater than God's. There is no comparison between the two. Our power and Satan's power exist on one "spectrum" of comparison. God stands alone. He is incomparable. God is always aware of Satan's plans and actions and is not threatened by them. God has always been, is now, and will always be in control of the universe. But as the sovereign leader of history, He has given us the dignity of choosing our path and our king, and deciding whom we will allow to rule our lives. If we choose to continue walking "according to the course of this world" (Ephesians 2:2), we will remain members of the kingdom of darkness under Satan's rule.

If we choose God's rule, however, He will pick us up out of the dirty, dark river of this world (Ephesians 2:1–4) and immerse us in a different one—what the Bible calls "the river of life" (Ezekiel 47:1–12; Revelation 22:2). Once we are in this river, our lives run on radically different courses than before. We will eternally grow in the light and life of Jesus.

Most people are not aware of the fact they are swimming in the river that leads to destruction. They have never considered Satan as their king. Satan, however, has given much thought to the issue of kingship. He knows the Bible predicts his eventual doom and torment and is fully aware of the prophetic promises, but he is somehow blind or unwilling to accept the certain reality of his downfall and refuses to give up. There is no contest between Satan and the all-encompassing power of our God, but in his outrageous arrogance and pride, Satan will nonetheless attempt to outmaneuver God and maintain his power base. Satan's plan involves two main strategies. The first is to wipe out the objects of God's prophetic promises: the Christians, and the Jews (Revelation 12:17). The second is to set his own man in place as king of the world. The Bible calls Satan's would-be king the *Antichrist*.

## THE CENTERPIECE OF SATAN'S PLAN: THE COMING OF THE ANTICHRIST

To many, "the Antichrist" is at best a fable, a creation of biblical conspiracy theorists and novelists. Tales of a crazed king, filled with lust for world domination, make easy targets for those who don't subscribe to a doom and gloom mentality. The prophetic writers of the Bible, however, did not view the traumatic events of the end times or the horrific nature of the Antichrist as part of a doom and gloom mentality. They simply accepted them as part of the reality that would come to a sinful, rebellious world that had rejected the

leadership of God.

As we prepare for the end times, it is important to study the Antichrist and his role. The Bible discusses the Antichrist and his activities frequently and in detail. The Holy Spirit gives much attention and prominence to the subject. The Antichrist's title, the "man of sin" (2 Thessalonians 2:3), speaks of a twofold reality. He will be the personification of evil and the personification of that which appeals to the carnal nature of man. Evil and wickedness by nature are self-exalting. The result of people's self-exaltation is a self-promoting, self-seeking society in which people seek to receive glory from other people. We tend to think of evil in the overt expressions of darkness that we find repulsive. We don't realize that much of what God despises is what mankind values most. Jesus said in Luke 16:15, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God."

Studying the Antichrist will prepare us to face his rise to power. His domination of the world scene will be integral to end-times suffering. As we learn what the Bible says about him, the Holy Spirit will impart the wisdom and revelation necessary for us to oppose him.

To study the Antichrist is to study evil incarnate. It is also to explore the depths of sin in the heart of every person, including ourselves. The Antichrist will personify all of the sinful lusts and ambitions of the nations and will embody all that carnally-minded men and women esteem: He will be appealing to many because of his gifts, skills, charisma, and power. There are many outward things we admire in those men and women we perceive as being great; but those attributes only seem great because our unrenewed minds love earthly things more than godly things. We don't realize the magnitude of our depravity, but through the Antichrist, God will distinguish the difference between the things mankind exalts and God despises. As we become aware of and accept our inherent depravity, we will recognize our need for God. As we cry out to Him and submit to Him, we will begin, by His grace, to live holy and righteous lives. Our lives will serve as examples to others and we will be able to speak the truth of Jesus into their lives, thus helping them to make right choices now and in the end times.

Both God and Satan are working to draw people to them. As clear battle lines are drawn in the days ahead, both will look for loyal followers. Both will determine who stands with them, and both will attempt to recruit those who don't. The difference is that God loves everyone and wants everyone to

choose to run with and to Him in love. Satan, on the other hand, hates everyone. He has no use for people beyond his wicked, brutal, self-serving plans. People quickly outlive their usefulness to him and he quickly discards them. While his initial plan will be to kill all Christians and Jews—the people of promise—his ultimate desire is to eliminate the entire human race because every member was made in God’s image. Those who join with Satan will not find a friend, but their worst enemy, an enemy fully committed to destroying them.

Satan’s hatred of men and women and his scheme to destroy them began long ago. In the garden of Eden, he took the form of a serpent and shrewdly deceived Adam and Eve by convincing them that God, with whom they enjoyed face-to-face fellowship, wasn’t all He appeared to be. He persuaded them that God had withheld true blessing from them, and so they began to question God’s goodness. Satan told Adam and Eve they could attain wisdom and find satisfaction apart from God, and he has told the same lie to men and women ever since. He has propagated the idea that there exists a wisdom superior to God’s Word and he tempts mankind to seek it. People continue to believe his lie that there is a wisdom superior to God’s and that God doesn’t have their best interests in mind. The result is that we attempt to take care of ourselves, rather than placing ourselves in God’s care and doing things His way. In our pride, we think we know better than God what is best for us. Once we reject the truth that we need God and His help, we give ourselves over to our own ways and remove ourselves from God’s protection. When we step out from under God’s protective care, Satan can easily manipulate us for his own benefit. He faithfully sends his demonic minions to control all the areas of our hearts and minds that have opened doors to darkness and sin.

Through this deception, Satan has ensnared the hearts of men and women, and established an evil world system that kills, steals, and destroys countless lives. Evil is steadily increasing as earth moves towards the fullness of transgressions (Daniel 8:23). The nations are falling into line with Satan’s plan and conditions are ripe for his next move—attempting to establish his kingship. By “transgressors reaching their fullness,” the Bible doesn’t mean sin itself will get worse. Sin has existed since the fall and has always destroyed lives. Sin cannot grow worse. Transgressors reaching their fullness means people will unify in their sin as never before. When people gather and agree in and with sin, a social context is created that gives license to all the evil imaginings and desires in people’s hearts and minds.

When sin remains hidden, there is an illusion of mankind's goodness and decency. For example, right now it is socially unacceptable in our society to discuss many of the dark things lurking in people's hearts. But things are changing. Right before our eyes, barriers are crumbling under the banner of "freedom of expression." Darker and darker expressions of sin are becoming socially acceptable. The sin that has resided in the hearts of men and women since the fall is now being expressed in the light of day. This unity in sin that will prepare the way for the Antichrist is even now quickly solidifying and will become complete in the end times. Because Satan's plan depends entirely on mankind's cooperation with his agenda, it is people who will empower the Antichrist to rule, not Satan.

The Antichrist will be the chief player in Satan's plan to maintain his rule over the earth. The Bible describes the Antichrist as the one who will be free to murder the saints of God, to blaspheme, to "corrupt with flattery" those who do wickedly (Daniel 11:32), and to brutally enforce loyalty to himself, with minimal reward (Revelation 13:15). He will activate his plan with bitterness, anger, deceit, betrayal, trouble, and ruthless ambition (Psalm 10:7–11). The Antichrist will have freedom to act this way because the standards and conditions of the times will have made it socially acceptable for him to do so. People will continue to empower and give permission to greater and greater expressions of sin and darkness, and thus will establish Satan's power base for him. From that power base, Satan, through the Antichrist, will gain the platform he needs to enact a systematic eradication of all Christians and Jews.

## THE RISE OF THE ANTICHRIST EMPIRE

The Bible is not clear about the origin of the Antichrist, the one who will carry out the final, desperate phases of Satan's plan. We don't know with certainty where he will come from. Many murderous dictators of the past seemed to arise from nowhere and lay hold of power and influence overnight. So it may be with the Antichrist. There is much mystery surrounding this future world leader, whom John described as the "beast that was, and is not, and yet is" (Revelation 17:8). The Antichrist's identity has been the subject of numerous discussions and debates and many don't know what to make of him. We do know he will "ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition" and will cause many who dwell on earth to marvel when they see him (Revelation 17:8).

Regardless of where he will come from, when the Antichrist arrives on the

scene, he will make a huge, international impact. Daniel 9:27 says that “he shall confirm a covenant with many” for seven years. Isaiah used the nation of Judah’s treaty with ancient Assyria as a picture of the future. Judah at that time in history entered into a “covenant with death, an “agreement with Sheol” (Isaiah 28:18). This compromise in Israel’s history gives us a picture of a far more costly compromise in Israel’s future. The king of Assyria, for Isaiah, was a clear picture of a much greater evil yet to come. Isaiah saw within the heart of his people a tendency to acquiesce to wicked and powerful kings rather than trust in the leadership of their God. He understood and prophesied how costly this pattern would be for Israel’s future.

The covenant described in Daniel 9:27 gives us a small picture of a coming time when many nations will ally themselves with the Antichrist. This alliance will have various levels and degrees. The book of Revelation gives much more detail to the passage in Daniel 9. Ten nations will be allied so tightly with the Antichrist that they will form one powerful empire together. Others will be connected with this empire and some nations will oppose this empire when it emerges in full strength. Israel will be one of the “many” nations who participate in a “covenant” early on with these nations, which will be portrayed as a peace treaty.

Israel will be fooled into making a deal with the Antichrist (as well as the nations that he represents), who will appear to exude wisdom and goodness (Psalm 36:3), although wickedness and deceit will be in his heart. As a result, and as Ezekiel prophesied, Israel will lower her defenses and rest in what will appear to be “peace and safety” from the continual waves of attack that have wearied her people (Ezekiel 38:11). Because the Antichrist’s agreement will be with “many,” Paul the apostle warned that it will appear that peace and safety have become a global reality for the first time (1 Thessalonians 5:3). Jesus warned us that one of the greatest threats to humanity in the future would be *deception* (Matthew 24:11, 24).

The coming deception the prophets and apostles described is humanistic in nature (2 Timothy 3:1–9), flowing from mankind’s “love of self” and “love of pleasure.” Paul described the days in which mankind’s love affair with itself and with pleasure as “perilous times.” Men will settle for a “form of godliness” but “deny its power.” Man’s spirituality will be false, his prosperity will be built on deception, and the global peace will be false. However, it will satisfy the many people living in constant fear of terror attack, war, and rumors of war. They will be free to live as they please, with

no regard for truth, consequences, or the fear of the Lord.

This great deception, or time of false “peace and safety” that Paul described (1 Thessalonians 5:3) will provide the freedom the Antichrist needs to consolidate his military and political power. During this time, the Antichrist will establish his power “peaceably” and “by intrigue” (Daniel 11:21). The English Standard Version uses the word, “flatteries.” In other words, the book of Daniel describes the rise of the Antichrist’s empire in a way that escapes the notice of most on earth.

It could be a rise to power that looks very similar to Adolf Hitler’s in the early 1930s. While the nations were distracted by the hardship and difficulties of the Great Depression, Adolf Hitler rose to power within Germany without warning. Very few were aware of the danger he posed to Europe and the rest of the world until it was too late to act. He won the heart of Germany with flattery, speaking to them about their rightful place in the world and their unfair treatment by other nations. By the time Germany was “converted”—without warning and by flattery—it was too late for the other nations to stop the power that had arisen to threaten the fragile “peace” that had descended upon the earth.

I believe that the Bible describes the rise of the Antichrist’s empire in a very similar manner. This is why many theologians who were contemporaries of Hitler—such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Niemöller—were convinced that Adolph Hitler *was* the Antichrist spoken of in the Bible. I believe that Hitler was operating in what John the apostle called, “the spirit of the antichrist” (1 John 4:2–3). Hitler was one of the “many antichrists” that John said would precede the final Antichrist at the end of the age (1 John 2:18). They shared similar stories with similar goals. They all despised the God of Israel and His Son, and longed to possess Jesus’ inheritance—the nations of the earth.

What sets the final Antichrist apart is that he will gather up unprecedented military, economic, and political power to himself (Revelation 13:1–10, 16; 17:13). Even more terrifying, he will gather unprecedented *spiritual power and authority* to himself (Revelation 13:4, 8, 11–18). The final Antichrist will display before all peoples exactly what the apex of human power looks like. Jesus is a picture of what mankind was meant to be—our creator God’s perfect design in righteousness. In other words, Jesus gives us a picture of how far men and women can go in the grace of God. The Antichrist gives us a clear picture of how far human beings can go in wickedness and rebellion. The

fullness of human potential in sin will be displayed for all to see. His empire will embody the fullness of sin, wickedness, and demonic power. It will trouble the whole earth and every person alive during that time. It seems as if this kingdom will emerge, however, almost by surprise.

## THE RISE OF HARLOT BABYLON: PREPARING THE WAY FOR THE ANTICHRIST

The world at that time already will have begun the transition from what Jesus called “birth pangs” to the next prophetic stage. That process will not have entered the “heavy labor” phase of the Great Tribulation, when the “water will break” and a flood of trouble will come to earth. It will be a far more subtle and dangerous phase of history. The Antichrist will be only a regional leader with growing international prominence. His rise, according to the angelic messenger of Daniel 11:21, will not be immediate. He will come “peaceably” and “seize the kingdom with intrigue.” He will initially be part of the coalition of nations propagating the newfound false peace and safety, but will eventually be given power and honor.

As a result of the newfound worldwide peace and safety, a world religion will emerge in the end times. The Antichrist will begin his rise to power as a key proponent of this religion. According to Revelation 17:3, his early prominence will be tied to this religion in a mysterious way, but he will surely benefit from the network of relational connections and economic prosperity. This same verse says he will allow himself to be the lesser of the two in the relationship for a little while. He will enjoy the way this religion prepares the way for his rise to power by shifting the culture of the world to accommodate his plans. Once this religion has served his purpose, he will turn the tables and destroy it, as we will see in the next chapter.

How will the new religion prepare the way for Antichrist’s rise to power and the emergence of his true nature? This world religion, the “Mystery Babylon” woman described in Revelation 17, will embrace and promote “toleration” and world unity. The unity will come at the expense of all wholehearted and uncompromising expressions of faith, which will be viewed as dangerous and threatening to the peace. This time will be a terrifying and hostile time for passionate believers committed to the truth of God at any cost. The newfound peace will be so tenuous that people will deal brutally with anyone who threatens to disturb it. And though there will be vocal preachers of

the truth who disturb it, it will be dangerous and difficult for believers to remain radical, passionate followers of Jesus. It will seem safer, wiser, and even more loving to embrace the culture of “tolerance.”

Even now, we see hints of this. “Open-mindedness,” which can be defined as accepting everything and anything as true, is tolerated and even encouraged. Yet, there is little tolerance for those who consider the Word of God to be absolutely true. Speaking about God, or a god, or discussing “spirituality” is acceptable to almost everyone. But these “safe” topics have much more to do with a humanistic god defined by the people, rather than the true God of Scripture. Religion has evolved into pleasing and gratifying self. Attaining inner peace, prosperity, contentment, comfort, and happiness, as defined by each individual, is considered the highest goal.

