



7th Day Pentecostal Assemblies (Esreso)

2016 End-of Year Camp Meeting

Sabbath School Lesson

By

Elder Enoch Ofori Jnr
(Senior Pastor)

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The Biblical Last Days are Here How Prepared are you?

Introduction:

It's Prophecy News on the hour!

To say that we are in the last days is not only an understatement but a trite fact. The media confront us on an almost daily basis with a chilling immediacy of fulfilled Bible prophecies as they happen around the world. The end-time signs are unfolding before our eyes in a way the original disciples, who had the privilege of hearing them firsthand from Christ, could never have imagined.

“Rumours of wars”, killings and disease epidemics are now a staple of mass media. Thanks to instantaneous media, we hear, read and see them as they occur. In the first century AD, it would have taken several months or years to “hear” such news from afar. It is a prophecy which is properly meant for our time. We witness the fulfillment of divine prophecies as they

unfold in real time! It's amazing how the news media have vindicated Christ's words in our day and age.

But how will it all pan out? How will the very last events of this last age happen? We know the Second Coming is the high point of it all. But what about the Great Tribulation: Will it take place after the 'rapture' of the church or before it? What is the chronological order of the end-time prophetic events?

Meanwhile, will Christ 'return twice'?

Read and be informed and stay spiritually prepared for "the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;¹⁴ Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works" (Tit. 2:13-14). He is at the door!

Elder Enoch Ofori Jnr
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No Temple? End of Time!

They were not exactly on a sight-seeing tour, but an occasion to show *Yeshua* the buildings of Herod's temple in Jerusalem and its lavish furnishings and adornments by the disciples turned into a prophetic discourse on the signs of the end (Matt 24:1; Mark 13; Luke 21:5).

All the response the disciples got for their efforts was not a spontaneous "wow" from the Master but a depressing prediction of doom for the famed temple:

"And Jesus said unto them, see ye not all these things? Verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down" (Matt 24:2)

The Lord's response was a real shocker that must have rattled the bones of the disciples—so shocking that all that they could think of was the end of time.

Time stops!

If the all-important Jerusalem Temple, the sanctuary of the Holy One of Israel where He vowed to put His Name forever (2 Chron. 7:16; I Kings 9:3), is no more, what else will remain?

The stage was set for perhaps one of the most important questions of all time—all focused on "when" and "what":

“And as He sat upon the Mount of Olives, the disciples came unto Him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of the coming and of the end of the world?”(Matt. 24:3).

The Master proceeded to give an outline of end-time signs which will precede and culminate in His second coming.

Learn to discern the signs of the times, not the season of events

In His response to the disciples’ question, we notice that Christ did not specifically answer the question of “when”—as to specific date or time. Instead, He described *the conditions that will characterize the end time*. He focused on the “what”—the signs of the times. He answered the second part of the disciples’ question: ‘How do we know the end is near from the events happening around us?’

This was the part Christ considered most important. Indeed, He taught that it was a mark of hypocrisy and/or spiritual immaturity not to be able to discern “the signs of the times” (Matt 16: 1-3, Luke 12:54-56). And so signs of the end He gave and not a timetable of the end.

Deceivers will exploit the Name “Christ”—and only it!

The first end-time sign Christ mentioned was religious deception in His name. He framed it in a warning:

“Take heed that no man deceive you.

“For many shall come in My Name, saying I am Christ, and shall deceive many” (Matt 24:4-5).

The motive of those who are not sent but “come in His name” (see Jer. 23:21-22; 25-26; 14:14; Matt 10:5-8, Luke 10:1, 17; John 20:21) is simply to deceive.

The vehicle—the means of deception—is Christ’s name. And they claim not only to have come in His Name or authority and therefore acting by His mandate but also arrogate to themselves the status of the Christ of God. They try to impersonate Him, claiming to be the very Christ who came down from heaven!

To the spiritually informed, however, they are hardly successful at impersonating the true Christ of the Bible, the Son of the Living God. This is because they are hardly able to fulfill the Messianic roles and characteristics revealed in prophecies to God’s prophets in the Old Testament. While these prophecies are scattered in different sections of the Old Testament scriptures, right from the Torah/Pentateuch through the Psalms to the Major and Minor

Prophets, and foretell His virgin birth (Isai. 7:14), birthplace (Mic. 5:2) and betrayal (Ps. 41:9 cp. Mark. 14:18), the *most comprehensive* of these is the prophecy in Daniel Chapter 9:24-27.

It not only predicts the coming of “the Messiah” the “Prince” but also the approximate date of His coming—calculated from the time of the issuing of “the commandment” to restore and to build Jerusalem” (Dan. 9:25). Of three decrees issued by Persian kings in relation to the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the one which applies most comprehensively to the prophecy was the decree issued by King Artaxerxes I (464-423 BC) in 457 B.C. Cyrus first issued his in 538 BC (Ezra 1), followed by a second decree by the same Artaxerxes I in 445BC. However, the 457 BC decree stands out. It was the decree which authorized the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem, including the installation of a functioning government, and which was entrusted to Ezra the priest (Ezra 7:11-13, 25-26; 9:7-9). **483 years** (i.e. 69 weeks times 7 = 483 days converted into years with one prophetic day equalling one literal year, Num. 14:34; Ezek. 4:6) from **the year 457BC** brings us to **27 AD** (i.e. 26 AD plus 1 year because no ‘zero year’ from 1BC to 1 AD), the year Jesus began His public ministry.

Now, Daniel says “after threescore [sixty] and two weeks” – which comes after the first “seven weeks” mentioned in Dan. 9:25 making *sixty-nine weeks* in all – “Messiah shall be cut off” (Dan 9:26), an event which would occur in 31 AD— $3\frac{1}{2}$ years after Yeshua launched His ministry in 27 AD.

The cutting off was “not for Himself” but as an offering for sin, by which also He made “an end of sin” (Dan. 9:24, Heb. 9:26; 10:12) and “reconciliation for iniquity” (Dan. 9:24, Heb. 2:17, Rom. 5:10).

Then there is the other prince in the picture. “The people of the prince”, who comes after “the Messiah the Prince” is cut off “shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined” (v. 26b). This would happen some forty years after Jesus’ sacrificial death and resurrection. The Roman military commander, General Titus, led Roman troops to attack and destroy Jerusalem and set the temple ablaze. The year was 70AD. The words of Jesus had been fulfilled to a nicety: “There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down” (Matt. 24:2).

Who else but Christ, the Son of the Highest, fits the prophetic portrait of the Messiah painted in the Book of Daniel and elsewhere in the Old Testament scriptures?

Apart from Him, the true historical Messiah of the Bible, who pre-existed as God (Php. 2:5-6) and who was born into the world in human form (Php 2:7; Rom. 1:3) by the activity of the Holy Spirit of God in the womb of the virgin Mary (Luke 1:35), and was crucified for the transgressions of men (Isai. 53:5-8), and rose up from the dead after “three days and three

nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:38-40), all other Messianic claimants have turned out to be square pegs in round holes! Complete frauds!

Yet they insist they are Christ because the true Messiah said they will use this very stratagem of deception! Dan 9:24ff is the litmus test. Apply it to them and their false claim will be evident!

Falsehood has rebranded itself in the colours of Christ

We realize then that, in Matthew 24, Christ is not merely speaking of religious deception in general but religious deception subsequent to His first coming and which is, in fact, a counter to it.

Religious deception is not a new phenomenon. It is an age-old problem. Indeed, it was the first weapon the devil unleashed on the innocent world of man in the Garden of Eden when he said to the woman, “Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4-5).

He has since fine-turned it into a sophisticated art. The world abounds in religious sects, the vast majority of which are structured around false spiritual ideas and philosophies.

The reason for this is simple: Satan who has deceived the whole world (Rev. 12:9; I John 5:19) is really the architect of these false religions, and his sole objective is to take away men from the worship of the Creator God, because he knows that man’s well-being lies in serving His God and praising His blessed Name!

Now, after Satan had launched his false religion in Eden and promoted it by false religious leaders down through history (John 10:8), Jesus came to earth as the consummate Truth from Heaven to show mankind the way to the Father. Nevertheless, He foresaw that the spirit of error already in the world would not take kindly to His work of truth but will stir to oppose Him. Yet it will not oppose Him in its old self or image (of paganism, etc.) but will rebrand itself in His colours as a ploy to attack and corrupt His message of truth.

In other words, the religious deception that will dominate the world in the wake of the first coming of Christ will be unlike any that has come before! It will be associated with Christ’s name; it will be perpetrated in His name, but, in reality, Christ will have nothing to do with it. The message which will be proclaimed will not be His! It will all be a ruse! They only hijacked His name to perpetrate their own falsehood. They came to deceive in His name.

Legions of Deceivers

The deceivers using the name of Christ as a tool of deception will be “many”. They will dominate the religious scene; they will fill the religious space.

But they will be known by their doings. To wit: “By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matt 7:20). That is to say, they cannot behave contrary to their spiritual nature which is essentially evil. However hard they try to put on “sheep’s clothing”, their inward wolf-like nature will definitely show (Matt. 7:15-18).

The scriptures are clear on the identifying characteristics of the deceivers fraudulently using Christ’s name:

- They are controlled by demonic spirits (I Tim. 4:1) which is why we should “believe not every spirit, but test the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (I John 4:1)”. How do we test the spirits? We “test the spirits” by the doctrines they teach through the prophet— a good example being the affirmation or denial of Christ’s bodily manifestation in the world (v. 2-3), which in fact, the scriptures affirm (I Tim 3:16).
- They neglect to teach people the Law of God (a core duty of God’s ministers, Mal.2:7-8) and instead focus on giving false prophecies and divinations (Deut. 13:1-5; Jer. 2:8; 5:131; Ezek. 13:1-9;22:28; Isai. 8:19-20).
- They are “false teachers”, and they go about it surreptitiously but with grave consequences. Their teachings are clothed in lofty religious ideas and scriptural language, but they are “damnable heresies”—false teachings which wreak havoc on the soul. At the centre of their teachings is the denial and/or diminishing of Christ because, He is properly speaking, their rival and naturally they would want to popularize themselves at His expense. But they just assured themselves of “swift destruction” (2 Pet. 2:1)!

How do we avoid the traps set by the false prophets?

Strive for the ancient faith

That’s the key recommendation given to us in the Epistle of Jude: “Earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (v.3). He means ‘fight hard for it, prize it and hold onto it at all costs’. This “faith” is the faith of the Biblical prophets and apostles with Christ Himself being the Chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). Christ is at the centre of it, and it enjoins obedience to God’s law through repentance and faith in Him (Matt 5:17-18; Rom. 3:31). It is the faith of the saints who “keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12; 12:17; I John 2:3-4). It is “the everlasting gospel”—having repentance and faith in Christ as its core—and which is meant for all mankind (Rev. 14:6-7; cp. Eccl. 12:13-14).

But as Jude goes on to warn us, some pose a threat to this old-time faith of the saints. These are false brethren who have “crept in unawares” – though not on the blind side of God who

foreknew them and condemned them beforehand. As to their character and motive, they are “ungodly men, turning the grace of God into lasciviousness and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ” (v.4).

They put on all the religious airs all right. But because they were “ungodly men”, i.e. wicked, lawless and impious at heart, they bastardized “the grace of God” into a licence for immoral acts – resulting in a lifestyle which denies Christ’s lordship over one’s life. (Compare Rom. 10:9 and 2 Tim. 2:19). To set the record straight, the true grace of God *bringing salvation* to mankind does not teach unrighteousness or lawlessness but the forsaking of “ungodliness and worldly lusts” so that we might “live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world”, while waiting for “the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:11-13).

So then, there are two kinds of grace: *the saving grace of God* teaching godliness and *the sin-excusing grace of ungodly men in cassocks* which aims to overthrow the lordship of Jesus over believers’ life.