This idea of deciding for oneself what will “work” as far as religion goes, is paving the way for a religion of tolerance that will emerge. At its core, this new religion will hold real promise of wealth and financial blessing. The luxury that enthrones the “harlot” of religion in Revelation 17:4 is a picture of the promise of prosperity the new religion will make. The message of prosperity will please carnal men and women, the “lovers of pleasure” and self that Paul describes in 2 Timothy 3:1–5. Our generation already has those who “heap up for themselves teachers” (2 Timothy 4:3) who will tell us what we want to hear. Anything relating to Christianity that is controversial or uncomfortable is already being set aside and replaced by the “whatever makes you happy is okay” kind of preaching that fills up the pews. It seems wiser and kinder for many to embrace any doctrine or faith and encourage everyone to “find their own way to God.” The acceptance and propagation of this mindset will worsen and the flow of finances will be intoxicating. The words will sound so wise. When the new religion dominates the scene, anyone preaching an alternative message will be met with hostility and persecution. Due to the pressure to conform, many in the Church will fall away from the faith during this season, the season just before the Antichrist reveals his true nature and intentions (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, the Antichrist will have been slowly ascending to power, building his resources and amassing his forces. He will have been making all the necessary alliances and back-door agreements that will propel him into power. Much of the world will have compromised to join this world religion. It will be an easy thing for him to exploit their compromise and entice them to go one step farther and worship him as god.

Ezekiel made a frightening statement about the Antichrist. He said the Antichrist would be “wiser than Daniel” and no secret would be hidden from him (Ezekiel 28:3). What makes this so frightening is that Daniel was said to have been “ten times wiser” than the most brilliant, learned men on earth in his day (Daniel 1:20). That means the Antichrist will be unbelievably wise. His unmatched intellect and mental capacity will propel him to an unprecedented height of power and honor. With his fierce countenance, his grasp of sinister schemes (Daniel 8:23), and his strategic mind, he will outmaneuver anyone who gets in his way, including the kings within his own alliance who might vie for power (Daniel 7:20). He will be the most gifted speaker of his time (Daniel 7:20; Revelation 13:2, 5), and will appear to embody the best humanity has to offer.

When we study the Antichrist, we must not exalt him or build him up with hype or exaggeration. Though he is Satan’s chosen tool, God will be the One allowing him to be raised up so He alone can bring about His plan. God will allow the Antichrist to obtain authority, influence, and power. While Satan will give him authority (Revelation 13:2), and men as well will give him authority (Revelation 13:4), he would have no authority if God did not grant it to him (Revelation 13:7). The rise of the Antichrist will be part of Satan’s plan, but God knows even now exactly what will happen and is already way ahead of Satan. While there are two opposing plans unfolding, there is really only one: God’s plan to bring the Church to maturity and simultaneously give the nations a clear distinction between wickedness and righteousness so they might choose Him. Satan’s plan will result only in his own destruction.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of this chapter stood out to you as truths that you would like to go deeper in?
2. We have now explored four of the main “players” in God’s end-time drama: the Church, Israel, the nations, and Satan. Why does Satan enjoy such a prominent role in God’s end-time plans?
3. How is Satan working now within human hearts and within society and culture to prepare for the fullness of His plans?
4. How concerned should Christians be about the plans and strategies of the enemy? What should Christians be doing about these plans?
5. Why does God give us information in advance about the activities of

Satan at the end of this age?

6. Why will the nations of the earth reject Jesus and ally themselves (to various degrees) with the Antichrist?
7. Is the subject of the Antichrist necessary for Christians to understand? Why or why not?
8. Why would God allow the Antichrist to operate in the manner that the Bible describes?

## THE TWO PLANS UNFOLD

The book of Revelation provides much insight into Satan's actions in the end times, and makes it clear that he is incapable of creating something from nothing. His schemes are wickedly brilliant, but he is no artist. With his limited ability and creativity, Satan is forced to take that which God has created or initiated and counterfeit it. He twists the works of God into enticing imitations to deceive people.

God has created everything to appeal first to our spirit, and as our spirits become more alive in God, His ways become more desirable. We become more tenderhearted and grow in love as we submit to the process God has for our lives. As we come into full obedience and agreement with His Spirit, our hearts are fully knit to His. We have been bought with His blood, the very inheritance the Father gives the Son (Ephesians 1:17–19), and His desire is to see us walk out this living reality. As His purchased possessions, we grow into what Paul called a “bondslave” (Romans 1:1)—slaves of righteousness. Growing in grace, we are willing slaves of His love and voluntary possessions of Christ.

Satan, on the other hand, shapes his counterfeit expressions to appeal to our sinful, carnal natures. What Satan presents is designed to ensnare and deceive, to guide us down a path that leads to hardness, bitterness, and destruction. His goal is for us to become fully given over to darkness and thus open our souls and spirits to possession of another kind—demonic bondage—which renders us helpless against the “flaming arrows” of his purposes (Ephesians 6:16). Over time, as we remain open to evil, we will become fully bound to darkness. Where God desires our voluntary love and relationship, Satan desires involuntary dominance and control.

The reason Satan wants to eliminate the human race is because He wants to eliminate the kingdom of God. God wants to cleanse the world of wickedness and darkness. Satan wants to cleanse the world of all who are part or will be part of God's kingdom. He will work furiously to eliminate all those who oppose him and he seeks to draw everyone else to himself. Satan's desire is to reign on earth forever, and so he will work to create the optimal conditions in

order for his own kingdom to be established on earth, which involves destroying mankind and the kingdom of God. According to Jesus, his agenda is simple: kill, steal, and destroy (John 10:10).

Once the Antichrist has set in place the new religion and begins the mass murder of Jews and Christians (Revelation 12:17), he will entice the nations with economic prosperity and false (demonic) signs and wonders (Revelation 13:13) tied to the new religion. These signs and wonders will be real, but not true, because they will be demonically empowered, not Holy Spirit empowered. They will seem so true, however, that Jesus said they would “deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Matthew 24:24). Out of this, the Antichrist will create a false worship and prayer movement and attempt to force all people to join. What will this false movement look like? Possibly, he will present himself as a “more appealing” god, offering more promise to humanity than God. As we noted earlier, the Antichrist highlighted in Daniel and Revelation is a skilled orator. The preaching ministry of the Antichrist may invite the people of the earth to embark on a journey of making themselves gods. The first stage of the Antichrist’s rise is intrigue; he comes to power in a surprising and unexpected way. The next phase, described in Revelation 13 and 17, is seduction: he seeks to win the hearts of the people to worship him. The final phase, described in Daniel and Revelation, is *domination*. Those who cannot be flattered or seduced will simply be conquered and forced to worship him. Over a three-and-a-half-year period, the Antichrist will consolidate his power base and set the stage for the next phase of Satan’s plan.

## THE DRAMATIC EVENT

At precisely the right moment, the Antichrist will capitalize on the optimal global conditions and act on the true ambitions of his wicked heart. Having worked behind the scenes for years to build his political and military power base, the time will come when he will have no more need for the false religious system. Revelation 17:13 describes this time as being one when ten kings, in alliance with the Antichrist and one another, and having “one mind . . . and they will give their power and authority to the beast.” The leaders will hand over all governmental authority to the one man among them, the Antichrist, who will take over the city of Babylon, its religious and economic resources, and establish a ten-nation empire as the ultimate global power.

When Babylon is taken over, the stage will be almost set for Antichrist’s dramatic event—the “abomination of desolation” (Daniel 9:27; Matthew

24:15)—but there will be just one more event before the abomination of desolation. Satan will be cast down from his heavenly realm and war will break out in heaven (Revelation 12:7). The angel who spoke to Daniel described this event: “At that time Michael shall stand up, the great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people; and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation” (Daniel 12:1). Revelation 12:7–17 says that when Michael, the great archangel who protects Israel, stands up with his angels to fight the “dragon,” (Satan) and his angels, Satan’s forces will not prevail. Not only will his forces lose the fight, but also there will be no “place found for them in heaven any longer.”

One of the Bible’s titles for Satan is “accuser of our brethren” (Revelation 12:10). He has accused believers before their God day and night, even throughout all of history. The story of Job is an example of Satan accusing the brethren before God. Satan accused Job before the Father, and continually reminded God of Job’s unworthiness to inherit the promised kingdom. In Satan’s mind, the “brethren,” the saints of God, are unworthy to hold such a privileged position, so he continues to accuse us night and day until he is cast down. Then his accusations will cease. He will no longer have access to God before His throne, for the testimony of the Lord will be the final word about His Church.

<sup>10</sup>Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. <sup>11</sup>And they [the saints] overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.

<sup>12</sup>Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! (Revelation 12:10–12)

Heaven will rejoice over the Church’s final victory over her greatest enemy and the silencing of his accusations against her. It will be a glorious moment. However, a terrifying dimension is to come. While the heavens rejoice, earth and all its inhabitants will experience a time of terrible woe when Satan is cast down to earth. Scripture says of that time, “For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time” (Revelation 12:12). When Michael stands up (Daniel 12:1), it will signal the beginning of the most troublesome time in history for Israel and for all the nations: the Great Tribulation. Satan will come to earth with new and

heightened expressions of rage. His rage will be born of desperation, the kind of rage a cornered animal feels when it knows its end is near. It will be the most terrible, fearsome and brutal kind of rage. All of Satan's plans to maintain control will be accelerated. He will know his heavenly campaign against the saints has failed, and his last chance to wage war against God will be through the nations. He will attempt to eradicate every Christian and Jew who could potentially receive the kingdom of God (Revelation 12:17).

When Satan comes to earth to wage war, the stage will be set for the final battle. The Antichrist will have stealthily secured his military and political might. He and his allies, the ten kings, will destroy the city of Babylon, seize her economic resources, and move to crush her religious sphere of influence. He will also move to crush the global religious system in order to establish himself as their true God. To legitimize his apparent and deceptive divine nature before the people, Satan will make a chilling decision: he will give the Antichrist his "power, his throne, and great authority" (Revelation 13:2). The Antichrist himself will then have governmental authority over the entire demonic realm and all spiritual power in the kingdom of darkness. It will be then that he reveals his true nature and his unbelievably wicked and deranged beliefs. He will present himself to the world as being God Himself.

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul called the Antichrist "the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4). The Antichrist had partnered with Babylon for years as he rose to power, using her as she used him, but all the while hating her and despising all she represented. The Antichrist will have always believed that he was the true God, the only one worth worshiping. Though deceived, he will see through the false piety of Babylon's self-serving religious system and its innate emptiness. After all, he will reason, if they (Mystery Babylon) aren't worshiping him, who then are they worshiping? This question will cause his contempt for her to grow over the years of their pretended partnership. In the same way, Hitler professed a love for the church in Germany as he attempted to use her influence and wealth to accomplish his goals. Over time, however, his true contempt for the church became evident.

Having always believed he was God, Antichrist will next set out to prove his deity to the world. After he destroys Babylon, he will bring an end to the Jewish temple sacrifices, which will have been restarted in their rebuilt temple in Jerusalem (Daniel 9:27). The Antichrist will have other plans for the

temple, plans involving an unthinkable act of arrogance. He will set up an image of himself in the Holy of Holies and demand that the nations worship it. This event is what Jesus called the “abomination of desolation.”

This image of the Antichrist will appear to be living (Revelation 13:15). The deceived people on earth will make duplicate images of the Antichrist and place them throughout the nations. Each duplicate image will also appear to be alive. The images will speak and somehow cause the deaths of many who refuse to worship the Antichrist. Revelation 13 explains how the Antichrist will gain the authority to make such demands and carry out his evil plan. The apostle John, author of Revelation, saw in a vision what will take place. First, John saw that the Antichrist will be mortally wounded with a traumatic head wound (Revelation 13:3). He will be “wounded by the sword and live” (Revelation 13:14). Though deadly, his wound will be dramatically healed. All will witness this miraculous display of supernatural power, and the event will shock the world. John said the entire world will marvel, and the Antichrist will develop a worldwide following. His fame will be great and his legitimacy as God will be established in the minds of many people. When he goes out to make war among the nations, he will be thought of as an unbeatable enemy (Revelation 13:4), and many will choose to worship him rather than fight against him.

## THE FALSE WORSHIP AND PRAYER MOVEMENT

Satan’s next desperate and twisted move will be to deceive and force millions of people into joining a false worship movement. A second “beast,” the “False Prophet” (Revelation 13:11–18) will orchestrate this movement. He will speak gentle words that mask demonic hatred and will possess “all the authority of the first beast in his presence” (Revelation 13:12). The False Prophet will cause all “the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast,” the Antichrist (Revelation 13:12), and he also will function as a false Holy Spirit in a counterfeit trinity. Satan will play the part of the Father, the Antichrist will appear to be the Son, and the False Prophet will function as the Holy Spirit. Millions will be enticed and deceived into joining this false worship movement. Those who aren’t lured into joining will be pressured to join, with the death penalty for refusing.

Those who willingly join in worshiping the Antichrist will be given a mark (Revelation 13:16–17) that will enable them to participate in the global economic system. This mark will be a counterfeit of the mark of God described

in Revelation 7:3–4 that is given to those who are loyal to Him according to 2 Chronicles 16:9: “For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him.” Another example of the mark of God is described in Ezekiel.

<sup>3</sup>And He called to the man clothed with linen, who had the writer’s inkhorn at his side; <sup>4</sup>and the Lord said to him, “Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it.” (Ezekiel 9:3–4)

God’s seal of divine protection will protect believers when His wrath ultimately breaks out upon the earth. Paul said in his first letter to the Thessalonians that “God did not appoint us to wrath” (1 Thessalonians 5:9). When the wrath of God is poured out on earth in judgment, it will not be directed at believers. It will be directed at the wicked who despise God and His ways. He will place a seal of protection on His own and keep us safe from His wrath. Psalm 91 lays out the principle that we will find safety and refuge in our God during times of trouble. “He shall give His angels charge over you” is the promise of that passage (91:11), and those who set their love upon Him will be delivered, and “set . . . on high.”

There is a difference, however, between the wrath of God which is directed only at the wicked, and the wrath of Satan, which is directed at everyone. Having God’s seal of protection from His wrath doesn’t mean we will not experience hardship, trials, or martyrdom in the end-time tribulation. Finding refuge in the Lord does not mean our lives will be trouble-free or carefree. What it does mean is that during the storms that will come, we can find refuge and safety in Him, knowing that while we experience trouble for a time, our eternal and glorious destiny with Him is certain (2 Corinthians 4:17). In fact, the coming trouble will work eternal glory in us for the age to come. Believers will experience the Great Tribulation because believers will be Satan’s prime targets. So, while we are immune to the wrath of God, God will allow Satan to bring his wrath upon us. God will allow this—not because He is angry with us—but because He loves us. He will use the fire of Satan’s wrath to produce a genuine faith (1 Peter 1:7), which is more precious and eternal than gold.

Satan’s mark will be given to those who willingly and wholeheartedly worship the Antichrist. It will be a seal of approval not easily obtained. Nobody will accidentally acquire this mark. It will only be given to those who

choose to bow down in worship and pledge allegiance with exclusive loyalty to the Antichrist. This mark will be a type of passport for its recipients, giving them access to all kinds of privileges and opportunities in the Antichrist's kingdom, as well as other territories under his influence. Buying and selling without this mark will be difficult. The marks of both God and Satan will be "loyalty marks," to clearly delineate which side people have chosen. It will remove ambiguity and grey areas of lukewarm, non-committal lifestyles. Both sides want radical commitment and the elimination of all middle-of-the-road compromisers.

The faith of the saints will be tested, as we wonder where our provision will come from, and we will have to trust God for more than ever. Much will be at stake in that time, and anyone who buckles under the pressure and worships the "beast" in order to receive the short-term benefits, will "drink of the wine of the wrath of God" in the fullness of its strength (Revelation 14:10).

The wrath of God will be great against those who compromise, take the mark, and worship the beast, because the choice to do so will be an intentional and deliberate one. Proving loyalty to the Antichrist by taking the mark will not be a minor decision. People will have to fully convert and commit to follow the Antichrist before they will be given the mark. The pressure to make this decision will be intense, but not impossible to resist.

Resistance to the Antichrist will be punishable by death, and many believers will be martyred as the result of their resistance. The conditions for this wave of martyrdom will have been established during the first phase of Satan's plan, the new and false world religion. Through its deceptive and sinister ministry, the world religion will have established a global culture of martyrdom, and thus have paved the way for increased levels of martyrdom to be socially and culturally acceptable. After the Antichrist reveals his true nature and proclaims that he is God, the groundwork laid over the previous three-and-a-half years will facilitate this widespread martyrdom during the next few years. The persecution and martyrdom of believers will be more extreme and pervasive than ever before.

The Bible reveals what is, perhaps, the most shocking and difficult point of all: everything the Antichrist accomplishes will be allowed by God. God will always be in control. Chapter 4 of Revelation is meant to establish and reiterate that it is God who is in command of the past, the present, and the future. The throne and might of Satan are nothing compared to the matchless splendor of the mighty King. The next move will be God's. He will have been

watching and waiting as Satan's plan seems to prevail. However, the trap will already be set, and the conditions for God's ultimate victory will be in place. Revelation 5 describes what will happen next. God will be ready to hand over the dominion and leadership of the world to His worthy Son, the only human King worthy to receive it. The catalyst for this moment will be the readiness of the Church to stand with Jesus as He receives the world from His Father. As Satan conceived and carried out his plan, God will have secretly unfolded His. Having known a time of martyrdom on an unimaginable scale would come, God will have set out beforehand to ready His Church for that hour. What many would call the darkest hour in Church history has been ordained by God to be her finest.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of this chapter stood out to you as truths that you would like to go deeper in?
2. At this stage, it would be helpful to recommend a deeper study of the book of Daniel and two very helpful resources: *The Islamic Antichrist: the Shocking Truth About the Real Nature of the Beast*, by Joel Richardson; and *The Antichrist*, by A. W. Pink. In studying the book of Daniel, I recommend the *New American Commentary*, by Steven B. Miller.
3. There is neither the time nor the space to explore the implications of an Islamic Antichrist in this book. If the Bible describes the Antichrist as emerging from out of the Middle East, would he then have to emerge from within Islam as well?
4. How is the storyline of the end times impacted by the Antichrist, and why must such a figure emerge?
5. Why would God empower and allow the Church to be persecuted, and the nations to be dominated, by one with such power and authority as the Antichrist?
6. How can Christians avoid potential offense at God related to His allowance of such evil to be unleashed upon the earth?
7. How is God going to use the emergence, rise, and power of the Antichrist to serve the Church and turn all things for good (Romans 8:28)?

# 10

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE VICTORIOUS CHURCH

While the crowning of the Antichrist as king—followed by His claim of divinity—will be dramatic and significant, an even more dramatic event will take place in the throne room of heaven. God will give His Son a scroll (Revelation 5:1–10). This event will be so momentous that the angels around the throne of God will break into a new song. The angels have sung a song of praise to the King for an untold amount of time, night and day; but a new song will break out—a powerful, glorious song that marks a turning point in the course of heaven and earth’s history. This new song will mark the beginning of a sequence of events that will culminate in the return of Jesus to earth and the full establishment of His kingdom.

This celebration of the angels is one in which we will eventually participate and enjoy forever. Imagine ten thousand times ten thousand angels with “thousands of thousands” more (Daniel 7:10), singing with thunderous voices more beautiful than those of the best choirs on earth. The angels will rejoice and revel in that moment, because they know what glory is in store for the saints. God gives us this chapter of the Bible to calm and reassure our fearful hearts, reminding us that His plan is perfect. He knows the whole story, including the Antichrist’s claim to be God, and He is untroubled by Satan’s doomed plan.

### THE END-TIME GLOBAL WORSHIP MOVEMENT

The scroll God will present to Jesus represents God’s leadership over history, and it is the “title deed” to earth. It will contain God’s plan to bring mankind’s current earthly existence to a close and usher in the age to come (Revelation 5:1–14). We understand this because of events described in the following chapters of Revelation. The scroll will have remained in God’s hands until someone was found worthy to take it. As the only One found worthy, Jesus will take the scroll, break its seals, and reveal its contents.

As Jesus comes forward to take the scroll, the book of Revelation describes a dramatic shift and much movement in the heavenly court. As He takes hold of the scroll, the final moments of this age will begin. God's preparation of His people for the ultimate confrontation with wicked nations and powers will be coming to a crescendo. Behind the scenes, as Satan has gone about his business, God will have been preparing His people to participate in a historic overthrow of the powers of darkness and oppression, to take over the governments of the world, and to function in meekness and humility as kings and priests. God's "secret weapon," an authentic worship and prayer movement, will be unleashed on the kingdom of darkness. With one accord, the Church will praise His ways, releasing the activity of the Holy Spirit in historic pathways through intercession. The unveiling of Jesus' singing, praying Bride will surprise the nations and dismay the evil one, Satan.

This historic shift will begin with the release of the new song of the Lord in heaven and earth mentioned earlier. There are many verses in the Bible describing this new song. It will not be a new sound, or new music. It will be worship that explodes from the mouths of His witnesses in heaven and from the hearts of believers across the earth—worship that will express and declare God's glorious new activity on earth. As this new expression of God's heart is released from heaven to earth, the Church will sing in agreement.

Isaiah 42:10 and verses 12–13 give a preview:

<sup>11</sup>Sing to the Lord a new song, and His praise from the ends of the earth. . . . <sup>12</sup>Let them give glory to the Lord, and declare His praise in the coastlands. <sup>13</sup>The Lord shall go forth like a mighty . . . man of war; He shall cry out, yes, shout aloud; He shall prevail against His enemies.

Malachi 1:11 tells us that "incense," or worship, arising from every nation and people group of the earth, will explode globally in the last days. These passages represent one of the most beautiful and clear pictures given us in Scripture to display the imminent, mature love of the Church before Jesus second coming: a song of unified, confident adoration and delight in the leadership of Jesus that explodes with joy worldwide. Believers everywhere, in some of the most difficult circumstances imaginable, will exude joyful praise, singing their glorious song of love for Jesus. (Isaiah 24:1–16)

Prophetic singing has always been one of God's most powerful weapons. He uses it to release His power on earth, and will use it as such in the end times. The power of prophetic singing is not only found in the songs

themselves, but in the way they knit our hearts with the heart of God and facilitate unity among believers. As the new song at the end of the age breaks forth, believers will share God's heart and be unified with one another. We will sing in agreement and praise for Jesus' role as Judge, preparing to loose judgments upon earth. The end-time church will be led by prophetic singers, singing in concert with the Holy Spirit about the coming judgments of the Lord. It will be in full agreement with His methodology and leadership, and will, in essence, passionately bring together the theme: "We agree with who You are, O Judge of the earth!"

Even now, God is orchestrating a new level of worship and prayer to unite His people with His heart and with our fellow believers. This unity will be directly related to the new level of power He will release in order to usher in a great harvest of souls and the second coming of His Son. Having anointed prophetic singers who are sensitive to the Holy Spirit and skilled in engaging and emboldening a body of believers will be a crucial element for the fulfillment of God's plan.

## THE END-TIME GLOBAL PRAYER MOVEMENT

Just as the victorious church at the end of the age will be a singing church, it will also be a praying church. It is just as important for the end-time church to be fully committed to a lifestyle of prayer and fasting as it is for it to be engaged in prophetic worship. Right now, God is initiating such a prayer and fasting movement in the worldwide Body of Christ. Prayer and song are the two main vehicles by which God is molding and shaping our hearts into agreement with Him. The full bowls of Revelation 5:8 speak of the prayers of the saints. As we pray, those bowls are capturing each and every prayer. When they are full, the Church will have matured as a praying Bride. The book of Revelation gives us another astonishing picture of these prayers: believers in heaven and on earth fully united in a global concert of prayer, orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, and led by Jesus Himself (Revelation 8:1-5).

"The Spirit and the Bride say, come!" (Revelation 22:17), shows us what is on the mind of the Father: the Holy Spirit and the Bride of Christ are speaking with one voice, fully given to the timing, plans, and desire of the Lord. This prayer, today and in that day, is one of great power and authority because it expresses the Body of Christ in unity within *and* with the Holy Spirit. This prayer represents more than a tidy end to the canon of Scripture; it represents the hope of every believer that the One who began a good work in His Bride

will be faithful to complete it before His coming (Philippians 1:6).

What good work will Jesus complete? What will the Church look like when the Lord returns to the earth? Most scholars and theologians throughout church history believed that the Church would come into complete maturity and fullness before the second coming, through a steady process of growing and increasing in righteousness and unity. In other words, most have believed that Jesus would return for a glorious Church without spot or wrinkle, holy and without “blemish” (Ephesians 5:27). Prayer not only will transform us into the spotless Church; it is also the way God has chosen to transform the world.

God established prayer to draw people to Him and bring them into agreement with His heart. He intends for human beings to partner with Him in serving, leading, and administering world affairs through prayer. God has chosen intercession as the primary means to release His government both in His relationship with Jesus and with His people now and forever. The majesty and mystery of intercession is seen foremost in Jesus’ relationship with His Father:

<sup>25</sup>Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since *He always lives to make intercession* for them. (Hebrews 7:25)

<sup>34</sup>. . . Christ . . . at the right hand of God, *who also makes intercession for us*. (Romans 8:34)

The mystery of intercession is the simplicity of what God has ordained—we tell God what He tells us to tell Him, which releases more of His power. The majesty of intercession is the power God releases from prayer: Jesus intercedes to establish and govern the world under God’s authority. He plans on using prayer to invite the entire earth to Him. In the end times, He will use prayer to unify and purify the Church; the unified, purified Church will extend this invitation globally through a worldwide prayer movement just before the second coming.

Prayer ignites deep internal transformation and fervent agreement with God. As we say God’s words back to Him, we move from disagreement, doubt, fear, and unbelief into a bold lifestyle fueled by trusting God and understanding what He cares about. Paul wrote to the Philippian church about his confidence in the Lord to complete the work that He had begun in them (Philippians 1:6). Yet, he still prayed that their love would grow and “abound” in knowledge and

all discernment; that their hearts would desire the excellent things of God. He also prayed that they would be filled with the fruits of righteousness, enabling them to press on with sincerity and confidence in God and His leadership (Philippians 1:9–11).

Though he was confident in God’s commitment to finish the work that he started in them, Paul still prayed that God’s work would take root in their lives. He calls them to do their part in working out their salvation “*with fear and trembling*” through obedience (Philippians 2:12). God, by grace, was working within them to establish His will and produce fruits of righteousness flowing out of them according to His good pleasure. It brought delight to the Father to transform them by His grace. They were obligated to participate with that grace in order to obey (mostly by holding their tongues) and “hold fast to the word of life” (Philippians 2:16). The goal of this transforming work was that they would have the mind of Christ and thus glorify Him (Philippians 2:5, 10–11). The fruit of having the mind of Christ—being like Him and in agreement with Him—was that they would also be in agreement and unity with one another:

<sup>1</sup>Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, <sup>2</sup>fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. (Philippians 2:1–2)

How would they come into this place of agreement and obedience? How could they work out their salvation with fear and trembling before the Lord? Paul gives them the way to move forward, to go higher and deeper in the things of God, later in his letter:

<sup>6</sup>Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; <sup>7</sup>and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. (Philippians 4:6–8)

Paul, in essence, gives this list of “excellent things” that he longs for them to be

able to discern. These would serve to aid their transformation in the fruits of righteousness. As he prays for them to become spiritually-minded, he prays that they would be able to identify and delight in the things of the Lord and His grace that are noble, pure, lovely, and so forth. The changing of our minds by grace happens during the process of God's grace, and by this we begin to love what He loves and hate what He hates.

Once we can discern and delight in the things of God over time, we are called to "meditate" on the things that He has revealed to us. The whole process Paul described summarizes a life of prayer and supplication. According to the *Oxford American Dictionary*, *supplication* means, "to ask or beg for something earnestly or humbly." As we give ourselves to a continual lifestyle of prayer and earnest asking, we actually will receive the "peace of God" that will guard our hearts and minds from offense toward Him. This is what Paul prayed for at the beginning of the letter; now he is inviting them into the lifestyle that actuates what the Lord wants to work within them.

This process of internal transformation is also one that leads into agreement with God. As we discern the things that are excellent, we grow in our approval of them as well. We will delight in what is right and just, love what is lovely and pure, and be drawn to the things that God approves of and establishes. The process of God's leadership and His prescribed lifestyle will seem a noble thing to aspire to and follow. The words and commands of God in Scripture that initially confused us, frustrated us, or seemed out of reach will—as we give ourselves to a life of prayer—ignite our hearts with vision, purpose, and direction. As our minds become renewed and our hearts become tender to the commands of the Lord, our lives will begin to transform into a reflection of His will and pleasure in us. This is why Paul exhorted us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). He was calling all believers to a continual dialogue with Jesus empowered by deep fellowship and communion with the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14).

Thus, every believer throughout church history has been given an invitation by God to live a life of prayer, fasting, and meditation on Scripture. These patterns were established by God to bring us into deep changes of heart and mind that knit us to His will and desires. As we give ourselves to His prescribed lifestyle, we actively participate with His grace working within us to accomplish deep transformation. In our day, there is a great stirring by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers everywhere to pray. Over the last decade I have observed a subtle awakening in the Church to the Holy Spirit's

invitation for this hour that “men always ought to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

The picture the Father gave us of an end-time church praying in unity and living in agreement with God is one that we are beginning to see emerge. This prayer movement has been alive and active throughout the seasons of redemptive history, with lulls and dormancy when His people disconnected from the place of prayer. Prayer, a key vehicle of personal transformation, is regaining a prominent place in God’s people again because the Lord desires a pure and spotless Bride at His coming. The process of bringing them into this internal reality involves unceasing prayer. Thus, the current stirring of the Church to pray is an early glimpse into the coming worldwide prayer movement. The re-emergence of prayer and fasting in the Church is a significant sign of the times in which we live. That which God is awakening in individual believers is also shifting toward corporate expressions that are multiplying around the globe.