A false prophet will not expound on divine grace as God’s unmerited favour towards sinful man in reconciling man to Himself and His life of righteousness through faith in Christ Jesus (Rom. 5:6-10; 2 Cor. 5:14-17; Col. 3:3-5). Nay, he won’t present grace as opening a fresh avenue for sinful man to get right with God. He will rather use grace as a false premise to “promise” people a false “liberty” from obedience to “the holy commandment” of God (2 Pet. 2:18-21; cp. Gal. 5:13-14).

A gospel of cheap grace which accommodates a life of continued disobedience or lawlessness in Christ is a “damnable heresy” to steer clear of. It is coming from the stable of a false prophet. And Jude cites previous cases where those who abused the grace of God brought upon themselves destruction. First, he mentions Israel which the Lord “saved out of the land of Egypt” by His grace (Ps 106:7-8, 44:3) and then the angels which “kept not their first estate” but whom God had showed great favour in making them excellent in strength (Jude 1:5-6; Ps 103:20).

The warning is relevant even now: “Receive not the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor. 6:1).

Millions of Deceived Followers

Another key characteristic of false prophets is that they make “many” followers (2 Pet. 2:2), some in the millions. Sadly but unsurprisingly, these followers imitate their sinful lifestyles, and the combined effect is that they give “the way of truth” a bad name (v.2_b; see Rom. 2:24; Matt. 23:15).

The false teachers tap into a ready crowd. They are able to deceive thousands and thousands of people because in this same end time people “will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

The false teachers crave human adulation, and the crowd crave myths and fables which will not rebuke their sin to their faces. They won't put up with the convicting power of sound teaching; they can't stand it. They have “itching ears”. They love to be regaled with religious stories which make no definite call to repentance or righteousness.

Healthful teaching (Greek) is rather judgmental. (See Isai. 58:1 Acts 24:24-25). But that is what every preacher under charge from God must to preach:

“I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at His appearing and His Kingdom,
“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim. 4:1-2).

However, the modern preacher is paid to preach. Like the corrupt priests of ancient Israel, he is a ‘career preacher’ who earns his keep by preaching to please the congregation (Micah 3:11). He can't afford to offend his paymasters, even though he may still claim to have his mandate from God!

The “last days” are indeed “perilous times” (2 Tim. 3:1). Serving God in truth and faithfulness is far from the minds of many so-called ministers. They are motivated more by greed. They are mercenary prophets (2 Pet. 2:3), and it shows in their mode of operation.

Their bait is their tongue. Theirs is not preaching “the wholesome words of Christ” (1 Tim. 6:3) or calling people to repentance and faith. Theirs is the use of fine, polished words of affected spirituality, what the Apostle Peter calls “feigned words”, to gain the confidence of their unsuspecting victims (2 Pet. 3:3).

The ministry is a business venture. They trade in fake spiritual gifts, selling branded anointing oil, holy water, bangles, specially blessed soaps and what have you. People pay to even attend their counselling sessions. They “make merchandise” of the people; they fleece them.

This is further evidence that they merely came in Christ's name to deceive and to defraud. The ministers sent by Christ preach and offer their spiritual gifts in the service of the people free of charge.

“And when He had called unto Him His twelve disciples, He gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of disease.’

“And He said unto them: Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:1, 8; see also Prov. 23:23; 3 John 1:7).

Misery is the lot of those not sent but came to defraud in the name of the Saviour! The false prophets have fattened themselves on the people’s money for the Lord’s slaughter, though in their unbridled avarice they are oblivious of it! The judgment of God is hanging over their heads like the sword of Damocles!

Pronounced “a long time” ago in the Old Testament (Ezek. 34:1-10. Jer. 14:14-15; 23:9, 11-15), it is not far off from taking effect. It “lingereth not” and “their damnation slumbereth not” (2 Pet. 3:3). The Judge is wide awake, and His judgment is certain. As surely as He punished “the angels that sinned” and the then ungodly world of Noah and the ancient ‘gay’ cities of Sodom and Gomorra, so He will punish these false teachers (2 Pet. 2:4-6). The justice of God does not allow sin to go unpunished. “It is a righteous thing with God” to punish evil. It’s a reflection of His righteousness (Rom. 2:2-3; Heb. 2:2; 2 Thess. 1:6).

Take care not to be exploited by the spiritual predators fraudulently using the holy name of the Redeemer.

A Crisis-filled World

The second end-time sign Christ gave relates to world trends. It answers the question, ‘What will the world be like in the last days?’

He describes a world characterized by political instability, calamities and outbreaks of epidemics:

“And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that ye be not troubled; for all the things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

“For nation shall rise against nation, and Kingdom against Kingdom, and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes in divers places. “All these are the beginning of sorrows” (Matt. 24:6-8).

Flashpoints and War Zones

The world of the last days is a world in crisis, and the *first* sign is the outbreak of wars.

We will “hear” of the wars. We will not necessarily participate in them or see action. But we will “hear of” them. That is assured! We will hear reports of them, and that is why this particular aspect of the Mount Olivet Prophecy of Christ is particularly relevant to our modern and technologically advanced age.

While it would have taken months and even years for people of past centuries (even as recently as the 19th century) to hear of a war that happened elsewhere in the world, now we not only hear of the outbreak of wars but also watch and follow them in real time, as they happen millions of miles away from us, via various media platforms in the comfort of our homes, or offices, or cars. We don't hear, or are informed, after the event; they are beamed live to audiences around the globe via satellite television, the Internet, etc. The words of Jesus have found an astonishing fulfilment in our time and age! In this closing hour of "this evil age", war reports have become an integral feature of media reportage, familiarizing us with such terms as Boko Haram, ISIS, Al Qaeda and Islamic Jihad, being leading insurgents and terrorist groups in the world.

In the meantime, wars between nations still rage, even as in-depth news reports and analyses fill us in on the raw gruesome acts perpetrated in the name of war. We cannot but recoil in horror!

In 2011, US-led NATO forces intervened in the Libyan Civil on the side of the rebels resulting in the overthrow of the government of Muammar Gadhafi and his eventual killing in a most ignominious manner! In 2014 Russia openly declared support for Crimean separatists seeking to secede from Ukraine, gave them military backing and now Crimea is a de facto independent state! As I write, Saudi Arabia is conducting an air campaign against insurgents in Yemen; Islamic State is ravaging parts of Iraq and Syria, spreading misery and death and annexing swathes of territory – and under almost constant bombardment from an ill-assorted, ill-coordinated anti-ISIS coalition which includes America and Russia. (See Rev. 9:1419 – A shadow of darker days to envelope the Middle East?). From the other end of the globe, reclusive North Korea occasionally fires verbal salvos at South Korea, Japan and the USA. The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians persist, an ever boiling kettle that is unlikely to simmer down anytime soon. Although Western sabre-rattling over Iran's nuclear programme has scaled down considerably, there are still discordant voices criticizing President Obama's landmark talks with the Islamic Republic.

The world is one large theatre of war dotted with flashpoints from the horn of Africa to the Caucasus!

Calamities rock the earth

With war and strife plaguing humanity, disease epidemics and natural disasters are not taking a back seat! Indeed, "there shall be famines, and pestilences and earthquakes in different places"

Millions die from hunger

Famine heads the list of calamities, and history has consistently witnessed the fulfillment of Christ's end-time prediction of the outbreaks of famine in different parts of the world.

Accordingly, it is estimated that, between AD 400 and AD 2012, no fewer than 140 major famines have occurred in different nations of the world with a total death toll of some 300 million (see Wikipedia List of Famines @en. Wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Famines).

The famines, which have had a devastating impact on the population size of victim nations and communities, have been put down to a number of causes, with drought and war identified as the two leading factors.

Records show the deadliest famine (to date) to have occurred in the years 1850-1875 in China. Attributed to the Taiping Rebellion, drought and famine, it decimated the population of China by a whopping 60 million (ibid.).

In 1959-1961, another major famine struck the Chinese. Known as the Great Chinese Famine, this famine is estimated to have killed between 15-43 million people. Other well-known famines of the twentieth century include the 1975-1979 famine in Cambodia in which an estimated 2 million Cambodians lost their lives to extermination, forced labour and famine under the reign of terror of the Khmer Rouge; the 1984-1985 famine in Ethiopia, and the 1991-1992 famine in Somalia, caused by drought and civil war.

Poignant images of emaciated starving men, women and children did not disappear with the turn of the 21st century. Various communities continued to be blighted by famines. The second Congo War (1998-2004 in DR Congo), for instance, resulted in the deaths of 3.8 million people mostly from starvation and disease. In 2012 West Africa witnessed a famine which affected 6 countries in the region, namely Senegal, the Gambia, Niger, Mauritania, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Experts identified the culprit as the 2012 Sahel drought (ibid.).

Again, the prophetic words of Jesus have not been without effect. From the early centuries of our common era to the present, famines of varying degrees have occurred in different places of the earth to warn mankind that we are truly in the last days.

Pestilences sicken and decimate populations

In lockstep with the menace of famine has been a rising incidence of pestilence. Pestilence is defined as "any infectious disease that spreads quickly and kills a lot of people"; an epidemic. And that's exactly what Christ meant. But there can be an escalation – a pandemic, defined as "a disease that spreads over a whole country or the whole world".

Of course, Ebola is a more recent epidemic still fresh in our minds, but it is only a late entrant in a long line of disease epidemics that have ravaged humanity down through the centuries.

Many of us do not realize it, but malaria is a long reigning epidemic which dates back to the days of the Roman Empire. Although it's now mostly endemic in the tropics, "malaria is still one of the world's most devastating pandemics, and continues to infect as many as 500 million people every year". Caused by a parasite found in certain mosquitoes, the sickness is "resistant to drugs, and a dependable vaccine has still yet to be developed".

Malaria and its effects go back a long time in history. During the American Civil War alone, "there were over a million cases of the disease", and many historians consider it to have been "a factor in the decline and eventual fall of the Roman Empire" [Evan Andrews, "10 Worst Pandemics", www.toptenz.net/top-10-worst-pandemics.php].

Malaria is certainly a silent but deadly killer disease with potentially far-reaching consequences. And yet it is still not satisfied with its centuries-long conquests. It continues its silent assaults eluding medical attempts at conquering it!

A lesser known pandemic but equally devastating in its effects was the Antonine Plague named after the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius. "Now suspected to have been an outbreak of measles or smallpox, the Antonine Plague was a pandemic that ravaged the Roman Empire from 165 to 180 AD... At its height the Antonine Plague killed a quarter of all the people it infected, as many as 5 million in all, and the victims included two of Rome's emperors. In 251AD, a similar sickness broke out....This time it was known as the Plague of Cyprian, and at its height it is said that the disease was killing 5,000 people a day in the city of Rome" (ibid.).

A gory statistic by any measure, but it was soon to be outdone in less than 300 years.

Here comes the Justinian plague! "The plague of Justinian was a particularly virulent disease that broke out in the Byzantine Empire around 541AD. Although the exact numbers are uncertain, the Plague is estimated to have caused the deaths of 100 million people worldwide—5,000 a day at its peak—and it is regarded to have killed one in four people in the eastern Mediterranean region".

Beyond its staggering mortality rate, the political ramifications of the Justinian Plague "were far-reaching as its devastation prevented the Byzantine Empire from being able to spread eastward into Italy and thus significantly changed the course of European history" (ibid.).

Several centuries passed, and another came virtually threatening Europe with extinction.

Also known as the Black Death, the Bubonic plague landed in Europe in the 1300s on a grisly business of mass slaughter never known before and after in the annals of pandemic outbreaks! Characterized by the appearance of oozing and bleeding sores on the body and a high fever, the plague (which ran from 1348-1351) would gain lasting notoriety as the mother of all plagues. It

is “estimated to have killed anywhere from 75 to 200 million people in the 14th century alone, with recent research concluding that 45%-50% of the entire population of Europe was wiped out” (ibid.).

Unfortunately, the world has not said goodbye to the outbreak of pandemics since the end of the Bubonic plague, which staged several minor comebacks until its last major outbreak in London in the 1600s.

Other deadly pandemics, which have and continue to inflict suffering and death, include Typhus, a highly infectious disease which killed millions in the 20th century, and Cholera which is transmitted through contaminated food and drinking water . It is a crowded list. Yellow fever, measles, influenza, Asian flu, SARs and swine flu, among numerous others, have all made the list of epidemics one time or another, although some, like HIV/AIDS, continue to defy medical treatment.

Estimates suggest that from the 2nd century AD to the present, over 200 different epidemics have broken out in in different parts of the earth in fulfillment of the Messiah’s end-time prophecy. While the majority of them are endemic or localized, a few have infected people on a worldwide scale, with a dozen or so still prevalent in various parts of the world.

Natural disasters take their toll

In tandem with the outbreaks of famine and epidemics, outbreaks of natural disasters (or as Luke 21:11 puts it, “fearful sights and great signs from heaven”) have occurred with equal ferocity.

Greater in variety and frequency than either famines or epidemics, natural disasters have battered the earth more frequently than any other plague in the history of mankind.

Earthquakes, the random outbreaks of which Christ said would serve as a sign of the end, fall under the category of natural disasters. And they have been veritable instruments of terror and destruction.

According to historical records, the 52 deadliest earthquakes happened between 1556 AD and 1797AD in which the total death toll was approximately 7, 400,000.

But it is not as though modern times have been spared the scourge of earthquakes. In the year 2005, Pakistan witnessed a magnitude 7.6 earthquake (on the Richter scale) in which 75,000 people were killed and 106,000 people injured. The previous year (2004) had seen an even severer earthquake which devastated portions of the shoreline of the Indian Ocean.

Appropriately named Indian Ocean Earthquake, the magnitude 9.15 earthquake “occurred on December 26, 2004. While the earthquake itself lasted for only 10 seconds, it caused a tsunami

that killed 200,000 to 310,000 people along the shores of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, South India, and Thailand with one death even occurring at Port Elizabeth in South Africa, 8,000 miles away from the epicenter” (<http://list25.com/25-worst-natural-disasters-recorded/5/>).

The major earthquake to rattle the world in 2010 struck the Caribbean nation of Haiti on January 12 measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale with a depth of 8.1 miles. “Its epicenter was located just south-west of Port-Au-Prince [the capital] with 59 aftershocks ranging from 4.2 to 3.9 magnitudes in strength. The strongest earthquake to hit the country since 1770, it had led to over 200,000 deaths, 2 million homeless, and 3 million people in need of emergency aid”(ibid).

2011 was the turn of Japan to reel from a twin disaster – a 9.0 magnitude quake followed by tsunami waves which hit the coast of Japan on March 11, 2011. “With a depth of 24.4km, this was the largest earthquake to ever strike Japan in recorded history. Documented as the 7th largest earthquake in the world, it led to about 15 million dead or injured, and 2,814 people missing. It also affected 18 prefectures, with over 250,000 buildings damaged or destroyed and caused a near nuclear disaster when there was a partial meltdown in 3 reactors of the Fukushima nuclear plant, which is the second largest nuclear disaster after Chernobyl” (ibid.) .

Certainly a multi-faceted tragedy to be expected from a quake with a tsunami under its armpit!

But the truth is that natural disasters (what Mark 13:8 calls “troubles”) have not been one way—earthquakes only—but have broken out in many different forms. The earth has endured a battering from cyclones, avalanches, blizzards/snowstorms, floods, tornadoes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, landslides and hurricanes (such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 USA).

And they have wreaked such mayhem and destruction that people have been reasonably terrified. “Men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth; for the powers of heaven shall be shaken” (Luke 21:26).

The costs in human lives, livelihoods and property are incalculable.

But how should the believer react to these terrifying happenings of the last days?

Heavenly Peace in a troubled World

“See that ye be not troubled”, says the Saviour, “for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. ... All these are the beginning of sorrows”.

In themselves, the cataclysmic events of the last days do not signal the definitive end of the world; the great finale when history will screech to a halt and the earth laid waste (Isaiah 24:1-

4), but that, that end is rapidly drawing near, though still a bit way off! They are simply the onset of birth pains!

Only keep your heart calm. The world of the end time is a world in turmoil plagued by wars, famines, pandemics, and calamities, but don't let that throw your own heart into turmoil. Don't let the world's troubled soul rub off on you. Instead, let your heart be anchored in the peace and love of Christ, who is "the anchor of the soul" (Heb. 6:18-20) on the world's high seas of crisis and uncertainty.

He assured us as part of His parting message on the night of the last supper:

"Peace I leave you, My peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27).

The peace of Christ works on the heart; it assures the heart! It insulates the heart from the fears and worries of this world (Php. 4:6-7). This is not the peace the world giveth. The peace the world giveth rests on happenings around us, the prevailing conditions of life. But the peace Christ gives rests on His finished work of redemption – that He has defeated Satan, the peace snatcher (Rom. 16:20); overcome the world of sin and troubles, and He's in control. So we take heart (John 16:33; 2Pet. 1:2-3). We have inner peace and tranquility.

Psalms 46 best captures this heavenly peace in a troubled world in an imagery where the earth is in the throes of chaos and upheaval—it disappears under the oceans, sinking the continents along with it; the mountains crumble and splash into the sea; the flood waters roar and lash the shore as the mountain quake. Yet amid all the tumult, "There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God shall help her, and that right early" (Ps. 46:1-5).

"The city of God" –persons over whom God reigns as King (symbolized by Jerusalem which physically has no river but a spring)—sits securely in the midst of the chaos watered by a pellucid "river of water of life" from the throne of Glory (Rev. 22:1). It is an oasis of peace and stability in an environment characterized by mayhem and destruction.

The river whose streams make glad the city of God is the river of God's Spirit:

"In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, if any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink.

"He that believeth on Me, as the scripture hath said, Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. ("But this spake He of the Spirit which they that believe on Him should receive.....)" (John 7:37-39).

The assurance is from the Holy Spirit within; it's that which situates the peace of God in our hearts. The Holy Spirit brings the presence of the peace of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

And nothing the world fears should ever frighten us (Prov. 3:24-26). The important thing is to stay devoted to the Lord, while seeing to it that the world doesn't infect us with its fears, particularly at this last hour of the closing age (see Isa. 8:11-13).

Instead, let's rededicate ourselves to the cause of the Kingdom and its values as end-time believers (Col. 3:1-2), intently looking forward to our redemption at the return of our Saviour:

"And when these things begin to come to pass, then LOOK UP, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:28; see also Eph. 4:30; Isai. 59:20).

Especially so when the last days won't be the golden age of righteousness.

A Tough Time to Be a Believer

The third category of end-time signs Christ gave describes the spiritual state of the world. Persecution of true believers, backsliding and betrayal, and apostasy and indifference will typify the spiritual state of the world. Yet this will not stop the preaching of the gospel in all nations:

"Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you; and ye shall be hated of all nations for My name's sake.

"And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another.

"And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.

"And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.

"But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.

"And this gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matt. 24:9-14).

The world persecutes the Church

The first sign of a world in an unhealthy spiritual condition is that it will persecute true believers, the bearers of God's truth. The world will not warm to them; it will hound them.

The persecution will range from infliction of suffering to infliction of death. The instigators of the persecution will not necessarily inflict the suffering or the death – either because they do not have the authority or ability to do so – but will in all likelihood hand over the believers to the appropriate authorities to be mistreated. (See Matt. 10:16-21).

Beloved, what our Lord foretold concerning the end-time persecution of believers is not some persecution set in the past or somewhere in the distant future. It is happening now!

As I write, a research conducted by the The Pew Research Center, a renowned research institute based in the United States, indicates that “over 75% of the world’s population lives in areas with severe religious restrictions [and many of these people are Christians]. Also, according to the United States Department of State, Christians in more than 60 countries face persecution from their governments or surrounding neighbours simply because of their belief in Jesus Christ” (“What is Christian Persecution”, www.opendoors.usa.org/christian-persecution).

Christian persecution is an ongoing reality, the evidence of which has lately been inflicted on us in the most shocking brutal manner! It’s horrifying to watch, but from areas of Christian persecution have emanated gruesome videos of blindfolded, tied-up Christians being put on ‘death marches’ and then beheaded under the fiendish, gibberish chants of hooded men wielding glittering swords!

These scenes of martyrdom have predominantly come from the Middle East and North Africa – the handiwork of such Islamist groups as the Islamic State (IS).

However, the 60 or so countries where Christians are routinely persecuted are not just confined to the Middle East and other known hotbeds of Jihadism, like northern Nigeria where Boko Haram is particularly active. They are spread across the world. This is because violent persecution is not all there is to persecution, although it may make the headlines and catch the most attention. Persecution can be in subtle, insidious forms and still hurt and cause pain.

That expands the persecution zone greatly beyond the areas usually associated with the perpetration of violence against Christians.

Indeed as Open Doors, a US based Christian watchdog organization, defines it, “Christian Persecution is any hostility experienced from the world as a result of one’s identification as a Christian”. This ranges from “verbal harassment to hostile feelings, attitudes and actions” and involves “beatings, physical torture, confinement, isolation, rape, severe punishment, imprisonment, slavery, discrimination in education and employment, and even death” (ibid).

Open Doors estimates that, on average, 322 Christians are killed for their faith *every month* around the world.

The world has not changed that much in terms of its hostility towards the children of light since the first-century AD. The forms and methods of persecution being meted out to followers of Christ today in the various lands of oppression were the same administered to early Christians in the first century.

In Hebrews chapter 10, we read an encouraging message to the Hebrew Christians who were then under persecution:

“But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions,

“Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions, and partly, whilst ye become companions of them that were so used.

“For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, KNOWING IN YOURSELVES THAT YE HAVE IN HEAVEN A BETTER AND AN ENDURING SUBSTANCE.

“Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward.

“For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise” (Heb. 10:32-36; cp. James 1:1-4).

In Heb. 13:3 these same Hebrew believers are exhorted to “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body”.

It is the same now as it was in the past. “They shall deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you”!

The use of the sword as the preferred tool of execution, in the midst of an abundance of modern killing tools like submachine guns, pistols and lethal injection, by the IS and other Jihadist groups, fulfills the prophecy in graphic detail! For in the context of the first century in which Christ spoke, the sword was the primary instrument of execution, and it has returned with a vengeance because the last “great tribulation” is around the corner:

“He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity; he that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience of the saint” (Rev. 13:10).

The agents of the Antichrist will use the sword on the saints, but they will not escape God’s justice! Believers are to take consolation from the fact that God’s justice does not slumber; neither can it be wished away! Vengeance is His, and He will repay (Rom. 12:19).

Until then, we must live with the reality that the world will persecute us in both overt and covert ways—by both the use of open violence and insidious methods of persecution at this time of the end.

Christian Persecution in America

The more insidious type of persecution is now prevalent even in the United States, the self-acclaimed guardian of the free world, and is growing there! It’s a spectre of darker days to come.

One of the pillars of American democracy, religious liberty—the freedom to practise one’s faith without fear of persecution or discrimination or harassment—is being perverted into *freedom from religion*! In America today, Bible believers are increasingly being stereotyped and caricatured as bigots and old-fashioned people with backward ideas. The growing mentality is that, the Biblical Christian worldview has no place in a modern open society so far as it threatens the rights of others to adopt lifestyles the Bible condemns as deviant and abominable!

Already, God has been ‘evicted’ from the public space in America, with a ban on the Lord’s Prayer in public schools and the outlawing of the display of the Ten Commandments in public places such as the courts.