This maturing process in His Church is birthed in the early stages of His final plan, during His purifying shaking before the Great Tribulation. The Church will be mature and prepared before the Antichrist becomes a powerful global dictator. Before the Antichrist sets himself in place, the Church will emerge as a unified, fiery, and mature body of believers. The world will witness an expression of Christianity radically different from what we know today. It is part of Jesus’ strategy to lead His Bride through testing at the hands of those who seek to destroy her: the false trinity of Satan, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet. This radically different expression of Christianity will only come about as a result of the Bride’s testing and victory during this time. It will be God orchestrating the cosmic drama, and He will know there are real lives in the balance. As a jealous, fiery God, He will do whatever He must to present His Son with a worthy, equally-yoked Bride to enjoy forever. Sadly, many will fall away and fail the test. Many will not like His leadership and reject Him. Those who do not, however, will receive great reward at the second coming of Jesus.

## JUDGMENT BEGINS IN GOD’S HOUSE

Before judgment comes to the nations of the earth, it will come to the house of the Lord, the Church. Referring to the Church, Peter warned, “it begins with us first” (1 Peter 4:17). The Lamb of God, Jesus, will be in full agreement and partnership with His Father as He initiates His final judgment. Before He

shakes earth, He will shake the Church, shaking all that can be shaken (Hebrews 12:25–29; Haggai 2:6–7). The Church will be tried and tested at the hands of the “counterfeit bride,” the new mystery religion of false peace and prosperity described in Revelation 17. Everyone in the Church will be forced to choose which “bride” they will give themselves to. They will have two choices: the Bride of Christ, the body of believers aligned with God; or the counterfeit bride, the body of people given to the global, compromised religion based on false promises of peace, safety, and personal happiness.

God will shake every dimension of our earthly existence with His judgments. His hope and desire is for all people to turn to the “Desire of All Nations” (Haggai 2:7). In that hour He will “speak from heaven” (Hebrews 12:25) and we must not refuse Him. He wants to shake all that can be shaken to remove from us anything that might hinder our love for Him. He wants to purify us. We must be unshakable in order to receive His kingdom, a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:27). God is a “consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29), who will move jealously to purify believers in that hour (Daniel 11:35; 12:10). The saints will be refined and made white, spotless in His sight, and fit to rule with Him (Ephesians 5:26–27). God will sanctify and cleanse His Bride with the water of the Word, “that He might present her to Himself a glorious church” (Ephesians 5:27).

Believers who take offense at God and His plan, those who have “shakable” lives, will fall away (Matthew 24:10–12; 2 Thessalonians 2:3). False prophets will deceive many and God Himself will release a strong delusion as many unrepentantly buy into Satan’s deception (2 Thessalonians 2:11). Believers who stand fast will be viewed as disruptive influences, targeted for elimination, and martyred by political regimes eager to maintain the tenuous peace of the day (Revelation 17:6). Rather than hindering the quickly-maturing global prayer movement, however, the increase in martyrdom will add fuel to its fire and stir the saints to cry for His justice (Revelation 6:9–11). When the trials of global disapproval and martyrdom hit the Church, there will be two choices for believers and two reactions among believers. Some will leave and some will pray. The great “falling away” from the faith Paul described in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 will be the result of God’s shaking the Church. Anyone who is shaken into offense and bitterness toward God will leave. Those who trust His goodness will pray. When those who are offended refuse to pray and turn from the Lord, the prayer movement will come into full maturity, power, and authority.

God's prayer movement will be the secret to the Church's strength in the final hours of history. The Lord is inviting this generation—our generation—to enter into a lifestyle of prayer and intercession now. In His wisdom, God has ordained prayer and intimacy with Him to be the best way to prepare us with the spiritual strength and humility to endure the storms of life. Those who are diligent in prayer and intercession today, and who become intimate with God as a result, will be among those best equipped to handle the pressures of the coming shaking. God never intended prayer to be only a value, but a lifestyle. Engaging in continual prayer and fasting means embracing a way of life before the Lord that challenges everything in us. Such a lifestyle presses our sensibilities to their limits. When we fully embrace this lifestyle, however, God brings about a significant and glorious transformation in our hearts. When His Church corporately embraces and approaches prayer as a lifestyle rather than a meeting, she will begin to take significant steps toward her ultimate destiny—partnering with God to shape history, affect the spiritual atmosphere, and influence nations.

The judgment coming to the Church will ready her to face the end times. Through it, God will use the Body of Christ as a fiery, powerful, clarion voice in an hour of greatest darkness. When the events of the end times are shaking the earth, God will use the Church to present a chaotic world with an alternative to wickedness and darkness. Through the Church, He will make a way for others to join His stable, steady, unshakable Bride, filled with thriving believers in love with Him. Though many in the Church will be slain, they will die victoriously with lovesick, fiery hearts. Their witness will astonish nations.

In its current state of powerlessness and compromise, the Church offers but a weak witness to the nations on behalf of God, virtually indistinguishable from other godless organizations in the world. As the Church's leader, Jesus is fully committed to changing this. He will ensure that the Church emerges from her great testing against the world's false religion as a true representative of Him and His heart. The Church will come forth as a fiery Bride, opposing the Antichrist and his forces with boldness and confidence, having unprecedented authority. The boldness, confidence, and authority will be a result of her prayer and intimacy with Jesus.

## THE BRIDE'S DESTINY: AUTHORITY IN LOVE

The desire of Jesus' heart is to see His Bride come forth at the end of the age

loving and trusting Him totally, leaning upon her Beloved (Song of Songs 8:5). In order for this to happen, we must aggressively depend on Him now and enter into abandonment to Him at the highest level. We must wholeheartedly accept His agenda and leadership. To abandon ourselves to Jesus, we must voluntarily embrace our weakness. He wants us to wholly trust Him for all of our provision, wisdom, desires, and sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30–31). Our destiny is to find our glory in Him alone, not in our gifting, strengths, or riches (Jeremiah 9:23; 1 Corinthians 1:31; Philippians 3:3). When she is mature, the Church will no longer have any confidence in or ties to the things of the world, but will have total confidence in Jesus and the things of God.

We are by nature full of pride. Our pride moves us to assert ourselves and operate in a spirit of independence. In His mercy and loving-kindness, God removes our pride by His various shakings and chastisements. He moves with jealous zeal to eliminate our desires to find comfort and contentment according to our own wills. He knows our sinful nature causes us to despise weakness and lean on anything and anyone other than God to find comfort when we are distressed. Even in times of prosperity and blessing, we often give up our dependency on God. We become intoxicated with our own importance and gratified by our own achievements. Thus we are easily knocked off course.

In His kindness and as a protective mechanism, God is currently withholding the awesome power He will give His Church in the end times. He will restrain it until He has dealt with our pride and prepared us to properly exercise the power we will receive. We will not be earning our blessing and anointing as we submit to Him in obedience, but allowing Him to equip us to manage our coming authority. Authentic humility developed in us by God through His grace will position us to walk in true authority. Authentic humility rightly exalts Jesus at all times, in blessing as well as in trial. As we come together in corporate prayer and worship, we will be forced to deal with one another and face our wrongful attitudes, agendas, and pride. As we do, we will develop meekness—the dominant characteristic of the coming victorious Church.

Only when our eyes are off of ourselves and on Jesus will we enjoy a love for Him that is authentic and mature. The Church will call Jesus her Beloved because she will be burning with an unquenchable, unmovable, and unshakable love for Him. This love will not quit or fail in the face of the greatest pressures. The lovesick Bride will not be undone by religious attitudes of shame, fear, and guilt.

Psalm 36:8–9 promises that the end-time church will thrive in her love for Jesus. As she drinks from the river of His pleasures, she is abundantly satisfied with the fullness of His house. In other words, all of the supernatural reality of the heavenly realm will be available—coming alive in the inner man of every believer in an entirely unprecedented way at that time. God will provide, according to Ephesians 3:16, supernatural might on the inner man for all those who ask Him for it. By grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, God will increase the deep inner fire of love for God in the hearts of men and women. David described this as a “river of pleasure” (Psalm 36:8), picturing a heart like a river that flows with tenderness, deep inner joy, and satisfaction. It is significant that David wrote this Psalm as he faced an enemy more wicked than any man before him had faced. God has one answer for believers facing an evil foe—cultivate hearts and minds alive in love and satisfied by Jesus alone. Such hearts will be unfazed by earthly pressures, even those brought by the Antichrist. Having intimacy with Jesus will empower the Church to serve and rejoice, even amidst the outpouring of God’s great wrath (Psalm 2:11–12).

Those who have spent their lives sowing in prayer and cultivating intimacy with Jesus will reap great rewards (Galatians 6:7). The Bride will begin walking with more authority in prayer. While individuals have touched such dimensions of authority in prayer, the corporate Church has never operated at the level of power and authority that she will operate in during that time. It will be an authority that moves angels and demons, shifts the heavenly realms, and brings entire governments into the will of God. When the Church is walking in humility and meekness, operating in power and authority, God will move forward.

## A CHANGE IN THE EXPRESSION OF CHRISTIANITY

God will bring massive transformation to earth. He will fundamentally change the expression of Christianity. The Church is not taken seriously now, but God will restore the Church to her rightful place. He will express Himself through His Bride in a way that will cause the nations to tremble. We know from Acts 5:11–14 that the early church operated in signs and wonders: “So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things. And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all in one accord in Solomon’s Porch. Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.”

This kind of response to the Church will come again. The victorious Church will be a conduit of heavenly power that moves the nations. In the process, people will consider the anointing on the Church, and the radical lifestyles of believers will challenge worldly value systems and mindsets. Others will wonder if Christianity really is the better way to live. They will wonder if the Bible really might be true. As they consider these possibilities, they will begin to wonder what it all means for them.

The new expression of Christianity will also change in terms of the Church's corporate lifestyle. As believers come into unity and operate in power and authority, people will be unsure of how to relate to an entity with so much power. As the Church under the leadership of Jesus releases judgments, people will begin to take the Church seriously again. The Bride's authority will engender esteem, godly fear, and trembling in many. It will provoke anger, rage, and contempt from others. Whatever their response, people will cease to be indifferent toward the Church when judgments are released. They will be either for or against her, and therefore for or against God.

As the worldwide prayer movement matures, the Lord also will release anointing on His people to do the "greater works" promised by Jesus in John 14:12–14. Moses initiated and halted plagues according to his God-given authority. Elijah and Elisha parted waters, purified waters, raised the dead, out-maneuvered and defeated massive armies, initiated long droughts, multiplied food (2 Kgs. 4:42–44), called down fire from heaven, and slew evil prophets. The apostles also moved in signs and wonders with "great power" (Acts 4:33) as a witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

The Church's anointing and power, however, will exceed that of any period in history. This massive increase will be necessary to counter the deception of the Antichrist and the False Prophet. The Antichrist will deceive many with "all power, signs, and lying wonders" (2 Thessalonians 2:9). The False Prophet will perform "great signs," including calling fire down from heaven, to deceive people and bring glory to Satan (Revelation 13:13–14). However, the Church in that hour will be given an expression of the power in the Holy Spirit far superior to all other powers. The Church's power will far exceed, in both glory and might, the power of the Antichrist and the False Prophet. God's power will be unmatched, just as in the days of Moses when Pharaoh's magicians were ultimately unable to match His power (Exodus 8:18–19). Throughout the world, a victorious Church will reap a great harvest of souls for Jesus by demonstrating the true power of His holiness (Revelation 14:14–

15).

God will also send what the Bible calls “two witnesses” to lead the Church. He will give them incredible, unprecedented power, and they will oppose the Antichrist in Jerusalem (Revelation 11). Zechariah prophesied of these two “anointed ones” thousands of years ago (Zechariah 4:1–14). John described their ministry as a combination of Moses and Elijah. They will initiate plagues and call down fire from heaven. They will stop the rains and turn water into blood. They will be able to perform signs and wonders “as often as they desire” (Revelation 11:6). No one will be able to harm them for three-and-a-half years.

These two witnesses are a picture of the anointing that will be upon the entire Body of Christ in that time. While the rest of the Church will not operate in power to the degree that the two witnesses do, believers will have a more powerful anointing than ever before, and they will bear witness to the nations about the coming kingdom of God. The huge measure of power given to the witnesses will be directly proportionate to their assignment from heaven and their geographic location. They will oppose the Antichrist in the Jerusalem temple. They will declare the “gospel of the kingdom” and pronounce the coming of the true King to earth. There will be other witnesses, or prophetic messengers and preachers of truth, who will preach this gospel worldwide to every nation. God is calling many, even in this hour, to proclaim the “gospel of the kingdom . . . as a witness to all nations” (Matthew 24:14).

The stage for all of this will have been set when Jesus receives the scroll, the “title deed” to the earth. Satan will have had control of the earth until this time. When Jesus takes the scroll, it will signify the nearness of His second coming. As the rightful owner of earth, He will return and claim what is His. He will take possession of His territory.

The prayers of the saints will have filled the bowls (Revelation 5:8) and the Church will be ready for Jesus to proceed. Neither He nor the Father will begin the final phase prematurely. If they were to initiate the Great Tribulation too early, many would be lost. Once Jesus has the scroll, He will open it, and as He does, He will break the seven seals on the outside of it. His breaking of these seven seals will initiate the events that shake earth and pave the way for His imminent return.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of this chapter stood out to you as truths that you would like to go deeper in?
2. Why is singing such a surprising, yet dynamic, part of God's end-time plan for the Church to walk in victory over powers of darkness?
3. Second Chronicles 20 tells the story of Jehoshaphat and his army of Israelites in their struggle to overcome a "great multitude" of Moabites and Ammonites who were marching against them. They sing and praise with great confidence, and the Lord moves powerfully on their behalf to win the day. As you study this passage, why was singing and praising such a powerful part of their victory? Does this passage have any relevance for the days to come and the final battles awaiting God's people before Jesus returns?
4. Why does God use prayer as His primary means of running His government and partnering with human beings?
5. How does prayer help draw us into deeper relationship and agreement with God and His leadership?
6. How does prayer help us participate in the bigger picture of God's plans globally?
7. How do worship and prayer work together with the Bible and the leadership of the Church to help bring all believers into maturity and authority in love and ministry?
8. What does God's way and plan related to prayer and His Church reveal about the dignity and value that every believer possesses in Christ?
9. The Lord uses *positive* things to bring the Church into mature love (i.e. prayer, singing, the Scriptures, sound leadership, all empowered by grace); why does He also have to use *negative* things to help the Church come into maturity (i.e. shaking, trouble, pruning, chastening)?
10. How have both the *positive* and the *negative* aspects of God's maturing and growth process worked for your own heart and life in God?

## THE END OF THE LONG NIGHT

Once Jesus has received the scroll from His Father (Revelation 5), the first thing He will do is give the nations what they truly desire. According to Psalm 2:1–3, the coalition of nations will have fought to have its own way and its own king. The nations will rage against God and reject Him. They will desire their own rule of law—one with no biblical morality. When they reject God, He will give them over to their selfish desires.