Not only that. His values have been legislated out of state constitutions and the national statute book by means of pro-liberal, pro-gay constitutional amendments and judicial decisions issued from the lower courts to the Supreme Court!

What is left is the silencing of the shrill dissenting voice of Christian truth by law. (See Ps. 94:20; Dan. 6:7-9; Acts 4:17). And it is on course. So-called hate crime laws have been introduced to make it an offence to share the Christian doctrine on ‘non-traditional lifestyle choices’ like same sex-marriage. Or insist on your right to deny their legitimacy or denounce them as the Bible does!

Sound Christian teaching and plain morality have been criminalized. Today, in 21st Century America, some Christians have been fired from their jobs for expressing their beliefs; some have been fined for not endorsing homosexuality by their refusal to offer their services in support of same sex-marriage, as in the case of a Christian couple who were fined \$135,000 in July, 2015 for refusing to make a wedding cake for a lesbian couple (www.foxnews.com/opinion/2015/07/03/christian-bakers-fined-35000-for-refusing-to-make-wedding-cake-for-lesbians).

Recently, one Christian doctor was fired from his job as a urologist at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston for ‘discrimination’ and ‘harassment’—for quoting Bible verses on homosexuality deemed ‘offensive’.

All the ‘offence’ that Dr. Paul Church committed was “warning of the health risks of homosexual behavior and questioning the judgment of a hospital promoting such unhealthy behaviour” (Kade Hawkins, “More Christians Discovering Biblical Beliefs could Cost Them Their Jobs”, www.prophecynewswatch.com/2015/september30/304.html).

The wave of anti-Christian persecution in the name of civil rights, often sparked by the supposed violation of ‘gay rights’, is not only spreading all over the United States but also

throughout the Western World. Reports indicate that already in Canada and in parts of Europe, Christian ministers have been arrested and charged with 'hate crimes' for preaching Biblical Christian doctrine on homosexual activity. In the U.K, "some reputable church groups have been denied the right to run charities because of their moral beliefs, and individuals are increasingly being denied the right to work in their chosen fields because of a moral stance " [Caroline Wyatt, "Growing religious persecution a threat to everyone" www.bbc.com/news/world-30001063]

Is this not naked government-sanctioned victimization of the Bible-believing Christian?

The religious freedoms guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 and reaffirmed in 1966 by the same UN body under the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) are stealthily being taken away. Led by the United States, the governments of the Western World are chipping away at our religious freedoms, ironically in the name of human rights, and browbeating the poor countries of the world to follow suit (e.g. decriminalize homosexual activity and thus criminalize anti-gay rhetoric) or else much needed foreign aid meant for them will be cut!

We are in a new spiritual season—on the cusp between an expiring old order and an incipient New World Order! America is no longer the harmless lamb it used to be; it is now a roaring dragon:

"And I beheld another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spake as a dragon" (Rev. 13:11).

America's roar will summon all nations to oppose Bible-believing Christians wherever they live on the face of the earth. The final end-time persecution of the true church is only beginning to heat up! The remnant church is in for a rough ride!

But no surprises, it's to be expected.

The world cannot hate the Master and love the servant

The world has a visceral hatred for Christ Jesus and hence for those who bear His name and represent His truth. It rings in our ears: "And you shall be hated of all nations for My name's sake".

This is the uniform treatment the world will mete out to all true believers without exception. Given the hostile reception the world accorded the master Himself, it is certain that the world will hate us too. He forewarned us:

"If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you. "

“If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.
“Remember the word that I said unto you, the servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept My saying, they will keep yours also” (John 15:18-20).

The world’s hatred of the believer is a mark of true discipleship, “for all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). Indeed, it has been fore-ordained that “we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

So then, to be hated and persecuted by the world is a blessing in disguise. You secure for yourself a “great reward” in heaven and join the ranks of the illustrious prophets of old who were similarly persecuted (Matt.5:10-12).

But “Woe” unto you; says the Master, “when all men shall speak well of you! For so did their fathers do to the false prophets” (Luke 6:26).

The world is in love with falsehood and averse to the truth because “the whole world lies under the sway” of Satan, the arch-deceiver (Rev. 12:9; 1 John 5:19). A spirit of anti-righteousness pervades the world; it’s the spirit that controls the minds of the majority of the peoples of this world. Scripture calls it “the Prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2). It’s the ideology and wicked principles of this spirit that the vast majority of humanity follow—in direct opposition to the will of God, the Creator.

But he would not always have his way. The Son of God was manifested to destroy the works of the devil (1 John3:8). And in His name was power to convert the stone-hearted, save the perishing, heal the sick, set the oppressed free and bring people into the light and Presence of the glory of God. The name *Yeshua* - Jesus- became a symbol of defeat and setback for the devil. It’s the One NAME Satan hates to FEAR! Thus he instigated the world which still lived under his dark evil influence to hate Christ and all who called upon His name (see Luke. 19:47, 1 Cor. 2:8; Acts 9:13-14).

Furious at this end-time than ever before (Rev. 12:12), his hatred for the true church, which continues to undo his work by the Name of the Lord Jesus, can only intensify. Consequently, the saints are under pressure from all sides—government, family, friends, neighbours—but then let’s take it in our stride. The Master stands by us in this end-time of growing hatred and persecution which He Himself predicted. He’ll never forsake us (Matt.10:19-20; Mark. 13:11; Heb.13:5-6).

It's the world that will suffer loss in the long run—their hatred towards the people of God for the truth they represent will be “a testimony against them on the Day of Judgment” (Mark 13:9; Luke 21:13).

The world cannot receive the WORD therefore it hates the WORD. But we are the shrine of the WORD; the WORD has taken up residence in our hearts (John 15:7; Col.3:16), and so the world hates us a way of expressing hatred for the WORD.

Our Lord – “the WORD made flesh” —foresaw it all and has warned us accordingly.

But how would individual believers react to the world's hatred and persecution? How will you take it?

The Church under Pressure: True Colours Begin to Show

Faced with persecution and hatred from the world – a situation we are now in at varying levels of intensity, including job losses – the reaction of the faithful will not be uniform. Reaction will differ from person to person.

Christ Disowned

First, “many will be offended”; they will turn their backs on Christ and abandon the faith. They will consider the price to pay for following Christ too high and they will call it quits. They can't stand tough times.

It speaks volumes about the quality of their spiritual life. They are fair-weather believers. It's “halleluiah” and “the Lord is good” while the going is good, but “here I come world” when the going gets tough.

The Master spoke of them in the parable of the sower:

“A sower went out to sow his seed....” And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture” (Luke 8:5-6).

He then explained in plain words:

“They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe and in time of temptation fall away” (v.13).

Those who desert the faith at the first hint of trouble lack spiritual depth; they only reacted emotionally to the good news. They have *no roots* because the word has *not taken root* in their lives. They neither allowed the word to implant itself in their hearts (Jam 1:21) nor yet allowed it to dwell richly in them “in all wisdom” (Col.3:16).

They only listened to the word at a superficial level and *did not take after the word*. They did not absorb it into their system and consequently forgot the righteous image the word painted of them in reflection of its own flawless nature ([Jam. 1:22-24, 25]). So the word hit a rock in their hearts and could not penetrate deep enough; it did not become the Rock on which they built their lives – an impregnable Rock capable of withstanding all storms:

“Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of Mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

“And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock” (Matt. 7:24-25; see also 1 Jn. 2:14).

Obedience and commitment to the Word is the way to build on the Rock which no external force can topple! Otherwise, a brief gust of wind will be enough to blow you away.

Like it or not, persecution has its place in the Christian life. It’s a spiritual refinery where believers are purified; it’s where the chaff is separated from the wheat.

Daniel spoke of the trying times the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes IV, the Greek Seleucid ruler, would bring to the Jews, which is but a forerunner of the “great tribulation” the saints will undergo under the worldwide rule of the antichrist:

“And such as do wickedly against the covenant shall he [Antiochus/Antichrist] corrupt by flatteries: but the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits.

“And they that understand among the people shall instruct many: yet they shall fall by the sword, and by flame, by captivity, and by spoil, many days.

“Now when they shall fall, they shall be holpen with a little help: but many shall cleave to them with flatteries.

“And some of them of understanding shall fall, to try them, and to purge, and to make them white, even to the time of the end: because it is yet for a time appointed” (Dan. 11:32-33).

The coming of the wicked one and the tribulation he will unleash on the saints will create a clear distinction between the people associated with the true God: It will separate those who’re unfaithful to the covenant from those “who know their God” (and demonstrate so by having implicit faith in Him and keeping His commandments, Jer. 9:23-24; 1 John 2:3-4).

During this period, one’s action and demeanour will show which group one belongs. The unfaithful ones will fall for the flatteries of the deceiver and thus worsen their spiritual situation.

And they will use flatteries of their own to move within the circles of the saints as part of them, whereas they have defected to the other side.

Lies and flattering appeal to their inner nature; that's what makes them tick. They like to flatter and be flattered, like to lie and be lied to. 'Deceiving and being deceived'. Their nature is contrary to what is true and righteous and therefore can't stick to righteousness. They will fall away in response to the flattery or deception of the deceiver—precipitated by persecution.

Like the Israelites of old, Pharaoh's pursuit and the hardships in the way will create in them an instant desire to return to the fleshpots of Egypt (see Ex. 14:10-12; Num. 11:4-6) because that desire is already there in their hearts in latent form (Acts 7:38-39).

The Word was sown in shallow soil above the rock of their hearts. It didn't really sink in, unlike the hearer of "good ground":

"But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it, which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (Matt. 13:23).

However, during this same time of persecution, the people who know their God to be faithful, holy and dependable will "work exploits". These are a people of understanding, a people who operate by the wisdom and knowledge of God and also have insight into the plans of the wicked one (2 Cor. 2:11). In direct opposition to the work of falsehood, they will instruct many in the way of righteousness.

Not surprisingly, the persecutor will come hard against them, and "they shall fall by the sword, by flame, by captivity and by plunder".

But they will be none the worse for it. They will emerge from the trial with improved spiritual lives- "to purge and to make them white". They have been refined through fiery trial removing from their spiritual lives the dross of besetting sins, complacency and indolence (Zech. 13:9; Prov. 25:4).

Disciple Peter in his young faith displayed characteristics of the believer who panics and deserts Christ when trouble and persecution break out. Yet his was a slightly different case. The devil singled him out for a mortal attack on his faith; he took deliberate aim at him for the destruction of his faith, not that the word fell on a rock in his heart.

The Master told him on the night of His betrayal and subsequent trial and condemnation:

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat.

“But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (Luke 22:31-32).

Later that night, Simon Peter would deny knowing Christ three times – and the cock crowed just as Jesus had forewarned him. But “the Lord turned and looked upon Peter” (vv.33-34; 54-62).

We can be sure that even when fear causes us to lose faith, the Master will be there “to keep us from falling” with His countenance of strength and salvation (Jude 1:24). That’s why He taught us to pray that He leads us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

Persecution, the trial of our faith, is a necessary evil. But blessed is he who endures it, “for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of Life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him” (Jam. 1:12).

So the only real option is to endure. For the Master is able to make us stand. Otherwise, you will not only betray the Lord in heaven, you will take it out on your brethren here below—the church on earth!

Hatred from within

The disaffection that the world’s hatred and persecution will create among the brethren who do not have the Word deep in them will not only drive them away from Christ, but will also have the ripple effect of souring their relationship with the brethren still in the faith.

That is to say, “they shall betray one another and shall hate one another”.

On the surface, it looks like an internecine feud, a contest in mutual hatred. But no true believer will ever hate or betray his brother. For “whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15; see also 4:20).

The command is to love the brotherhood and extend dignity to all men:

“And this commandment have we from Him, That he who loveth God love his brother also” (1 John 4:21).

“Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the King” (1 Pet. 2:17).

So the culprits are from one side – the apostatized brethren who have left Christ for the world. They are the ones who have turned on the believers in good standing, hating and betraying them to the authorities. They left their “first love,” and bitterness and animosity has taken root. (See Heb. 12:15).

But then, some of them were not true believers in the first place. They were false brethren who infiltrated the church with one mission – to destroy the church from within! (See Gal. 2:4; Jude 1:4). Their unholy mission is akin to that of Judas Iscariot who *betrayed the Master with a kiss* (Luke 22:47-48). The Lord spoke of him:

“Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil? “He spake of Judas Iscariot the son of Simon: for he it was that should betray Him, being one of the twelve” (John 6:70-71).

It’s a sad observation, but the church will never be rid of false brethren in the mould of Judas Iscariot. Like him, they will keep their agenda secret until persecution presents them with the opportunity to betray their (ex-) brethren or openly hate them!

The last days are indeed ‘perilous times’ for the believer, both within and without the church. The Master has duly forewarned us. Worry not. That’s how the spiritual season is!

Little wonder, the spirit of error has many ‘prophets’ operating on its behalf in the church!

Apostasy takes over the pulpit

False prophets will arise and operate within the church. And there shall be “many” of them and they will “deceive many” people (v.11)

We witness then persecution from without and apostasy – an attack on the truth – from within, but all of them the handiwork of one evil mastermind, the devil, with one singular objective – to destroy God’s church.

The doctrinal attack is a full-scale attack on the church with “many false prophets” enlisted in the effort. This is an undeniable phenomenon evident even to the casual observer. It is a ‘boom season’ in ‘Christianity – at least in Ghana and other African countries. This boom in church business has brought to the fore a new breed of charismatic prophets whose methods vary from stamping on the sick to ordering church members to eat grass off the ground for healing and blessings! It verges on the insane, but it’s exactly these churches of the maverick prophets that are mushrooming all over the place and pulling in the crowds.

Elsewhere in the West, the fad is the ‘emerging church movement’ which seeks to make Christianity more ‘relevant’ in a post–modern world. That has meant reinterpreting Christian belief and practice in the light of contemporary culture and human experience among other benchmarks such as multiculturalism. This inevitably calls for doctrinal elasticity and flexibility in which objective truth is replaced with subjective truth – with no clear, fixed lines between the holy and the unholy. It’s about how you feel, how something seems right to you; your value judgment.

The big casualty is the “sound doctrine”. It has been rejected out of hand!

What increasingly finds favour across the Christian world is the ‘Prosperity Gospel’, a key feature of the Charismatic Movement and on which it rode to popularity. Its proponents teach that “financial blessing is the will of God” for the Christian “and that faith, positive speech, and donations (possibly to Christian ministries) will increase one’s material wealth” (Wikipedia, prosperity theology). Material prosperity is seen as a divine promise to claim as a Christian believer who has been called to receive a blessing mainly seen as physical in nature.

But, in reality, God called us not to make ‘mammon’ the object of our lives, but Jesus and His way the object of our faith and life (Rom. 8:29; 14:17)— and that He has made a gracious provision for our needs so long as we trust Him! (Matt 6:24-33; Heb. 13:5).

The Prosperity Gospel paints a rosy picture of the Christian life, but Christ never promised us a cushy life where we will never see hard times. Even when He has materially blessed us in fulfillment of His promise to those who commit first to the cause of His gospel, He says we must still expect “persecutions” (Mark 10:29-30).

But the Prosperity Gospel puts the emphasis on the blessings here below, which is a Laodicean gospel of worldly riches (Rev. 3:11-18), distracting church-goers from “the things in heaven where Christ is seated on the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1; see Ps. 119:89; Rev. 11:19).

The focus should be heaven, but carnal man is of the earth and naturally finds earthly blessings more appealing than some distant intangible heavenly bliss which awaits the redeemed!

The inescapable result of the work of the false prophets is that they will succeed in deceiving many people. For they operate widely and greatly outnumber God’s true ministers.

Besides, as already noted, their message sells in a world that too often sides with the devil and has “itching ears” for fables and messages which condone sin and are not ‘judgmental’ or critical of sinful behavior (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

But their real power lies in their ability to deceive the majority of people without their suspecting it! It’s a trick that goes back a long time!

When the Apostle Paul in his farewell message to the church in Ephesus warned them to watch out for “grievous wolves” who shall “enter in” among them “not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:25-31), he knew what he was talking about. Back then, when forty years had not passed since Christ ascended to heaven, “the mystery of iniquity” was “already at work” (2 Thess. 2:7). And this is how all false prophets operate in the church. They make people disobey God (commit iniquity) under the illusion that they are worshipping God—while the people themselves have

no idea that, that very act is abominable to God. It does not appear to them as flagrant sin because it has been presented to them in the guise of Christianity.

That is the pernicious power of the false prophet operating in the church. Anything packaged as patent idolatry will not sell; it'll be rebuffed. But clothe the same thing in Christian ceremony, and people will fall over themselves to grab it.

Yet 'iniquity' is iniquity whether disguised or not, and heaven is not amused. The purpose is to make people break God's law and destroy their faith in Christ and their devotion to Him (2 Cor. 11:2-4, 13-15).

The denial of Christ is at the centre of it all, as the Apostle Peter forewarned us in the second chapter of his second epistle:

“But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false prophets among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that brought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction” (2 Pet. 2:1).

False prophets subvert the authority of Christ in the lives of their followers in primarily two ways: First, they teach a false concept of grace. They misapply the grace of God to mean licence for immorality and thereby deny Christ His lordship over people's lives because, even though they purport to follow Him, in reality they have been taught to disobey Him (Jude 1:4).

Another way false prophets attempt to rob Christ of His lordship over people is by taking away adoration from Him so that they might usurp His place as the object of faith. They project themselves as 'spiritual masters' having inherent spiritual powers themselves and who, by both direct and indirect pronouncements and gestures, effectively tell people, "look to me. I'm all you need to trust"! They are not the servants of Christ who lead people to Him. They are not under-shepherds to Christ," the chief Shepherd", who is "the good shepherd" (1 Pet. 5:2-4; 2:25; John 10:11).

The sheep is their own, and they have been greedily feeding themselves on their 'largesse'. They exploit and extort by all sorts of means, leaving the sheep spiritually malnourished, diseased and bruised (Ez.34:1-6; Micah 3:5). The chief Shepherd is watching the evil ways of the self-seeking shepherds with an eye to vengeance. (vv. 7-16; Micah 3:6-7 cp. v.8).

The denial of Christ through disobedience and undermining of faith in Him is the point of all apostasy considering that salvation is to be found only in Him:

“Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

This is also the reason why pagan festivals which neither honour Christ nor the Father have been smuggled into the church. Pagan festivals like Saturnalia (renamed Christmas) and Easter are really in honour of the sun-god Shamash or Sol Invictus and the goddess Eostre (or Astarte), not in honour of the Lord Jesus who commands us to worship Him as He instructs and not as the pagans worship their idols (Deut. 12:29-32; Matt. 28:20).

But as Christ predicted, the spirit of error has been operating in Christianity for a long time through the work of the false prophets to this day, and (although today's Christians are better informed) the traditional observance of pagan festivals have come to stay!

And the situation has gotten worse yet! It sounds incredible, but in these last days of unprecedented evil, there exist preachers who are actually self-confessed atheists and deviants.

Era of Godless ministers

Since the turn of the 21st century, there has been a steady stream of media reports about Christians ministers in the West, especially the U.S.A, who have proudly come out as gays (or lesbians) and have since gone ahead to marry their same-sex partners in a church wedding ceremony!

In October 2015, a catholic priest who held a senior post at the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Monsignor Krzysztof Charamsa, announced at a news conference in Rome that he was both gay and in a relationship. After the Vatican fired him from his post following the announcement, the priest wrote a letter to Pope Francis in which "he criticized what he called the Vatican's hypocrisy in banning gays, even though he said the clergy was 'full of homosexuals'". In a word to his fellow gay priests, he called on "all gay cardinals, gay bishops and gay priests [to] have the courage to abandon this insensitive unfair, brutal church". All because the Roman Catholic Church was denying gay Catholics like him their "human rights" in an expression of "homophobic hate", although the Roman Catholic clergy was "full of homosexuals" (Caroline Wyatt, "Gay priests decries 'inhuman' treatment of homosexuals Catholics" www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34654581 Emphasis mine).

Meanwhile, Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, who is heterosexual, has registered his rejection of a homophobic heaven, saying he would rather go to hell than going to a heaven that "condemned homosexuality as a sin". He stated emphatically at a United Nations' gay rights "Free and Equal" campaign function in Cape Town: "I would not worship a God who is homophobic, and that's how deep I feel about this. I would refuse to go to a homophobic heaven. 'No' I would say 'Sorry', I mean, I would much rather go to the other place" (Desmond

Tutu: “I’d pick Hell over an Anti-Gay Heaven” www.charismanews.com/world/40416-desmond-tutu-i-d-pick-hell-over-an-anti-gay-heaven).

Poignantly, he seems to know the Word well enough to know that heaven is decidedly anti-gay and therefore hell is the ideal place where the ‘human rights of homosexuals’ will be respected and they’ll be free to express their ‘sexual orientation’ and be happy together with their supporters! For the God of the Bible and of heaven has made it clear that “there shall in no wise enter into it [the city of heaven] anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb’s book of Life” (Rev. 21: 27; also 22:15; 1 Cor. 6:9).

That “abomination” includes the abomination of sodomy or same-sex relations:

“Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind, it is abomination” (Lev. 18:22; also 20:13; cp. Rom. 1:26-28, 32).

Yet a whole minister of international repute finds God’s disgust with homosexuality distasteful and would gladly go to hell *in protest* at heaven’s anti-gay policy—in solidarity with the gay community, one of whom is his own daughter priest!

That daughter priest of the Archbishop recently got married to her long time female partner! According to media reports, “The daughter of Nobel Laureate and former Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, married her long time lesbian lover Prof. Marceline van Furth in a small private ceremony held in the Netherlands last Wednesday December 30 [2015]” (www.citizenstv.co.ke/entertainment/former-archbishop-desmond-tutus-daughter-marries-lesbian-lover-110989) (Accessed Jan. 18, 2016).

It is a descent into a quagmire of ever greater abominations in the house of God:

“And he said unto me, Go in, and behold the wicked abominations that they do here [in the Lord’s house].

“Then said he unto me, son of man, has thou seen what the ancients of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chamber of his imagery? for they say, The Lord seeth us not; the LORD hath forsaken the earth.

“He said also unto me, Turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abomination that they do” (Ezek.8:9, 12-13).

It is a slippery slope. The darkness is not going to recede; it is going to get darker and more assertive. To us God-fearing believers, “it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret” (Eph. 5:12). To them, it is a *liberating new era of darkness*; it is Sodom comeback, and they feel quite proud about it:

“The shew of their countenance doth witness against them; and they declare their sin as Sodom, they hide it not.

“Woe unto their soul for they have rewarded evil unto themselves” (Isa. 3:9).

You cannot indulge in “the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph. 5:11) and do your soul good. You turn out to be the worst enemy of your own soul; you bring a self-inflicted curse upon yourself—for adamantly choosing evil when you know what is right from the Holy Scriptures and the moral voice of your own conscience. (Read Deut. 11:26-28; Rom. 2:15).

The divine prophetic word has been spot on! “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears, And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

“They will not endure” bespeaks a general spiritual condition of the last days; it describes the spiritual state of the vast majority of the church going masses of the end time.

Religion will not be uprooted, but from pulpit to pew the religion that will be practiced in the name of Christianity will pander to the lusts of a generation that has no intention to live for Christ in holiness and righteousness but for themselves.