It has always been the way of God to give people over to their desires, whether those desires are good and godly or bad and ungodly. This works for our good when we “ask, seek, and knock” in pursuit of knowing Jesus. He will give us more of Him. But if we seek and choose to reject Him and His ways, He also will give us what we want: He will give us over to ourselves and let us go our own way. It is a principle of God that His judgment is to “give them up” to the lust of their hearts (Romans 1:24). Those who persist in pursuing darkness will be eventually “given over” to their debased minds (Romans 1:28). The frightening aspect of this principle is that ultimately, if people persist in their rebellion, God will “give them up” to the everlasting fire. If their deepest desire is to be separated from Him, God will allow them to be separated from Him for all eternity.

This principle will hold true in the end times as well. In the same manner God gives all of us over to our desires, whether good or evil, He will give the nations over to their desire to be without Him. God’s wrath at this time will be global and terrible. As the nations exercise their freedom to do what is in their hearts, earth will experience horrific chaos and upset. As God removes all restraint on a global scale, people will finally have permission to establish evil laws that seem logical and right to their carnal minds. This will be the practical expression of the “fullness of the transgressors” described in Daniel 8:23.

The first thing the nations will receive from heaven as a result of God giving them over to their own desires will be Satan himself. Satan will be cast down to earth and he will be full of rage. The second thing the nations will receive is the king they want. This king will be the Antichrist, the “man of sin”

(2 Thessalonians 2:3).

This situation will be similar to what happened in Israel thousands of years ago. The King in heaven ruled the nation of Israel, but in a blatant rejection of God, the Israelites petitioned the prophet Samuel for an earthly king. They asked for a king to govern them “like all the nations” (1 Samuel 8:5). In His kindness, God sent Samuel to the Israelites with a warning because He wanted to change their hearts and convince them to stop asking for a king “like all the nations.” God had His own man in mind, King David, whom He was grooming to be a great, wise, just, and kind king. God had selected David as the king to establish His government around a tabernacle filled with singers and musicians praying and worshipping God night and day. God wanted to show the nations a different way to do government.

Despite God’s warning, Israel persisted in asking for an earthly king according to their own timing, rather than trusting God and His timing. So God “gave them up” to their own desires, and gave them King Saul. Saul was indeed just like every other king on earth. He was insecure, jealous, murderous, and stubbornly independent. He saw God only as a means through which he could establish his own power base. Saul ended up insane and demonized. God gave Israel what she had asked, a king like the kings of other nations, but King Saul was hardly a blessing—He was a prototype of the Antichrist.

## JESUS BREAKS THE SEVEN SEALS

God will once again give the nations of earth over to their evil desires and allow the Antichrist to be their king. He will then go forth “conquering and to conquer” (Revelation 6:2) as the result of Jesus breaking the first seal on the scroll He receives from the Father. At the breaking of this first seal, God also will grant Jesus permission to move ahead in the release of fearsome judgment on the world. The nations will have the Antichrist as the king they wanted, and he will then conquer earth.

The rise of the Antichrist will also be a result of his declaring himself to be God and placing his image in the Jerusalem temple. As the first seal is broken, the Antichrist will demand that all people worship him as God and then follow up with enforcement of his command. This enforcement will be at first a bloodless conquest (Revelation 6:2) but will soon become a full-scale global war. When Jesus breaks the second seal, the false peace earth will have known for three-and-a-half years will be suddenly and viciously snatched away.

When Jesus breaks the third seal, a world war waged by the Antichrist will lead to global famine. When Jesus breaks the fourth seal, one-fourth of all people on earth will die as a result of battle, hunger, disease, and wild animals. It is important to note that the early phases of God's judgment on the nations will serve to demonstrate the true potential of men and women to cause their fellow human beings trauma, pain, and suffering. It will shatter any illusions that many people have today in believing that humanity is basically good and that it has the potential to accomplish good things apart from God.

The Church will be swept into this dramatic shift in the global climate. Many will be martyred as the rage of Satan is expressed through angry, hostile men and women. Satan will initiate genocide of Christians and Jews, and thereby seal his own doom. The prayer movement God has been cultivating for thousands of years will be mature (Revelation 5:8), and as the judgments break out and Satan orchestrates worldwide slaughter of the saints, God's underground prayer movement will burst forth, responding with higher levels of prayer than ever before. Not only will increased martyrdom fuel increased prayer, it will propel the prayer movement and the Church into a whole new realm of authority and power. The Church will participate via intercessory prayer in the Lord's release of judgments on earth. As she does, she will become the chief foe of the Antichrist, and the focus of his hatred. Then the fifth seal will be opened.

The fifth seal's breaking will be more severe than the first four because it will loose on earth a judgment more fierce and terrifying to unbelievers than the first four. God's prayer movement will evoke the fierceness of God's wrath against those martyring the saints, and His judgment will bring torment and death to those who oppose God. The Church will have a Psalm 149 authority in prayer for judgment. This authority, as in the case of the two witnesses, will release God's fire from heaven (Revelation 8:3-4). The people of earth will tremble at the prayers of the saints as the result. As promised in Luke 18:7-8, God will bring speedy judgment on those who persecute the saints to vindicate His reputation and His people.

Revelation 6:9-10 describes the golden altar of incense in heaven, under which reside the believers slain because they would not back down from their testimony. These saints' intercessions will arise to the throne, as they cry, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Their intercession will stir God's heart to act in a new, more direct way in His wrath expressed toward unrighteous, ungodly

people. Up to this point, His judgments will have been fierce but indirect. He will have allowed people the freedom to devour one another in their rage. Now, God will be stirred with zeal for His beloved people and will move in a direct and fearsome way against the Antichrist's kingdom and all who stand with him. With the breaking of the sixth seal, He will bring extraordinary cosmic disturbances. The sky will roll back like a scroll and every land formation will be shifted.

Then Jesus will break the seventh and final seal, the most powerful of all, and it will initiate the sounding of seven trumpets (Revelation 8:2). Seven angels standing before God will each be commissioned, properly positioned, and given one of the seven trumpets. There will then be a chilling but glorious silence in heaven, as all present anticipate the full release of God's judgments. The angels will be overwhelmed as all heaven awaits God's initiation of climactic events that will end this age. The sudden silence in heaven will be all the more chilling when juxtaposed against the horrifying sounds that accompany the breaking of the seals. As these seals were broken, John describes hearing voices like thunder, intercessory cries, and cries of terror from the kings of earth. But during the ensuing half-hour-long silence, he wrote that he heard absolutely nothing. The significance and dread of that silence is hard for us to even imagine.

## THE SOUNDING OF THE SEVEN TRUMPETS

The sounding of the seven trumpets and the judgments they usher in will be in response to and a reflection of the saints' prayers. They bring a mixture of mercy and vindication because the saints will have prayed for God to release judgment on their persecutors, but also that people would repent. These trumpet judgments serve three purposes: they will bring judgment on the enemies of the saints, warning to the lost that Jesus' arrival is imminent, and inevitable victory to God's people. The saints' victory will come as a result of true spiritual warfare, with all its elements of suffering, intercession, meekness, and service (2 Corinthians 10–12). The saints will not fight in a direct way, but in patience will ask God to fight for them from heaven.

The judgments that accompany the sounding of the seven trumpets will be akin to the Egyptian plagues mediated by Moses. They will increase in intensity and culminate, when the sixth and seventh trumpets are sounded, in a shocking number of deaths. Moses was an earthly partner of God and actively proclaimed, released, and stopped the plagues through preaching and

intercession. In the same manner, the saints will move in unity with the Lord to release judgment on the wicked in the hope that they will repent.

The first four trumpets will be used by God to destroy the provision, safety, and natural resources of the Antichrist's worshipers (Revelation 8:7–12). Like the first four seals, these judgments will have an indirect effect on mankind. However, the last three trumpets called "woes," will touch men in the Antichrist's kingdom directly, using demons to torment and kill them. The activity of the demonic realm will increase in intensity, while the partial nature of the trumpet judgments will give those on earth opportunity to repent. The full cup of God's wrath, about which the angel spoke in Revelation 14:9–12, will culminate with God casting all who have rejected Him into the eternal lake of fire. Until the very end, however, God will provide opportunity for repentance. It will always be God's desire that none perish. First Timothy 2:4 reminds us of God's desire that all mankind might be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Those who realize the events are judgments from God, will tremble in fear and hopefully turn from their wickedness.

We must always keep in mind that the severe judgments described in Revelation will not come because God has an angry attitude towards mankind. God loves every person He ever created, but will be deeply grieved by the nations' rejection and hatred of Him. The severity of His judgments will be proportionate to the hardness of people's hearts. Those who have understanding of God's ways will never have cause to say He is too severe. His people will understand His perspective and fully agree with His methods and leadership.

God has always and will always use the least severe means to produce the greatest amount of love and repentance in human beings. Throughout history, God has moved in ways we may think are extreme. From a heavenly perspective, however, He has always done only what is absolutely necessary to deliver souls from the eternal lake of fire. When the time comes for the trumpets to sound, God will be making His final attempt to get the attention of the nations before they completely harden their hearts toward Him. Once the nations fully reject God and declare war on Jesus' return to earth, it will be too late for most. The level of deception will be so great by then that many will view Jesus' glory as Satan himself. They will mourn, not rejoice, at His coming. So, in His mercy, God will be committed to saving as many souls as possible before these final moments when there is no turning back.

The trumpet judgments will prove the Antichrist's self-deification and other

false gods to be inferior in power to Jesus. God's supernatural acts will bring all nature and demons into submission to Jesus. God will have frustrated the Antichrist's worldwide economic controls by striking down his natural resources. The trumpet judgments will be supernatural in contrast to the first four seals, which are the ripe consequences of sinful mankind's unrestrained actions.

Believers will not be the objects of the trumpet judgments, which God will hold back until all the saints are sealed (Revelation 7:1–4). In his vision, the angel told John that the saints would be protectively sealed before God struck the earth, seas, and trees (Revelation 7:1–4)—areas the first four trumpet judgments will devastate (Revelation 8:7–11). Many believers will be protected during the end-time judgments (Zephaniah 2:3; Micah 7:14–19; Isaiah 11:15–16). While unbelievers are overcome by fear, the Church will be filled with faith (Luke 21:26–27). This dynamic contrast between the two groups will cause many people to seriously take note of the Church's unshakable nature, and this will draw them to salvation during what the Bible calls the great harvest (Luke 10:2).

The sounding of the last three trumpets will initiate the worst of God's judgments—His final attempt to reach and save the wicked. In his vision, John saw an angel in heaven declaring with a loud voice, “Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the remaining blasts of the trumpet of the three angels who are about to sound!” (Revelation 8:13). When the last three trumpets sound, Jesus' return to earth will be near and He will soon declare war on darkness, violently removing all who oppose Him. A multitude of people will be in the valley of decision (Joel 3:14), but time will be running out. The wicked nations will then gather in a literal valley in Israel and stage their last, desperate assault on Jesus. By the time they gather in this valley called Jehoshaphat, all final decisions will have been made—both theirs and God's. They will have decided to make war against His Son, and the Father will have decided to pour out the full measure of His wrath in a final judgment that comes through the pouring out of the bowls, following the trumpet judgments. The “woes” loosed when these last trumpets sound will be God's final three trumpets. Revelation 9:21 states the wicked will not repent even then and their eternal destiny of damnation will be sealed.

The judgments' severity brought forth by the sounding of the fifth and sixth trumpets is almost too shocking and terrifying to contemplate. Though severe, they will still be an expression of God's mercy to people on the brink of

destruction. There will be a release of demonic forces that are given permission by God to torment and then kill wicked people. These demons will be the same ones these ungodly people had worshiped (Revelation 9:21). Through this release, God will allow people to see for the first time the true nature of the demons they had openly worshiped. The first demonic wave will come from the abyss, led by a demon king named “Destroyer” (Revelation 9:11). These demons will torture the wicked for five months. Four demon captains, who have “been prepared for the hour and day and month and year” (Revelation 9:15), will lead the second wave. They will be given permission by God to kill a third of mankind, and will lead two hundred million demons in slaughtering the unrighteous.

The fate of the rebellious nations will be tragic. Though the wicked experience horrific consequences of their choices, they will not stop worshiping demons (Revelation 9:20–21), nor will they repent of their murder, sorcery, sexual immorality, or theft. Combined with the actions of a demonic world dictator who devastated the earth with his twisted policies, there will be unprecedented demonic activity. Immense suffering, grief, fear, and rage will be unchecked. People worldwide will be bitter at God, will betray their families and friends, and will be filled with hatred and deception. Occult practices and open demonic worship will increase in the midst of global famine and hardship. As people starve to death, their rage toward God will compel them to turn to these demons for help. These demons will betray, torment, and ultimately kill them, but even as they suffer, they will remain loyal to them to defy God. Because of their loyalty to spiritual darkness, Jesus will release literal darkness after the fourth trumpet sounds (Revelation 9:12). At that time, daylight will end at noon (Amos 8:9) as God darkens the earth at midday.

Next, the two witnesses will be killed by the Antichrist (Revelation 11:7–10). Their dead bodies will lay in the streets of Jerusalem, which will have become an evil city, the likes of Sodom or ancient Egypt. No one will allow their bodies to be buried, and “those from the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations” (11:9)—wicked people from all over—will come to rejoice and celebrate their deaths for three-and-one-half days, reveling, making merry, and sending gifts to one another (11:10). They will believe the deaths of these two witnesses signify victory over God and the end of His tormenting judgments.

However, as the wicked celebrate the two witnesses will be suddenly resurrected before their eyes. After the three-and-one-half-day period, “the

breath of life from God” will enter them and they will stand to their feet (Revelation 11:11). As the wicked tremble with fear at this turn of events and the two witnesses arise, all will hear the Lord’s audible voice telling the witnesses, “Come up here!” and both will ascend to heaven in a cloud (Revelation 11:12). All will realize that God had not been defeated, and the judgments are not over. As the two witnesses ascend to heaven and their enemies watch in horror, Jesus will prepare to sound the seventh trumpet and proclaim the kingdom of God. His return will be just around the corner.

At the sounding of the last trumpet, heaven will break into great rejoicing, and proclaim, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!” (Revelation 11:15). John describes hearing loud voices shout this proclamation, long awaited by those in the courts of heaven. Before He returns, however, Jesus will gather His saints to Himself in the sky.

This gathering of the saints in the sky has been called “the rapture” of believers. Some suppose the rapture and the second coming are the same event, while others believe they are separate events that occur many years apart. Many, who hold to the theory that they are separate events, believe the rapture will take place before the Great Tribulation and the second coming. However, a closer reading of the Bible indicates that the rapture will take place when Jesus bursts through the sky after the tribulation that has lasted for 1,260 days. Other scripture references to the tribulation state that it will be a period of forty-two months or “time, times, and half a time,” which equal one year, two years, and half a year (Daniel 7:25; 12:7; Revelation 11:2–3; 12:6; 13:5; 14). The abomination of desolation, or image of the Antichrist, will remain in the temple for thirty more days after Jesus appears, according to Daniel 12:11. There will be a thirty-day period between Jesus’ appearance in the sky and His defeat of the Antichrist on earth. This “appearing” in the sky will be only the first phase of Jesus’ return to earth—opening moments of a return that will culminate in His triumph over the Antichrist and his armies.

## THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS

With the kingdom proclaimed and the saints gathered up to Jesus, the most amazing event in history will soon take place: the second coming of Jesus Christ. Since the creation of the world, Jesus has longed and waited for this moment. Thousands of years of labor will have come to fruition in that moment and all of heaven will share in His almost inexpressible, uncontainable

excitement. He will finally take what is His—all the nations of earth. It will at last be the time for Him to leave heaven, gather His saints, and rescue His chosen family, the Jews. Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 that Jesus will go forth with a great shout, and the voice of an archangel will signal His battle cry. Vengeance upon His enemies will be in His heart, and in righteousness He will judge and make war upon them (Revelation 19:11). The nations will encounter the “winepress” of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God (Revelation 19:15). The second coming will take place just days after Jesus gathers His saints in the sky.

To properly understand the dynamics of His second coming, we must have a proper perspective. As Gentile believers, we focus on worshiping Jesus as God in the supernatural conditions of heaven. We emphasize Jesus’ deity as the Son of God. The Jews, however, have always thought of the Messiah as an earthly King with whom they would reign in the natural conditions of earth. They have always emphasized Messiah’s humanity as the son of David. The reality of Jesus, the Messiah, is that He is both fully God and fully man. The processes of the natural realm will not be suspended when He returns, but there will be a supernatural dimension to them. God created the physical, material earth to be our home. But earth will be profoundly impacted and enhanced by the supernatural as the two realms join together. As fully God and fully man, Jesus provided a picture of the relationship between the natural and supernatural realms when He appeared in His resurrected body. Isaiah depicted this reality throughout his writing, describing dry and barren earthly deserts that suddenly bloom with glorious life. He described the beauty of Carmel and Sharon growing miraculously in the wastelands as parched ground became lush with springs of water (Isaiah 35:1–6).

Jesus described His appearance with some detail in two places (Matthew 24:29–31; Luke 21:27–28). All the nations will see the sign of the coming of the “Son of Man,” which is the Old Testament title of Messiah, the Deliverer of Israel. They will see Him in all of His glory and with all of His angels when He breaks through the literal darkness. When the people of earth who oppose Him see this, they will mourn deeply. The One whose purpose in coming to earth is to make war against them will be before them. Only then will they realize the vastness of His power. His revealed glory will cause them to tremble with indescribable fear.

In Luke 21:28, Jesus said that when the Church sees this event unfolding they should “look up and lift up your heads” to the sky, for “your redemption

draws near.” The moment for which all believers have longed through millennia of history will have arrived. Jesus’ procession in the sky, which may begin over Jerusalem with the rapture of the two witnesses, will then circumnavigate the world. It will not be possible for everyone to see Jesus at the same time. The global procession will last for days as Jesus sends His angels “with a great sound of a trumpet” (Matthew 24:31) to gather His elect from the four corners of earth, from one end of the sky to the other. Many assume that this will be an instantaneous event, but Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:52 that we will be transformed in a moment into our resurrected bodies. He did not say that we will be caught up in a moment. This is a process that will take time as every eye will see Him at His coming (Matthew 24:30). As believers look to the heavens, awaiting their angelic escort, all who have died in Christ will be raised incorruptible (1 Corinthians 15:52). They will ascend to the sky first, and those alive when Jesus returns will be right behind them (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17), meeting Jesus in the air. As believers are caught up into the air, they will be transformed “in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Corinthians 15:52). In one moment, each believer’s natural body will be transformed into what Paul calls a “spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:44). Our spiritual bodies will be glorified physical bodies, like the physical body Jesus has possessed since His resurrection.

When the Israelites made their exodus from Egypt in the days of Moses, Pharaoh pursued them in order to kill Moses and recapture his former slaves (Exodus 14). They were trapped between the shores of the Red Sea and Pharaoh and his army behind them. The Israelites were terrified and defeat seemed inevitable. Both Israel and the Church will be in a similar position just before Jesus returns, as the forces of the Antichrist close in. Before the rapture, the situation will appear hopeless for Israel and for the Church. The Church, however, will be confident because she will know the return of Jesus is near, but Israel will be terrified once more as all the nations surround Jerusalem (Zechariah 12:2–3). Instead of parting the Red Sea, Jesus will part the sky and rapture His Church. Nearly thirty days after He comes to earth to save those trapped in Jerusalem, Jesus will split the Mount of Olives in two (Zechariah 14:4). Just as Pharaoh’s army was drowned in the Red Sea, the Antichrist’s armies will be drowned in the “sea” of Jesus’ bowls of wrath. In the next chapter, we will look at why there will be thirty days between when Jesus comes to earth and when He rescues the Jews, and what will happen in that thirty-day period.

Isaiah gave a graphic picture of Jesus marching towards Jerusalem from Edom (Isaiah 63:1–6) when He comes to rescue Jerusalem from the armies of the world. At that time, not one of the kings of earth will have aligned himself with Jesus. Jesus will be alone, but glorious in His apparel and mighty in His strength. The One who is mighty to save will approach His battle with the Antichrist with all power and strength, knowing that He will prevail. After His feet land on Mount Sinai, Jesus will travel to Egypt, and there begin to release the bowls of wrath. There is a dual reason for Jesus to travel to Egypt to release these bowls of wrath, these supernatural signs of the power of God, as He pours out His final expression of wrath upon the rebellious nations (Revelation 14:10).

The first reason involves Moses' prophecy about Jesus in Deuteronomy 18:15 where he said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren." Jesus will be like a "second Moses," standing against an end-time Pharaoh for the deliverance of His Jewish people. Like Moses, Jesus will release terrible judgments to secure this great deliverance. The bowls of wrath will cripple the Antichrist's kingdom and force a desperate last stand against Jesus. The second reason Jesus will travel to Egypt, to be discussed more in the next chapter, involves Jewish captives there whom He will set free (Isaiah 27:12–13).

As the forces of good and evil gather in a valley and surround Jerusalem to destroy her, human history as we have known it will be drawing to a close. Jesus will have left Egypt and traced Moses' exact path toward Israel. The nations will steel themselves, terrified, but filled with rage for one reason. Jesus will be in the land of Israel marching directly toward these armies. The long night will come to an end. A new day will be about to begin.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of this chapter stood out to you as truths that you would like to go deeper in?
2. What does it mean that, in the end times, God will "give the nations what they truly desire"?
3. Many of the details from this chapter are taken from the book of Revelation; for example, the narrative of widespread death and suffering is described in Revelation 6. Why does the book of Revelation emphasize such widespread death, and how would such a thing be possible?

4. When hearing about the catastrophic events the book of Revelation describes, how can a believer wrestle through such dramatic statements and still maintain deep confidence in the Lord's leadership?
5. The book of Revelation shouldn't necessarily be the first book of the Bible we study to find out what Scripture has to say about the end times. It is the last book of the Bible because it "sums up" all of biblical prophecy in one final presentation of the events surrounding Jesus' second coming. Within the book of Revelation there are three hundred allusions to Old Testament prophetic passages. Here are some great resources that can help further your studies on many of these three hundred Old Testament passages:

*The Book of Revelation* by Robert H. Mounce

*A Commentary on the Revelation of John* by George Eldon Ladd

*A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* by David Pawson

*Revelation 1–7 Exegetical Commentary and Revelation 8–22*

*Exegetical Commentary*, by Robert L. Thomas (I found these to be the most helpful)

6. Why do the judgments described in this chapter become progressively intense and destructive as the Lord releases them?
7. Why does God want the Church to participate in the release of these judgments through prayer and worship?
8. How often do you reflect on the second coming of Jesus? How can you grow in this area of devotion to Him?
9. Jesus connected the subject of prayer and His return to the subject of "speedy justice" in Luke 18:7–8. The intensity of the events of the second coming is due to the depths of shaking necessary to remove sin from the earth. I recommend studying this passage with a study group and working together to grow in understanding the relationship between prayer, justice, delay, and faith as they are all connected to the subject of the second coming. How does the parable Jesus shared in this chapter help us grow in understanding?
10. In the Isaiah 63 passage referenced to close this chapter, Isaiah cannot recognize the Man striding towards Jerusalem in power and glory. Why would Isaiah have a difficult time recognizing Jesus in this vision? What implications does this have for the Church? For us, knowing and loving Jesus upon His return?

# 12

## THE DAWNING OF A NEW DAY

In his final recorded vision, Daniel learned the ultimate fate of his people, the Israelites, from an angel. Chapter 12 of Daniel describes the climactic conclusion to Daniel's twenty-five year journey of angelic visitations and end-of-the-age visions. As a young man, he had wrestled with theological issues involving God's chosen people, the Israelites, and their Babylonian captivity. The answers he received after a forty-year period of regular prayer and fasting are some of the most significant in the Word of God. Daniel wondered what would become of his people during and after their captivity. The angelic messengers of the Lord, including the angel Gabriel, revealed to Daniel much more than Israel's near future. The visions he received caused him physical pain, because he was so distressed over the trauma his people would experience in the distant future. Despite the awful things they would endure, Daniel received the revelation that the time of trouble "such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time" (Daniel 12:1), would also be the hour of ultimate deliverance for his people.

The angel described to Daniel the hour in which the saints would rise from the dead, some receiving glorified bodies that will "shine like the brightness of the firmament," and others, who have turned many to righteousness, receiving bodies that will shine "like the stars forever and ever" (Daniel 12:3). Paul described this reward process in 1 Corinthians 15:35–49. The new bodies of the resurrected saints will shine to different degrees, even like the celestial bodies (15:40–41). As each star differs from the next in glory, so it will be with the resurrected bodies of believers.

After the angel told him what would happen, Daniel had one question. One of two nearby angels asked the very question on Daniel's mind: "How long shall the fulfillment of these wonders be?" (Daniel 12:6). The original angel answered immediately, and told him there would be a three-and-one-half-year period of unprecedented trouble. Before the end of the age came, when "all these things shall be finished," the "power of the holy people would be completely shattered" (Dan, 12:7). Daniel had realized great trouble would come in the end times, and that a demonized, powerful world dictator would

oppress and kill the saints; but until he heard “completely shattered,” he had not realized just how dreadful the situation at the end of the age would be for his people. When this realization set in, he wondered aloud if his people would survive. “My lord, what shall be the end of these things?” (Daniel 12:8).

This is the same question every believer wants answered. We all want to know how the story will end, and whether everyone will make it through safely. The angel’s answer gave Daniel little comfort: “Go your way, Daniel, for the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end” (Revelation 12:9). The angel was in essence telling Daniel that the answers he sought could not be given at that time. The angel did, however, offer a hint. Though the unprecedented time of trouble for the saints would be for three and one-half years, the abomination of desolation would remain for thirty days beyond that. What will happen during this thirty-day period? Why will there be thirty days in which the saints are not subjected to the great pressure and rage of the Antichrist, even though he will still be in power, as seen by the abomination of desolation remaining in the temple? The answer that unfolds through Scripture is that Jesus will be on earth, guiding events toward an epic battle, beginning with the liberation of captive Jews and culminating with the liberation of captive Jerusalem.

## THE LIBERATION OF JEWISH CAPTIVES

Israel has experienced many terrible times during her long history, but the time just prior to Jesus’ return will be the worst. None of Israel’s past suffering will compare with what will take place then. The Bible tells us that there will be a second, worldwide Jewish holocaust, much worse than the first (Jeremiah 30:7; Zechariah 13:7–9). The Word of God has many references to prison camps and horrific conditions for the Jewish people before Jesus comes. Isaiah 42 is one such passage, in which the Lord promised that He would open blind eyes and rescue prisoners who sit in darkness in their death camps (v. 7). When Jesus begins to restore the earth, He will commence by calling out to the prisoners, “Go forth,” and to those in darkness, “Show yourselves” (Isaiah 49:8–9). Psalm 102 was written “for the generation to come” (v. 18) and from the perspective of a prisoner in a prison camp. The prisoner anticipates the hour when God will look down from heaven and “hear the groaning of the prisoner, to release those appointed to death” (v. 20).

As Jews and Christians around the world face the horrors of prison camps

and other atrocities, the Jews living in Israel will also face a huge problem. The armies of the nations will conquer Israel and surround Jerusalem to destroy her. Zechariah depicts the events of that hour in chapters 12–14. The scene will be terrifying. During that final siege, Jerusalem will be “like a cup of drunkenness to all the surrounding peoples” (Zechariah 12:2). Zechariah goes on to say that two-thirds of Israel’s population, millions of Jews, will be slaughtered (13:8). As the raiding armies continue to pummel the city, incited to a drunken rage in their demonic zeal, the remainder of the Jews will wait in terror to die. Zechariah 12:3 describes it as the time when every nation on earth will have come to “heave away” this “heavy stone” called Jerusalem.

Jesus will be the cause of the nations’ rage. His return will incite the armies to gather and lay siege to Jerusalem. All the nations will have seen Him appear as He made His way “from east to west” around the world (Matthew 24:27), and men and women will have mourned everywhere as He crossed the sky with His glorious procession. Some will mourn because they have heard about this moment for many years from believers and are now faced with the truth. Some will have taken the mark of the beast (Revelation 13:17; 14:9–11) and now have to face the consequence of that decision. Some will mourn because the Antichrist will have warned them about the coming of Jesus for years, and they believe they must now defeat the Man whom the Antichrist will paint as the “false Messiah.” None will be prepared for the sheer power, glory, and majesty of Jesus. Jesus’ breathtaking journey across the sky will cause even His most hardened, arrogant foes to tremble. As a result, most people in the world will be stirred by His coming and gather to fight Him.

It is likely that His journey around the globe will end at the most astonishing of places—Mount Sinai. From there, Isaiah said that the Messiah (Jesus) would travel to Egypt and free Jewish captives there (Isaiah 11:11–16). It is also there that He will begin to release the bowls of wrath. He will next travel to Assyria to free Jewish captives and rescue those about to perish. Isaiah 27:12–13 describes this process: “In that day that the Lord will thresh, from the channel of the River to the Brook of Egypt; and you will be gathered one by one, O you children of Israel. So it will be in that day: the great trumpet will be blown; they will come who are about to perish in the land of Assyria, and they who are outcasts in the land of Egypt, and shall worship the Lord in the holy mount at Jerusalem.”

Zechariah 10:10 says the same thing: “I will also bring them back from the land of Egypt, and gather them from Assyria.” It will be an awesome sight, as

the son of David, surrounded by the resurrected saints and an angelic host, marches towards Israel (Zechariah 14:5). The nations will be stunned by what Jesus accomplishes in His strength. He will continue liberating captives and releasing the terrible bowls of wrath in concert with His Father in heaven. The desire for self-preservation will grip even the “kings from the east” (Revelation 16:12), who will have resisted the Antichrist’s regime until their water supply turned to blood (Revelation 16:4). This will enable the Antichrist to convince these nations to join him in resisting this new enemy who has emerged. Jesus in that hour will appear to be the greatest threat that mankind has ever faced.

## JESUS’ FINAL MARCH TO VICTORY

When the first four bowls are released, all who have taken the mark and worshiped the image of the Antichrist will be afflicted with a “foul and loathsome sore” (Revelation 16:2). Many afflicted with sores will be those who have persecuted the Church and murdered the Jews. The sores will represent a mark from God to remind them of their coming doom, and they will be gripped by fear and enraged. Next, the seas will turn to blood; the oceans of earth will literally become blood “as of a dead man” (Revelation 16:3). The foul blood will kill every living creature in the sea, thus crippling earth’s food supply. People will be forced to drink blood to survive as “their just due” (Revelation 16:6). Brutal and bloodthirsty in their lust to destroy God’s saints and prophets, His judgment on them will be to give them what they sought—blood.

Those in Jerusalem will probably hear about the Moses-like figure in Egypt who is releasing supernatural signs, and will wonder who He is and why He is coming to their rescue. Some may hear of the mighty works of His hand in freeing Jewish captives in the Egyptian and Assyrian regions; others may hear of the Moses-type signs and wonders that are erupting and fulfilling the promise of Micah 7:15, “As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, I will show them wonders.” They may hear of His march from Bozrah to Jerusalem (Isaiah 63:1). With all of these scattered bits of information, there will appear to be much confusion regarding the true identity and nature of Jesus. The people of the world and the Jews will all ask, “Who is this King of Glory?” (Psalm 24:10). As Jesus comes to their aid by releasing bowls of wrath that cripple the Antichrist’s power base, the Jews will be shocked at His “Jewishness,” at how like them He is and how much He understands their

national history. They will not realize yet that their history is actually His history and their destiny is in Him.

While the Jews will be perplexed because of how this mysterious figure is fulfilling their well-known scriptural promises, they also will be hopeful. In contrast, the nations will be more enraged than ever. With their food supply lacking and the fresh waters of earth filled with blood, the hardening of their hearts will come to completion. Paul described the root cause of the condition they will find themselves in when he wrote, “They did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 Thessalonians 2:10). These people will have willfully forgotten about God because they didn’t want to submit to Him and alter their lifestyles (2 Peter 3:5–7); they will have chosen to live according to their own agendas and to reject the truth of God. God, in His perfect justice, will give them their “just due” (Revelation 16:6).

From that point on, those who have rejected God’s truth will come to the end of their journey into wickedness. There will be no love for God in them, and they will be fully hard-hearted, indeed, even at the point of no return. They will blaspheme the name of God during the judgments released by the next two bowls of God’s wrath—scorching heat and terrifying darkness. By the time the sixth bowl of wrath is released, recorded in Revelation 16:12–16, they will have become fully reprobate. They will, like the Egyptian Pharaoh thousands of years before them, have become so hardened that God will participate in the hardening of their hearts (Exodus 9:12; 10:20, 27). The release of the sixth bowl will be the moment when millions around the world who have been offended or angry with God will come off of their fence of indecision. They will join the Antichrist in making war against Jesus (Revelation 19:19), now deceived into thinking that Jesus is the evil one, the one bent on their destruction.

The release of the sixth bowl will be followed by a “strong delusion” (2 Thessalonians 2:11–12) sent from heaven to cause these hard-hearted ones to believe the lie that Jesus is an agent of the devil, or even the devil himself. The very definition of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, or the “unpardonable sin” (Matthew 12:32), is for people to be so hardened in heart and deceived in their thinking that they call the loving actions of the Holy Spirit to be “of the devil,” even as the Pharisees did in Jesus’ day. According to Revelation 16:13, the nations will be tricked by Satan into believing that Jesus is actually the Antichrist, dedicated to destroying the world, overthrowing all kings, and taking over the earth. The sixth bowl will point toward a global blasphemy of

the Holy Spirit and will be the place of no return for many on earth. There will be no more forgiveness after this spiritual showdown, which is why the sixth bowl will be the most terrifying judgment.

In other words, as Jesus releases the judgments of the sixth bowl, He also will allow Satan's demonic deception to be released on those who now stand against Him. Thus, kings and leaders who had previously resisted the Antichrist or openly opposed him will change their minds. They will cross the newly dried up Euphrates River and join the other kings gathering there to make war against Jesus. The drying up of the river will serve as a false sign of the Antichrist's power to oppose Jesus, and all of these kings will believe in this false power. They will think that it is possible, if they join together with the Antichrist, to defeat this great threat marching toward them from Bozrah.

## THE BATTLE OF JERUSALEM

They will be enticed and energized by the "spirits of demons, performing signs" (Revelation 16:14), and thus lead their armies to the Valley of Jehoshaphat and gather to attack Jerusalem. This staging area, also known as the plain of Megiddo, has been widely recognized as the "crossroads of the nations." Three continents come together in this wide valley region of Northern Israel, giving it strategic military value. Historically, those who have controlled this region have had a significant advantage in war. The armies will be led by a now desperate Antichrist and his False Prophet, who will be set on completing their satanic plan to eliminate the people of promise and leaving none alive for Jesus to rescue.

As the armies converge, thousands of Jews will be trapped in Jerusalem. Having been completely broken as a people, their will to fight will be almost nonexistent. Even with the mysterious and mighty King marching to save them, they will feel little hope. They will cry out and wail, and many will repent. When the situation seems utterly hopeless, however, something significant will suddenly happen. Jesus will release the seventh bowl, and the most powerful earthquake in history will strike earth. Mountains will collapse and violent waters will cover the islands. Babylon, one of the most powerful cities in the world, will be totally destroyed, never to rise again. Mighty hailstones will fall upon the wicked armies and these people will rage and cry out with their final blasphemies against God (Revelation 16:21). What began with the seventh trumpet in heaven will end with the release of the seventh bowl.

Jesus will ride into battle on a white horse (Revelation 19:11), clothed in

white and accompanied by the armies of heaven. The fullness of God's wrath toward wickedness will be fully released through His Son on this "day of vengeance" (Isaiah 63:4) and Jesus will effortlessly slaughter the armies of earth as He rides into what Isaiah described as the "winepress of the nations" (Isaiah 63:3–6). Many soldiers (Revelation 19:21) and world leaders (Psalm 110:5–6) will be slain in this final battle, when Jesus strikes the nations and executes their rebellious kings. Blood will flow out of the valley for 184 miles (Revelation 14:20), at some points as high as the bridle of a horse. According to Isaiah, Jesus will be completely covered in His enemies' blood as "all His robes" will be stained (Isaiah 63:3). John indicated the same in Revelation 19:13, where he wrote that Jesus will be clothed with a robe "dipped in blood." By "dipped in blood," John didn't mean only a corner of His robe will have blood on it; he meant Jesus will appear to be fully covered in blood.

Zechariah 14:1–7 gives more detail regarding what will happen in this climactic battle for Jerusalem. Because of the fifth bowl of utter darkness, it will literally be the darkest day in history. Amos 5:18–20 says this day will be a day that is "very dark, with no brightness in it." It will be a tense time for those trapped in the city. There will have been a great earthquake, hail, and the destruction of battle. The forces of the Antichrist will be closing in and looking to finish them off. Just as when they were trapped between Pharaoh and the Red Sea, they will be trapped again—this time in a city partially destroyed by the massive quake of the seventh bowl, and between the city's fallen ruins up against the Mount of Olives, desperate for their Deliverer. Suddenly, He will appear! The mountain before them will part like the Red Sea thousands of years before as Jesus sets His foot upon it (Zechariah 14:4).

Jesus thought about this moment two thousand years ago when He promised, "For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart" (Mark 11:23). He was standing on the Mount of Olives when He made that statement. "This mountain," according to Zechariah, will split in two from east to west and create a large valley through which those trapped in Jerusalem and the valley can escape. "Thus the Lord my God will come," Zechariah said emphatically, "and all the saints with You." The Jews' flight to safety will enable Jesus to finish this great battle. "But in the evening time it shall happen that it will be light," Zechariah said in describing the end of the struggle that marks the end of this age. The light is a reference to the dawning of a new day. It shows the emergence of a glorious transition, the end of the kingdom of mankind and the

birth of the kingdom of God on earth.

At the end of the battle, the Antichrist and the False Prophet will be captured and cast alive into “the lake of fire burning with brimstone” (Revelation 19:20). Satan, the defeated prince of the world, will be captured as well, and chained by an angel. He will be stripped of all authority and power, and his kingdom will be dismantled as the kingdom of God overtakes earth. God will set a seal on Satan as He casts him into the same pit from which “Legion” begged to be spared two thousand years earlier (Luke 8:30–32). Satan will be trapped in this prison and unable to deceive anyone for the entire one-thousand-year period of Jesus’ reign on earth.

### BLESSED IS HE WHO WAITS

In addition to the two groups discussed, the saints in the Church and the wicked who hate God, there is a third group of people who will be alive throughout the end times and after the final battle. This group will be comprised of unbelieving Jews and others who are not Christians that nevertheless refused to take the mark of the beast during that three-and-one-half-year period of trials. These unsaved survivors refused to worship the Antichrist and were not converted in the great harvest at the end of the age. The Bible refers to this group as “the ones who are left” and “the ones who remain” (Isaiah 4:3; 10:20; 11:11; 49:6; 65:8; 66:19; Jeremiah 31:2; Ezekiel 20:38–42; 36:36; Daniel 12:1; Amos 9:9–10; Joel 2:32; Zechariah 12:14; 13:8; 14:16).

In studying the end times, many people don’t know how to explain or understand the existence of this group of people. They wonder how or why an unsaved person could refuse the mark. The language of the book of Revelation seems to indicate that all whose names are not written in the Book of Life will take the mark (Revelation 13:8). Further, the language in Revelation 13:16 seems to imply that all people will be forced to take it. On the other hand, Zechariah 12:10–14 describes Jesus interacting with “all the families that remain” in the land after the great battle. Those among the one-third Jewish population who survive the time of trouble will all come to salvation after the battle. None of them will have taken the mark. There are other passages, such as Psalm 48 and Revelation 21:24, which speak of Jesus interacting with earthly kings. It would not be possible that these kings were saved prior to the conflict; otherwise, they would have been raptured with the saints. Likewise, they couldn’t have been among the wicked kings opposing Jesus, or they would have been killed. They must, therefore, belong to the third group—those not

saved, yet not in opposition to God.

Additionally, Revelation 22:2 says the leaves of the tree of life “were for the healing of the nations.” The nations will desperately need healing after the final battle, and this third group of people who will have remained on earth with unresurrected bodies will also need healing. Many of the unsaved survivors will be converted and become believers as Jesus begins the process of renewing and rebuilding the earth.

It is not clear why this group of people will exist. It may be because their names were always written in the Book of Life in the foreknowledge of God. It may be God will have mercy on them, as He will have mercy on whomever He will have mercy (Romans 9:15). What we can know for certain is that, while mortals will be as rare as fine gold after God’s wrath has been poured out (Isaiah 13:12), there nonetheless will be some mortals. Isaiah 66:19 says Israel will declare the glory and the greatness of the Lord to all the Gentiles who survive, for the Lord will spare many for the sake of His servants (Isaiah 65:8). Ezekiel 36:36 says, “the nations which are left all around you shall know” that the Lord has rebuilt the ruined places in that day.

Therefore, several groups of people will survive the final battle. One group will be the Jews who have survived all the trouble and trauma of the last days. As Jesus enters the city triumphantly, the Holy Spirit will pour out “the Spirit of grace and supplication” (Zechariah 12:10) upon these Jews. The spirit of prayer will fill them and cause them to mourn deeply over their sins and their rejection of Jesus at His first coming. The entire land will mourn and grief will overwhelm them, even in deep repentance. The Jewish people will finally recognize Jesus as Messiah, and acknowledge the One they pierced (Zephaniah 3:18; Zechariah 12:10). The leaders and people of Jerusalem will receive Him, shouting, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” This will fulfill the prophetic word spoken two thousand years ago by Jesus to the spiritual leaders of Jerusalem (Matthew 23:39).

## THE RESTORATION OF ALL THINGS

Jesus will initiate the “restoration of all things” (Acts 3:21) by opening a fountain in Jerusalem (Isaiah 41:18; Zechariah 13:1–3) that will be a blessing and cleansing agent. Idolatry will be cut off there for all time. He will deal with false prophets and the unclean spirit, most likely Satan himself. As mentioned, Satan will be cast into the abyss. Jesus and the saints will oversee the process of rebuilding the city, the land, and the devastated earth, and the

remaining population will assist them. The rebuilding process will take many years, but Jesus eventually will establish His kingdom throughout the world. The nations will be trained in the ways of the Lord (Isaiah 2:1–4); the law will go forth out of Zion. All those on earth will be disciplined by Jesus and the saints with new government systems established and a true global peace will exist.

The Feast of Tabernacles will be celebrated soon after Jesus' monumental and glorious triumph, and people will celebrate their deliverance from Satan and his wicked followers. The spiritual atmosphere of the world will begin to shift as worship and prophetic songs fill the hearts of newly-saved men and women, heard even while the ruined places are being restored and rebuilt (Isaiah 61:1–4). "The Branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious; and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and appealing for those of Israel who have escaped" (Isaiah 4:2). The kingdom of heaven, like a mustard seed, will start small, but it will eventually become the resting place for the nations of earth (Matthew 13:31).

Many other things will take place as Jesus reigns on earth. Matthew 25:31–46 says that Jesus will begin to set up thrones and gather the nations to judge those who refused to align themselves with Him at the battle of Jerusalem. All who are left on earth will be judged and evaluated by Jesus as He determines which of the unsaved survivors will enter the kingdom. One determining factor will be how they treated God's "brethren" during the Great Tribulation, referring to the now saved remnant of Jews who survived the final battle, as well as the now resurrected believers. Jesus also will build His throne and a glorious new temple in Jerusalem (Ezekiel 40–48). As He does, supernatural and glorious events will unite His earthly throne with His heavenly throne. Heaven will become God's throne and the earth His footstool (Isaiah 66:1). Ezekiel 43:7 calls the earthly temple "the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the children of Israel forever." In speaking of the millennial temple as the footstool of His throne, Jesus was speaking of the New Jerusalem emerging from heaven and dwelling over earthly Jerusalem in the sky for one thousand years (Revelation 21:10).

The angel of Daniel 12 gave Daniel a hint about how this would come about. He indicated that though the abomination of desolation will be removed thirty days after Jesus raptures the Church, there will be an encouragement for those who "wait" until forty-five days after the rapture. The angel told Daniel that those who wait will be "blessed." The angel then encouraged Daniel that

he would arise, or be resurrected into his inheritance, at the end of the age. The question is, what is coming to those who will be blessed, and what will the inheritance be to which Daniel will arise? It is possible that the forty-five-day mark will signal the official end of this age and the breaking in of a new age with significant portions of our inheritance from God. This may be when the New Jerusalem “descends out of heaven” (Revelation 21:10). John recorded seeing the New Jerusalem descend (Revelation 21:9–27), which is part of the inheritance for which the great heroes of the faith have been waiting, according to Hebrews 11. Verse 11:10 says that Abraham waited for this city, understanding that it would be his true inheritance, not the actual land of Israel in his time. Hebrews 11:13–15 says that those who died in the faith were awaiting a better homeland or “a heavenly country,” and understood that the city God had prepared for them, the New Jerusalem, would be the heavenly home of all the saints.