The leaven of liberalism (aka the time of Judges where everybody lived to please himself, Judge 17:6) has extinguished the flame of righteousness from the pulpit and hence the light of God’s truth from the hearts of the congregation. And it is by mutual agreement. The people “love to have it so” (Jer. 5:30-31). But more than liberalism, atheism now preaches from the Christian pulpit!

Atheists but Preachers!

Welcome to the world of “belief-less Christianity”! It takes apostasy to a whole new level! Here, the preacher preaches a ‘God’ he does not believe in, or at least conceptualizes him in a way that is fundamentally different from how the congregation sees God! And yet he preaches on with pride!

The atheists in ministry are the vanguard of a new godless movement in Christianity which goes by the name ‘Christian atheism’.

As its name suggests, it’s about a belief in the unreality (or non-existence) of God as a self-existent, eternally existing Supreme Being who is outside time and space (transcendent) and yet involved in life and the universe (immanent). They deny all this – the personhood of God as a supernatural spirit Being who actually exists and from whom all reality emanates (I Ch. 29:11-

12), and they deny that His son, who existed with Him eternally and became human by the Incarnation, was an actual historical figure. (See 2 Pet. 1:16-17).

Christian atheism strikes at faith itself, belief itself, and aims to undermine all revealed truth. Chief among them is the belief that because there is really no Creator God who wields both moral authority and moral accountability over man, people should be free to express themselves and to formulate and follow their own value judgments. To them, the existence of God is counter-progressive.

In fact, one of their theorists Thomas J.J. Altizer “wrote of God as the enemy to man because mankind could never reach its fullest potential while God existed” (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_atheism). (Accessed Jan. 2016).

What “potential”?

He means human self-expression without the moral restraints imposed by ‘God’. But that untrammelled human expression is, by scriptural definition, the unleashing of the human potential for evil and sinfulness. “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not” (Rom. 7:18).

Yet *belief-less Christianity* insists God is the problem, the barrier to human progress. And so we ought to dethrone Him in our minds and in our conception of reality and live by our own rules and principles in conformity with modern culture.

Even so, Christian atheism has by no means arrived at a consensus on its core beliefs. It is a small Babel in its own right, and proponents range from *atheists* (there is no God and never has been) to *agnostics* (it is not possible to know whether God exists or not) to those who “believe in God as a concept”.

It is this third view of God (it is by no means the full range) which is shared by the majority of the *Christian ministers who are not believers*, that is to say belief-less preachers. It is the central theology (philosophy) and focal point for their ministry and the reason why they won’t quit, despite not believing in God, denying the virgin birth and regarding Biblical events and accounts as fiction!

Klaos Hendrikse is a Dutch pastor who openly declares himself an atheist but continues to serve a congregation of the Protestant Church in Netherlands. In November 2007, he published a book the Dutch title of which translates as “Believing in a God who does not exist: manifesto of an atheist pastor”.

In the book, Hendrikse argues for the non-existence of God and rather insists that God is a metaphor for human experience. “God is for me not a being but a word for what can happen between people”, he writes in his book. “Someone says to you, for example, I will not abandon you; and then makes those words come true. It would be perfectly alright to call that [relationship] God” (www.albertmohler.com/2009/03/31/does-your-pastor-believe-in-god).

Another belief-less pastor who describes God as “a symbol of myth-making and not credible as a supernatural being or force” is John Shuck of the Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA).

With this understanding of God as an unreal being, it is not surprising that Shuck calls the Bible “a human product as opposed to special revelation from a divine being” (Jennifer Le Claire www.charismanews.com/opinion/watchmen-on-the-wall/48891-presbyterian-minister-doesn't-believe-in-god-yet-defends-his-christianity). (Accessed Jan.2016).

And he maintains his brand of belief-less Christianity is the dominant Christian sect of the future: “I believe one of the newer religious paths could be a belief-less’ Christianity. In this sect, one is not required to believe things. One learns and draws upon practices and products of our cultural tradition to create meaning in the present”. He continues: “Belief-less Christianity is thriving right now, even as other forms of the faith are falling away rapidly. Many liberal or progressive Christians have already let go or de-emphasized belief in heaven, that the Bible is literally true, that Jesus is supernatural, and that Christianity is the only way. Yet they still practice what they call Christianity” (ibid.).

The prediction of Shuck, who is a huge fan of congregations “that make huge commitments to LGBTQ people” is not likely to be proved wrong—if a survey of the beliefs of the membership of the liberal protestant church in the Netherlands is anything to go by (a survey which may well mirror the beliefs of other western Christians).

The survey showed that “42% of the members of the protestant church in Netherlands (PKN) are nontheists, (i.e. non-believers in God), while “an investigation of 860 pastors in seven Dutch Protestant denominations” revealed that “1 in 6 clergy are either agnostic or atheist” (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian-atheism).

So broadly speaking, there isn’t much of a discrepancy between the beliefs and theological expectations of an increasingly ‘belief-less’ clergy and those of congregations that are also becoming increasingly ‘belief-less’ in their religious views. There is a correlation; there is a meeting of minds.

Both clergy and laity can’t “endure the sound doctrine’, and faith, the first principle of the Christian faith, has been thrown overboard:

“Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God,

“And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:14-15).

“But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name” (John 20:31).

Faith is the clarion call of the FAITH: “But without faith it is impossible to please God Him for Him: for he that cometh to God must believe that HE IS, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him” (Heb.11:6). “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

But they object, saying nobody ever saw God; there’s no empirical, rational basis for belief in God. Yet it’s the creation that reveals God. “For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse” (Rom.1:19-20).

“But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. Who knoweth not in all these that the hands of the LORD hath wrought this? “In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind” (Job.12:7-10).

The existence of God is self-evident truth from the sheer order, intricacy and wonder of creation. Indeed, it beats reason to believe that there is no supreme Intelligence behind nature! That even the lower creatures know by instinct!

Yet persons who purport to be preachers profess non-belief in a living God or aren’t certain that He exists. They have reduced God to a concept, a symbol of human experience, and that, in their words, is ‘demythologizing’ God! But in reality they mythologized the Living God into an unreality, an abstract idea; a convenient, versatile indefinable ‘god’ of human experience! (See Rom. 1:25).

In the eyes of the belief-less ministers, this is enlightenment; it reflects higher learning. But scripture just called them “fools” (Rom.1:22). For it’s the fool who says in his heart “There is no God” (Ps. 14:1).

So why still serve in the ministry, which is obviously also a “myth-making” vehicle for the worship of a “myth-making” God?

They enjoy the control and authority that come with the pastoral role; they understand that the Christian message can give a sense of hope to ‘weak-minded people’. Thirdly, and perhaps most important of all, they say that the ministry provides them a comfortable lifestyle (and income).

These are their reasons for their continued involvement in the ministry. They have not been sent by God who, by the way, does not exist in their world.

So what message will they have for their congregations? What will be the impact of their ministries on the souls of their followers?

They will only deepen their unbelief and convert them to atheism right in the church through a 'Christ-centered' message of human experience which, in reality, denies Christ in the most fundamental way. Neither He nor the Father are real but that the Godhead is "a kind of poetry that is written by human beings, as a way of dealing with the fact that we are finite, we are vulnerable".

That's one unbelieving pastor's conception of 'God'! (See I John 4:2-3).

The end-time prophetic words of the Lord Jesus has come true in the most vivid and astonishing manner! These are indeed "perilous times" in which men will have "a form of godliness" but will deny its life-transforming "power" (2 Tim.3:5). Because they preach an unreal God, a mere concept, who is not living or all-powerful but the creation of futile human imagination which has no power to save or transform.

The command of scripture is that "from such turn away" (2 Tim. 3:5b). Don't be taken in by their "enticing words of man's wisdom"; their lofty-sounding words of 'Christian humanism. Otherwise, your faith will "stand in the wisdom of men", not in "the power of God" (I Cor. 2:4-5).

So beware. They will subtly preach against implicit faith in a real, living, Eternal, prayer-answering God, yet they don't leave you without planting in you some sort of faith or belief. You'll end up placing your faith in their words, and living by them, and therefore in their worldly wisdom. You are a servant to whom you obey! (Rom. 6:16).

The Christ, the true Son of God, has got many spiritual competitors out there whose sole desire is to obliterate the impact of "the word of His power" from among men in favour of 'fables'— the invented theories of men. This is the last days:

"Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that the antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time" (I John 2:18).

"Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.

"If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed:

"For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds" (2 John 1:9-11).

A denial of “the doctrine of Christ” is denial of the Godhead made up of the Father and the Son (John 1:1-3; I John 1:3; Col 2:9), and is so grave a spiritual offence that whoever encourages the offender or wishes him well is deemed an accomplice.

Since the true doctrine of Christ espouses belief in both the Father and the Son, one teaches a doctrine of an unreal God to expose himself as a spiritual fraud, a charlatan, who is, in fact, godless. After all, they represent a religious philosophy which is a God-less one

The night hour is thickening. It’s time to be vigilant and sober as a believer (I Peter 4:7). The floodgates of unrighteousness have been opened as never before. In a world in which the truth of God has been drowned out by the falsehoods of legions of false prophets of all stripes, this is only to be expected.

Love grows cold

As an unhealthy spiritual sign of the end, Christ forewarned that love will be in short supply in an age dominated by lawlessness:

“And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold” (Matt. 24:12).

It’s a spiritual moral trend directly connected with the work of the false prophets. The corrupted word they sowed has borne evil fruits!

Iniquity will so overrun the world that there will be little incentive to love back—because nobody showed you love in the first place! They only hurt you; they plotted against you; they sought your downfall. If you had your way, you would gladly pay them in their own coin, much less love them back!

Lawlessness has become a common way of life for the billions of unrepentant masses living under the control of Satan, the devil (I John 5:19), and there’s always the strong temptation to copy their (thieving, crooked, deceptive) ways to match them squarely! But the scriptural admonition is, “My son, if sinners entice, consent thou not” (Prov. 1:10). It continues:

“Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men.

“Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away.

“For they sleep not, except they have done mischief; and their sleep is taken away, unless they cause some to fall.

“For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.

“But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day” (Prov. 4:14-18).

The “path of the just” is the way of life and calling of the true believer. His life is a “shining light” which cumulatively increases in brightness (2 Cor. 3:18; Dan. 12:3) as the “perfect day” (when we will put on the glorious body of Christ) approaches (Phil.3:20-21; Col. 3:3-4).

Light is a symbol of righteousness (Dan. 12:3; Matt. 5:16). And so the call is, *excel in righteousness*. Bask in the light of God’s righteous and reflect the same in cumulative brightness as you “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our lord and savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). “For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light: For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth” (Eph. 5:8-9).

But still, you see and feel evil all around you. So as an alternative to imitating the sinful lifestyles of the world, you decide to refrain from lawlessness as a believer, but neither will you also show love to others. This is where the Master is especially concerned. Your love has grown cold. After all, who qualifies to be shown love? Who has shown you love or done you good for you to return same?

Get your sense of righteousness right. Do adjust your lamp!

Righteousness is not just the absence of sin, but the pursuit of good deeds. It is not a passive moral mode where you neither do good nor evil; you neither harm nor help. It is not to put your spiritual vehicle in neutral gear. It is to move forward in the right way! Thus we are reminded in Jam. 4:17, “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin”. We read in I Peter 3:10-11:

“For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile:

“Let him eschew evil, and do good, let him seek peace and ensue it”.

In his exhortation to King Nebuchadnezzar against the backdrop of a looming personal catastrophe, in which he would be driven away from among men to live in the wild like a beast for seven years to learn to acknowledge the superiority of God in the affairs of mankind, Daniel said to him:

“Wherefore, O King, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness and thine iniquities by shewing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquility” (Dan. 4:27).

In all instances, we see that the avoidance of evil is simply not enough but its replacement with righteousness. That is biblical righteousness, and love is at the heart of it:

“Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and with all thy mind. ‘This is the first and great commandment’.

“And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:37-40).

This is the very love-centered righteousness iniquity threatens to overthrow by its ubiquitous, snowballing presence. It will be a natural response to an unusual upsurge in unrighteousness.

But we have been called to stand out from the crowd as “the children of light”. The challenge is live up to the father’s expectation in an age where sin has virtually become an accepted way of life.

While keeping back love is a sign of selfishness which is itself a sign of “the last days” (2 Tim. 3:1-3), showing love to all manner of men, even one’s enemies, reflects the higher love of God which we must emulate as His children (Matt. 5:43-48).

Iniquity reigns but not over the believer’s life. He must stand up for righteousness regardless of the costs.

Salvation is for those who endure

The last days are spiritually challenging times no doubt about it, but that is no excuse to give up on our faith. We must persist in faith and righteousness. That’s the right way to respond to the unprecedented rise of lawlessness.

The Lord has assured us that he who endures to the end will be saved:

“But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved” (Matt. 24:13).

The end times are trying times “but” they are not unsurmountable—if we endure! The motivation is the blessing to be gained from endurance – salvation:

“Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised them that love Him” (Jam. 1:12).

There’s “trial” but there’s also “love”, and that is the impelling or driving force which produces endurance. Because we love the lord Jesus, our savior, we endure for His sake and are not discouraged. (See I Pet. 1:6-9).

But what did Christ mean by endure unto the end?” Endure what?

He meant all the pressures of the world that will hit the end-time Christian, namely persecution, hatred, threat of backsliding, betrayal, falsehood and unprecedented levels of

immorality (Matt. 24:9-12). If we desire to be saved, we must not buckle under them, but endure them. We must face them, or go through them, without despairing of righteousness

However tough it gets, we must resolve that quitting the way of life is not an option, and that we will persist in faith and righteousness, come what may!

So be one to endure, be one to make a difference. Many will obviously fall away; they will succumb to the pressures of this world, but be one of the few exceptions to overcome by endurance.

And the promise is that, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne, even as I also overcome, and am set down with My father in this throne" (Rev. 3:21).

The power to overcome does not come from our own selves but from the Mighty One who has promised to save us if we endure.

In every generation, He has always had a remnant of faithful followers whom He has chosen and preserved by His grace. In the days of Elijah, the prophet, at a time the Israelites had abandoned the worship of Yahweh for Baal worship, the remnants who remained true to Him numbered seven thousand. Thinking he remained the only true servant of the living God, Elijah had complained:

"Lord, they have killed thy prophets, and digged down thine altars; and I am left alone, and they seek my life.

"But what saith the answer of God unto him? I have reserved to Myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal.

"Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace.

"And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work" (Rom. 11:3-6).

So was it in the days of Noah when the whole earth was awash with evil. "Noah found grace". And the grace was that he was preserved and insulated from the corruption all around him and therefore the destruction which would come by flood:

"And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth Me that I have made them.

"But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.

“These are the generations of Noah: Noah was just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God” (Gen. 6:7-9).

The evidence of grace upon Noah’s life was his righteous life:

“And the LORD said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house into the ark, for thee have seen righteous before Me in this generation” (Gen. 7:1; cp. 2 Pet. 2:5).

So it is today. “At this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace”. That remnant chosen by grace did not bow to Baal, then a national cult. ‘Remnant’ Noah was righteous in his generation in an age of total depravity. The same is true today. Those who live under grace are those who live lives of righteousness. “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Titus. 2:11-12).

Thus the result is that “sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law [in the sense of living under its penalty as a law-breaker, Jam. 1:25; Rom. 8:1-2] but under grace” (Rom.6:14). Lest we get the wrong idea, the apostle clarifies for us what it means to be “under grace” (as against mere legalism, for example, which has no power to make a person righteous):

“What then? Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid” (Rom. 6:15).

Grace is the controlling factor here. Life under the grace of God is a life of victory over sin. This is the answered prayer of David: “Remove from me the way of lying: and grant me Thy law GRACIOUSLY” (Ps. 119:29). “Order my steps in Thy word,” he pleads in verse 133”, and let not iniquity have dominion over me”.

It is grace for today. He still gives grace: “But He giveth more grace. Wherefore He saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (Jam. 4:6).

With grace from Above, we can certainly endure unto the end and be saved:

“But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you” (I Pet. 5:10).

And there’s hope for the true salvation seeker. The true gospel will not go extinct or cease to be preached in this last hour of the closing age.

The Gospel will be preached in all nations before the end

This is also an end-time sign:

“And this gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come” (Matt. 24:14).

The Master refers to a particular gospel recognized by both Himself and His disciples as the one authentic gospel. “This gospel” has repentance and faith at the heart of it:

“Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God,

“And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1-14-15, also Matt 4:17).

The urgency of the call of the gospel could not be lost on its original hearers, neither on anyone who sincerely seeks God today! ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God beckons!’ Repent and Believe the Gospel!

This is the gospel of salvation which Christ first began to speak “and was confirmed unto us by them that heard Him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to His own will” (Heb. 2:3-4).

The Messiah still does preach today through His chosen ministers authenticated by God Himself with signs and wonders and miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Meanwhile, it’s divinely guaranteed that at no point in time, during the period of the last days of the gospel age, will the proclamation of the true gospel of Christ cease. It will be preached in all nations during this gospel age, which Christ Himself inaugurated after He was baptized by John the Baptist and which He entrusted to the Apostles and the church down through history (Mk. 16:15; Matt. 28:19-20).

In saying this, Christ foresaw the age of advanced technology and mass communications which will give a major boost to the worldwide dissemination of the gospel, bringing it into virtually every nook and cranny of the world. This technological support in furtherance of the worldwide gospel outreach effort was foretold by the prophet Daniel in close proximity to each other in the twelfth chapter of his book:

“And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.

“But thou, O Daniel shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased” (Dan. 12:3-4).

“Many would be turned to “righteousness” by the messengers of God because the technological means to reach mass audiences scattered across the face of the earth would be available. For one thing, fast-travelling modern transportation systems, such as airplanes, would be developed. For another, international mass media and telecommunications would also be invented in an era of technological and knowledge explosion. We may look upon the present information Age as a scientific phenomenon, but it’s not without Biblical prophetic background. The Bible foresaw it as providing a great vehicle for the proclamation of the gospel in especially these last days of the modern era.

So you and I are without excuse now. The message is being proclaimed via television, radio, the Internet and books, among other media platforms. By means of this plethora of mass communications, the gospel has entered every country, city and home *but not necessarily every heart*.

Ideally, the gospel seeks men for God and His Kingdom, but because not all men will heed the message, it is to be “preached in all the world for a witness to all nations”.

That is its inescapable accomplishment. (See Ez. 2:5). No one can say I never heard the truth of God. The preaching of the gospel in all nations is the witness or testimony that all humanity heard the word but some, and I daresay the majority, refused to repent and believe the gospel.

Accordingly, no one can plead ignorance of the truth on the great day of God’s judgment, and thus God will be justified in His condemnation of the wicked.

Little time left

Although it’s getting late, the gospel age has yet to end. Therefore, there’s still an opportunity for repentance through faith in Christ. The ‘gospel age’ is the period known as “the day of salvation”, “the accepted time” (2 Cor. 6:2). Still, it’s only a “day”, albeit an opportune day of divine favour. The gospel age will not always be. It has an end point at which the proclamation of the true gospel will come to an end.

Prophet Amos tells of the desperation that will seize the pleasure-seeking youths who ignored the gospel of the Kingdom during the gospel age:

“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.
“And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the LORD, and shall not find it.

“In that day shall fair virgins and young men faint for thirst” (Amos 8:11-12).

The rarest, most sought after commodity in those days of a complete dearth of heavenly truth will be the Word of God. With all the divine graces influencing men’s hearts in the way of truth and salvation withdrawn, the world will enter a time of spiritual stagnancy never known before! It will simply be impossible to undo one’s spiritual state, whether good or bad:

“And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book for the time is at hand.

“He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still.

“And behold, I come quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give every man according as his work shall be” (Rev. 22:10-12).

Here, the time of the call to repentance is past, and the words of the ‘mighty angel’ have come to pass:

“And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven,

“And sware by Him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer: But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, the mystery of God should be finished, as He hath declared to His servants the prophets” (Rev. 10:5-7).

Each and every individual, whatever your spiritual state, will be stuck in an irreversible ‘spiritual stasis’ because there is a heavenly blockade against the preaching and hearing of the word of God preached for 2000 years.

The righteous God of creation has put up with sinful man long enough! Whatever your soul desired and pursued, that you will have! Human history has entered a new phase. Sin reigns unchallenged in all its outrageous grandeur!

The restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit, “the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven” for the preaching of the gospel (I Pet. 1:12), has been taken away, and the “man of sin” rules the world:

“And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time.

“For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.

“And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of His mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of His coming” (2 Thess. 2:6-8).

The lawless era of the Antichrist begins at the point the Gospel Age ends!

NOTICE! NO ‘RAPTURE’ YET. WE ARE NOT THERE YET!

The Worldwide Rule of the Antichrist and the Last Great Tribulation come next!

We now enter upon the final end-time sign: The worldwide rule of the Antichrist, bringing in its wake the last great wave of worldwide persecution of true believers.

The holy place of the Temple in Jerusalem is a focal point for this prophecy. Mark the prophetic words of the Lord:

“When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:)

¹⁶ Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains:

¹⁷ Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house:

¹⁸ Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes.

¹⁹ And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!

²⁰ But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the Sabbath day:

²¹ For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matt. 24:15-21).

A key event of the prophecy which will serve as a signal to true believers to take to flight in a time of “great tribulation” is “the abomination of desolation” standing in the holy place of the Jerusalem temple. It will not be a secret event. Believers alive at the time, especially those living in Judea/Jerusalem, will “see” it; they will be eye witnesses to it.

And they must understand its prophetic spiritual significance from their reading or study of the scriptures—which underlines the need to regularly read the scriptures so as to be armed with the right spiritual information for an accurate assessment of the times. (See 1Tim. 4:13 & 2 Tim.2:15).

The specific writer to whom the Master directs us is “Daniel the prophet”. The Prophet Daniel mentions “the abomination that makes desolate” at least three times in his prophetic book. All bear on the desecration of (the holy place of) the temple but occurring at different periods in prophetic history.

In chronological order, the first “abomination of desolation” perpetrated against the holy place was carried out by Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) the Greek Seleucid ruler in 168 BC when he offered a pig on the altar of the Jerusalem temple and then erected an altar to Zeus right within the sacred walls of the temple! That is the act of desecration specifically described in Dan. 11:31:

“And arms shall stand on his part, and they shall pollute the sanctuary of strength, and shall take away the daily sacrifice, and they shall place the abomination that maketh desolate”.

But then, Antiochus was merely a forerunner. In 70 AD during the Roman invasion and subsequent destruction of Jerusalem, the *second partial fulfillment* occurred when soldiers of the Roman General, Titus, sacrificed to their eagle standard (or ensign/flag), the bird of Jupiter, within the precincts of the holy temple. Shortly afterwards, they set fire to the temple razing it to the ground in a ballooning inferno! (See Dan. 9:26).

All that is left of the Second Temple, which was lavishly refurbished and expanded by Herod the Great (John 2:20) after it had been built following the return of the Jews from their 70-year captivity in Babylon, is the Wailing or Western Wall at the Temple Mount (*HaKotel*) in Jerusalem. That was not even part of the temple structure itself but one of four outer walls surrounding the Temple Mount on which the Temple proper was sited.

The words of Jesus have been fulfilled with exactitude:

“Verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down” (Matt 24:2).

The levelling of the Jerusalem Temple, approximately forty years after He predicted it, is a grim reminder of the power of divine prophecy. It cannot and does not fail (Isai.34:16).