## THE NEW JERUSALEM AND THE RENEWAL OF THE EARTH

The New Jerusalem will not, however, immediately settle onto earth. It will be a glorious and massive “satellite city,” which hovers over the earthly Jerusalem for the one thousand years that Jesus reigns on earth. Scripture gives us some information about the relationship between the New Jerusalem and the earth during Jesus’ one-thousand-year reign. There will be a connection between earth and the heavenly city before it finally settles onto the new earth, and that connecting point for the two realms will be the throne of Jesus. His throne will connect the earthly Jerusalem, which will measure 10 square miles (Ezekiel 48:30–35), with the heavenly New Jerusalem which will measure 1,500 square miles (Revelation 21:16). Earth will be the “footstool” of Jesus’ throne as the two realms of heaven and earth connect but do not yet merge. The ancient throne of a king had two parts, the seat, or chair, and the footstool. One would not consider these parts as two distinct thrones, but would view the two pieces as one unit. This is what Isaiah 66:1 spoke of—two places (heaven and earth), but united as one throne for Jesus during His thousand-year reign over the nations. Jesus will live in the New Jerusalem; His throne will connect both the heavenly and earthly realities. From this throne He will rule the nations.

The old earth will not be able to contain this massive city, with its unfathomable dimensions, until it is fully restored by Jesus. Not only will the land have to be reformatted to contain this city in its width and depth, but the atmosphere itself will have to be reconfigured to extend farther into space,

much beyond our present breathable atmosphere, in order to contain the heights of the great New Jerusalem. In other words, a “new heavens” will have to be formed. There are deserts in Egypt that Isaiah said will burst into bloom during the reign of the Messiah (Isaiah 35:1–7) that would be crushed under this massive city were it to settle onto earth right away. Nations would be underneath this 1,500-mile-wide city, whose dimensions would stretch from the eastern coast of the United States to the Mississippi River. In the meantime, Jesus’ throne will bridge the heavenly city with earth. The New Jerusalem will be home to the resurrected saints and God, until all the people on earth are suitably prepared to relate to God face to face.

The New Jerusalem will serve and bless the nations during the one-thousand-year reign of Jesus in many ways. It will be our home, but also will contain the tree of life, whose leaves will bring “healing to the nations” (Revelation 22:2). The nations will flow to the “mountain of the Lord’s house” (Isaiah 2:2–4) and learn the anointed way to live in “the ways of God” so that they might walk in His paths. It will be the starting point for the mighty river of God (Ezekiel 47:1–12), which will flow from the throne (Revelation 22:1) and bring refreshing to the desert places of the world. The city will bring light to the saved nations of the world (Revelation 21:24), and earth will need all one thousand years of the millennial reign to prepare to contain this city. When the time comes for the New Jerusalem to settle onto earth, the nations will be healed and the people will be fully mature and fully given to God. They will no longer have any pride, rebellion, hidden agendas, or wrong attitudes.

The main goal of Jesus’ one-thousand-year reign will be to prepare the nations for the coming of His Father to earth. God has longed since the fall of Adam and Eve to be fully with us again, and Jesus has always been committed to making this a reality. He will labor with the saints to prepare every nation and people to be in deep, face-to-face intimacy with God for all eternity.

The end of the one-thousand-year preparation process will bring one final test for those remaining on earth, those not raptured when Jesus returned (Revelation 20:7–10). Those who were unsaved when Jesus returned will have given birth to children throughout the one-thousand-year reign. These later generations born during the millennial reign will have been fully Christianized under the leadership of Jesus, but not all will be truly in love with God. There will be those who quietly resent Jesus’ leadership. For example, Zechariah 14:16–21 indicates that the people of Egypt will refuse to come to Israel to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, resisting Jesus’ summons

to all the world to come and commemorate its deliverance.

It may seem odd that there will be those who sin during the Millennium; at least until we remember how much sin exists in the Church today. The unfortunate and uncomfortable truth is that sin exists within the Body of Christ, in our own churches. Sincere believers who love Jesus struggle with sin now and believers will continue with that struggle until the end of the millennial reign. While there will be sin during that time, there will be some difference between that time and our present condition. With Satan bound, the temptation to sin will be significantly diminished, and there will be much less opportunity for sin to be expressed. It will be far easier to obey the Lord than it is now. The problem is that it will also be easy to become complacent but appear to be obedient. The hidden attitudes and frustration with the leadership of Jesus will have no context for expression. Choice is the greatest test of love, as well as the greatest gift God gives us to grow in love. We will always have the freedom to choose to love Him. In that day, the people on earth during His millennial reign will have that same freedom, and will still wrestle with their sinful natures.

The nations of the world will be offered a final choice. One final option will be given to the nations as the garden of Eden scenario plays out again at the end of the thousand-year reign of Jesus. The Lord Himself will orchestrate this to test people's hearts, and to discover what is authentic and what is hidden. Only authentic love will be able to endure the full glory of the Lord that will cover earth. Satan will be released from his long imprisonment and deceive many in that time—the number will be as “the sand of the sea” (Revelation 20:8). Although this will surprise many, Jesus will not be surprised because He is able to perceive the true state of people's hearts. God's release of Satan to entice those who rebel against joining Him is for our benefit and theirs, not His. Those who hate God must and will be removed, since the result of their hatred would be further attempts to overthrow God and destroy the righteous. Their bitterness would only increase with the passage of time, once their choices were made.

Once God swiftly and conclusively deals with the rebellious and wicked, earth will enter its next phase of history. We cannot be sure of what that new age, which we call eternity, will look like for us, but we do know the Father has been waiting and planning for that time from before the creation of the world. Right now, Jesus is yearning and longing to return for His Bride. Right now, the Father is yearning and longing to be reunited fully with His precious

children. Whatever the Father has in store for us in eternity, we can be certain it will be glorious and wonderful. Our destiny is to grow in our knowledge of His love for us and to grow in our love for Him, as well as to grow in our capacity to know and receive His love, forever and ever.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of this chapter stood out to you as truths that you would like to go deeper in?
2. This chapter described the second coming in three stages—in the air, through the land, and into Jerusalem. How is this different than your own view of the second coming? How had you imagined Jesus returning, and what is He returning to do?
3. The common assumption about the second coming is that everything God wants to do at the return of Jesus, He will do instantly. This chapter describes a process to the second coming and to the restoration of the earth. Why does God commit to a process instead of using His power to transform and renew things instantly?
4. Why does God commit to a thousand-year process to restore, renew, and fully transform the earth and prepare it for eternity?
5. How is it possible that there will be survivors of the events of the second coming? Why would God allow survivors to participate in life on the earth after the return of Jesus?
6. Why is there a thousand-year delay between imprisoning the devil and judging him after the restoration of the earth is complete?
7. Why is there fire and cleansing at the end of the thousand years?
8. Why would God release Satan to tempt the peoples of the earth after the thousand years described in Scripture?

# EPILOGUE

## ON THE OTHER SIDE OF ETERNITY

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2). In this verse, John offered encouragement to his friends in the churches he had cared for over the past few years. He encouraged them to live according to the promise and truth that abided in them, a living truth connected to the assurance of eternal life. He urged them to cut off their love for the things of the present world and their attachments to worthless, temporal things.

We are the ones who abide forever with God. Therefore, we must set our affections on the only thing that stands forever: the Word of God, which indicates what God’s will is. We must receive the words of John in our hearts and decide to live for eternity, rather than for today only. The cry of John’s heart when he authored 1 John was for people to understand that, as children of God, we are children of promise, children of eternity. He wanted us to grasp that the greatest expression of love we can offer to God is to obey Him with all of our hearts. The Father has bestowed His immense and perfect love upon us, a love so fantastic and otherworldly that, when properly understood and received, causes our hearts to soar with delight and sing with everlasting joy. Those who love God have the honorable distinction of being called “children of God.”

Being children of God has implications so vast, wonderful, and grand with regard to our destinies that we can hardly fathom them. Unfortunately, few even try. Few people pause to consider the benefits that come from holding the title, “child of God.” And those who do consider the benefits usually don’t consider their full scope. While even the most basic benefits, such as being happy, not shedding any more tears, and knowing true peace, are wonderful and worthy to be considered, they are almost nothing compared with the greatest of all benefits—living in perfect relationship with God for all eternity and being wed to His Son Jesus forevermore.

When Jesus returns, love perfected will have been worked into the heart and life of every believer. The journey from where we are now to where we

need to be is one of preparation. In order to lay hold of this perfected love, we must be willing to do whatever it takes to prepare for that encounter. The love of Jesus must be perfected in us *before* we finally encounter Him face to face. Jesus said He wants us to “be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). The Amplified Bible translation of this verse describes the process of love being perfected in us as that of “growing into complete maturity of godliness in mind and character, having reached the proper height of virtue and integrity.” As John the beloved disciple said in his first letter, our hope must involve more than salvation from hell and escape from our present, unpleasant circumstances. Yes, our hope is related to what the future holds for us; but we must remember that hope is inseparably linked to faith and love. The height of hope is found in perfected love.

John also wrote in the same letter that the “blessed hope” to which Titus 2:13 refers, is about far more than even the glorious appearance of Jesus in the sky. While the blessed hope is partially about seeing the Son of Man appear with righteous vengeance to rescue the saints, vindicate His Father, and claim what is His, it is about even more. This hope has a deeper dimension. According to John, this hope is also about our eagerness to discover who we will be when we see Jesus “as He is” (1 John 3:2). We do not yet know what we will be like when our bodies are transformed into their resurrected, eternal, glorified states. Just as Jesus will be beautiful beyond measure, we will be amazed at our own revealed beauty and glory.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote that he was expending all his might and focus on the work of knowing Jesus fully in every dimension possible to know Him, including joining in His suffering. The reason he gave was, “if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:11). Paul understood eternal reward. He longed to receive the full measure of the reward that would come to Him at the resurrection. The reward we will each receive is one that will last for all eternity. In His sovereignty, God is orchestrating each of our lives with His big picture in mind. He knows what we shall be, but has not yet revealed it to us. The real and full dimension of who we really are cannot be known apart from our “real” lives, which will be revealed in the age to come. In the next age we will begin a whole new journey. We cannot know now what we will be doing a billion years from now, but we can be sure it will be magnificent and fantastic and beyond our wildest dreams.

God, of course, knows what we will be doing. He sees the end from the

beginning and knows all the magnificent things He has planned for us. The Bible contains surprisingly little information about our life with God in eternity. There are hundreds of verses about the final years of this age and the millennial kingdom of Jesus, but there is not much in the Word of God about our destiny beyond that point. We do know a few facts from Scripture, however. We know there will be no end to “the increase of His government and peace” (Isaiah 9:7). We know that from His throne, Jesus will order and establish His kingdom with judgment and justice “from that time forward, even forever” (Isaiah 9:7). We know Israel will inherit the land forever promised to Abraham, and will maintain possession of it throughout eternity. We know the sons of Levi will stand and minister in the name of the Lord forever.

We also know we will live forever in the New Jerusalem, which will come out of heaven and settle onto the new earth after Jesus’ one-thousand-year reign. The New Jerusalem on the new earth will be the literal inheritance of Israel and the saints forever, and the location of the throne of Jesus. The Father Himself will dwell with us there. We will relate face to face with the Father for the first time since Adam and Eve related to Him in the garden of Eden. The Father Himself will be the “exceedingly great reward” for our labors now and in the millennial kingdom. We will spend all of eternity enjoying our “great reward.” We will continue to grow forever in love for God and in our capacity to receive His love. We will be forever exploring the depth, the width, the length, and the height of this great ocean of God’s love for us.

While we can’t know all the details of what our life will be like in eternity, we must realize that what we do now will directly impact who we will be and what we will do then. Our choices today really do have an eternal impact. As we follow His ways, obey His commands, and seek to love Him with all of our hearts, God will help us to know the “hope of His calling” and “the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints” (Ephesians 1:18). God wants us to ask Him for “the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him” (Ephesians 1:17). God wants to give us prophetic insight into our eternal destiny. He wants to make mysteries known to us through the Holy Spirit. He wants that which we can know in this age to motivate us to live differently—to abide in Him. He wants our perspective to be an eternal one so we will understand that the end times, though full of difficulty, hardship, and suffering, will be but a moment in time compared to the endless eons of years that we will drink from the fountain of the river of His life in eternity.

The apostle John was given a glimpse of just how glorious our future will

be. He spoke of this in 1 John 3:1–3, “It has not yet been revealed what we shall be.” With these words he gave us that same glimpse, the same anticipation of our destiny as children of God. “But we know that when He is revealed,” John said with excitement, “we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” He used that insight to motivate his beloved friends to pursue what was real and eternal, and to put aside worldly, temporal pursuits. Right now, Jesus, our great Intercessor, is contending in heaven for us to come into a place where we will do the same. He is asking that His Bride make the same shift in priorities. We know our loving God awaits us and in His presence we will find the greatest fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). God longs for us to begin our new, eternal lives in Him and with Him now. Because we have become so disconnected from our true identities as children of God and all that comes with that glorious distinction, we live far beneath our true nature and calling.

To reconnect to the awesome destiny that awaits us in the eternal age to come is to begin again. To be stirred in the deep places of our hearts by the grandeur and splendor of what will constitute our “real” life, is to view our present life of this age in a different light. This book of our temporal life is meant to inspire us to begin a new journey. The path is an ancient one, but it has an eternal destination. Once the book is finished, our new life can begin. For now, our temporal life must be one dedicated to prayer, fasting, and a passionate study of the Word of God. These pursuits will prepare us to navigate the trials of this life successfully and will catapult us into the eternal calling of God.

Studying the end times is not meant to be a hobby, a pastime, or a curious pursuit. It is meant to be a consuming journey into the knowledge of God to discover who He is and what He is like. It is meant to connect us with the realities of yet another life beyond this one in a new world and a new age prepared for us from before time began. End-time passages are a gift that, if received wholeheartedly, will equip us to live in radical obedience and abandon, and not loving this world that is passing away (1 John 2:15–17). “He who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17). What then, is the will of God? Ultimately, the will of God is for us to know Him. Let His will become your life’s obsession. This is the most worthy pursuit—most worthy because you are living for the treasures of another age, heaping up “treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:20–21). This is the final and best reason to study the end times: your heart is already somewhere else, and you are hungry to follow and discover where it is.

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International House of Prayer Missions Base, 3535 E. Red Bridge Road, Kansas City, MO 64137  
(816) 763-0200 | [info@ihopkc.org](mailto:info@ihopkc.org) | [ihopkc.org](http://ihopkc.org)

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