And the Master in foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem in the parallel passage in Luke chapter 21, which event would result in the dispersion of the Jewish nation (Luke 21:20-24), did imply that a desecration of a sort will accompany the destructive invasion—which was the sacrifice the Roman soldiers made to their Jupiter god in the east gate of the temple!

Yet in so far as this “abomination of desolation” mentioned in Matthew 24:15 takes place at the end of the gospel age whereupon “the end” of the age will come, *it is an event that occurs in the very final stages of human history*, the prophetic period which will mark “the end of all things” as the Apostle Peter put it (1 Pet. 4:7). That’s when the final abomination of desolation will occur.

This time, the Antichrist will *desecrate the temple with his own person*, with his blasphemous claim to deity. The Apostle Paul wrote:

“Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;
“Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God shewing himself that he is God” (2 Thess. 2:3-4).

The “temple of God” referred to in the text is the temple in Jerusalem, then standing at the time Paul wrote to the Thessalonians in circa 54 AD. But since the **ninth day of Av** [August] 70 AD to date, the temple has been in ruins. How then can the prophecy of the abomination of desolation be fulfilled in a non-existent temple?

The Jewish nation stands again

Since AD 1948, the conditions for the fulfillment of the prophecy have been steadily falling into place. The year 1948 was the year in which Israel was restored to her ancient land, bringing to fulfillment the words of Yeshua that the worldwide Jewish dispersion and Gentile domination of the Jerusalem will come to an end at some point in prophetic history:

“And they [Judeans] shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled” (Luke 21:24).

After nearly 1900 years of exile from the Holy Land, Jewish survivors of the Nazi Holocaust emerged from the pit of hopelessness and powerlessness into statehood in their own ancient land, in one of the phenomenal fulfillments of Bible prophecy in the modern era!

The prophet Ezekiel pictured them as a “valley full of dry bones” upon which he was commanded by God to prophecy for the dry bones to live. “So I prophesied as the He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army. Then He said unto me, son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost; we are cut off for our parts. Therefore prophesy and say to them, Thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you out of your graves. And shall put My Spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the LORD” (Ez. 37:10-14).

And the State of Israel is “an exceeding great army” – a militarily strong country that has survived and kept her enemies at bay by dint of military might!

For the prophet Isaiah, the miracle was the mode of Israel’s rebirth:

“Who hath heard such a thing? Who hath seen such things? Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day? Or shall a nation be born at once? For as soon as Zion travailed she brought forth her children” (Isa. 66:8).

The “travail” was the tension filled, crisis-filled atmosphere in which Israel was born under a menacing cloud of threat of annihilation carried out within 24 hours of Israel declaring itself an independent Jewish state!

The day was 14th May, 1948, the culmination of a process going back to the late 1800s when Jewish immigrants from mainly Europe began to settle in Jerusalem and other parts of the land in trickles to live, work and die in the Holy Land.

Others, however, sought a more organized way to re-establish a national Jewish home in Palestine, and Zionism was born at about the same late 1800’s. They were all stirrings of the prophetic word concerning Israel’s return to the land.

In 1917, the British government issued the famous Balfour Declaration in support of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, giving a boost to the Zionist dream. When the First World War ended, Great Britain was given mandate over Palestine by the League of Nations. But soon Britain was caught up in a bitter struggle and rivalry between the Jews and the Arabs, and Britain began to limit Jewish immigration into Palestine--a policy that would coincide with the Nazi persecution and massacre of the Jews in Europe.

Local Jewish resistance to the British anti-immigration policy was inevitable. But neither would the Arabs accept any of the British compromise proposals to divide Palestine into Arab and Jewish sectors.

Palestine was now a scene of unremitting conflict with Jews against Arabs and Arabs against Jews and both against the British.

Unable to handle the maelstrom of violence any longer, Britain turned to the United Nations for a solution. The UN recommended the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state, while Jerusalem is placed under international control. On Nov. 27, 1947, the UN General Assembly adopted the Palestine partition plan, a decision which was accepted by the Jews but rejected by the Arabs right out of hand.

War is afoot!

The British had trained and equipped an “Arab Legion” east of the Jordan River in Transjordan (now Jordan), turning over to them their military posts. The plan was that once they exited Palestine, the Arabs could quickly mobilize and crush their enemies.

In all, seven Arab countries bordering Israel on the south west (Egypt), north and north-east (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon), including Saudi Arabia (which provided funding and support) looked forward to a massacre of the Jews and so warned their people to leave the land for a short while to avoid the impending bloodbath.

The Jews, meanwhile, concentrated on forming their own government (Jer. 30:21) and declaring an independent Jewish state.

On May 14, 1948, David Ben Gurion, Israel’s first Prime Minister proclaimed the State of Israel, and the Arab armies moved in on the new nation in force to destroy it. But miracle after miracle intervened to give Israel the victory.

An article written by the late A.N Dugger, a Jewish Christian who lived in Israel, and published in the *Mount Zion Reporter*, a magazine he founded, documents several of these miracles. They include the miracle of bees swarming out of their hives in their thousands to fight off the troops from Jordan; of the Egyptian army surrendering to Israeli army officers because they had been warned to do so by the bearded leaders of an innumerable company of mounted soldiers stationed on all the hills behind the Israeli lines; and of the armies of the north suddenly brought down with dysentery and unable to fight any more—just when they had penetrated fairly deep into the land from the north!

It was a different time. The national rebirth of Israel was a prophesied event that could not be stopped. The travail of Zion was not a travail of destruction but of a new dawn.

Nineteen years later, Jerusalem was liberated in the Six-Day War, bringing to a startling fulfillment the prophesied words of Yeshua that “Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled”.

For the first time in nearly 2000 years, Jews regained access to the Western Wall. And now we are heading towards a prophetic climax.

Plans are far advanced to rebuild the Jerusalem temple. One of the prominent Jewish groups dedicated to the rebuilding of the temple is the Temple Institute of Jerusalem. They have over the years made great efforts and sacrifices to construct the sacred objects to be used for holy service in a future temple to be built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. These include the seven-branch golden lampstand (the Menorah), the table of shewbread, the altar of burnt

offerings, the priestly garments, the breast-plate of the high priest and numerous worship implements.

In addition, the Temple Institute has prefabricated large sections of the temple structure so that at the right time those prefabs can be taken to the site and built into the superstructure of the temple.

Meanwhile, the Jewish Sanhedrin has been reconstituted—since 13th October, 2004. Composed of 71 members (plus the president), the Sanhedrin aims to take charge of all religious affairs in Israel, including matters relating to the proposed rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple.

The Temple, the Two Witnesses and the Antichrist's Peace Prize

All is nearly set for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. But it is “nearly”. Major political roadblocks need to be cleared. And that is a goal to which international diplomats have devoted their energies and time over the past several decades.

Only they have no real trophies to show for their efforts. The Israeli-Palestinian peace process remains in diplomatic gridlock! Virtually no progress. You name it: The 1991 Madrid Conference, the 1993 Oslo Accords, the 2000 Camp David Summit, the 2003 Road-map for Peace, and even the recent Obama-led 2013-2014 peace talks aimed at “a two-state solution”, have all failed to produce a comprehensive and final peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

That is a prize waiting to be grabbed by the Antichrist via a seven-year agreement with Israel. Interestingly, this seven year agreement takes place during the last seven years of this age and is prophetically known as ‘the 70th week of Daniel’ – the final week of Daniel’s 70 weeks’ prophecy outlined in Daniel chapter nine.

“And he shall confirm a covenant with the many for one week. And in the middle of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and offering to cease, and on a corner of the altar, desolating abomination even until the end. And that which was decreed shall pour out on the desolator” (Dan. 9:27 *The interlinear Bible* by Jay P. Green p. 691).

The phrase “the middle of the week” is prophetic code for ‘the middle of the seven years’ (that is, a week of years). That that is when the Antichrist will bring about a cessation of the revived animal sacrifices (which some Jews in Israel have since restarted) in the restored Jewish temple

in Jerusalem by an act of gross desecration! He'll proclaim himself 'God' in the temple to the horror of the Jews.

This is what the Lord Jesus refers to as "the abomination of desolation" in Matthew 24:15. It happens at the mid-point of the last seven years of world history.

The first half of these last seven years will be dominated by an entirely different spiritual programme – the work of two prophets God will send to warn the world of the coming of the Antichrist. They will operate in the power of the spirit of Moses and Elijah, two of God's foremost prophets who are scheduled to call humanity back to God's law and a return to true worship "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD" (Matt. 4:4-6; cp. Matt. 17:1-4, 11). Their joint ministry based in Israel will commence at a time the temple will have been rebuilt--at the start of the last seven years. They will operate for 'a thousand two hundred and sixty days', that is, 3^{1/2} years. And they will be given divine supernatural powers to afflict the earth with some of the *same plagues Moses and Elijah* unleashed on the rebellious in their days:

"And there was given me a reed like unto a rod; and the angel stood, saying, Rise and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein.

"But the court which is without the temple leave out, and measure it not; for it is given unto the Gentiles: and the holy city shall they tread under foot forty and two months.

"And I will give power unto My two witnesses, and they shall prophecy a thousand two hundred and threescore days, clothed in sackcloth.

"These are the two olive trees, and the two candlesticks standing before the God of the earth.

"And if any man will hurt them fire proceedeth out of their mouth, and devoureth their enemies: and if any man will hurt them, he must in this manner be killed.

"These have power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy: and have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will.

"And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them.

"And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified" (Rev. 11:1-8).

The "great city where our Lord was crucified" is universally known as Jerusalem, but at this time in prophetic history it will be "spiritually called Sodom and Egypt" – which adds to her past sin relating to the crucifixion of our Lord at the hands of wicked men.

The double inglorious name-"Sodom and Egypt" will fit the prevalent moral and spiritual character of Jerusalem at that time. The city will be a hotbed of homosexual activity ("Sodom") and the occult represented by 'Egypt'.

Today, the spectre of this godless Jerusalem to come has appeared in Israel. The worldwide gay movement has one of its vibrant chapters in Israel where a so-called 'gay pride parade' is held in the city of Jerusalem every July since the year 2002. On 23rd February, 2016, the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset, held its first-ever 'LGBT Rights Day' in a show of support for the LGBT community in Israel.

Meanwhile, there are movements and proposals among the world's political and religious power brokers for Jerusalem to be made an international spiritual centre for all faiths.

In the book *Project 666*, the author, Michel Smiely of Stockholm, Sweden, not only proposes a "666 Peace Plan to solve the conflict between Israel and Palestine, but also to "convert Israel into the Spiritual Centre of Christianity by reconstructing the Third Temple of Jerusalem" (*Project 666* First English Edition, p.91, 1990).

The word "Christianity" in there is a smokescreen. The reference is not to Biblical Christianity, which is the faith of Yeshua (Jesus) and the Apostles. Instead, it is a euphemism for a syncretistic world religion in which a bastardized, paganized Christianity plays a leading role but in which all other faith traditions are welcomed on board in the name of unity and love! It's a new and enlarged version of Babylon!

In their own words, "Project 666" aims at "the creation of a new political, economic and social system...[it is] the basis over which the present human civilization of our nuclear-space era can construct the most perfect society ever known in history superior even to the paradise offered by the different religious sects and beliefs" (ibid. p.6).

The main vehicle for the realization of this utopia, this humanistic paradise on earth, is the European Economic Community (now the European Union), envisaged to evolve into "The New Roman Empire of the West".

The book *Project 666* even foresaw 'Brexit' (the withdrawal of Britain from the EU) 26 years before it happened in July 2016! It is a secular book of unusual prescience.

And it insists that the Third Temple of Jerusalem will be built—just as Bible prophecy foretold thousands of years ago.

This is the temple which stands in Jerusalem as God's Two Witnesses begin their work.

Their presence and ministry in the holy city of Jerusalem in Israel will upset the prevailing world political and religious order in no small way. The world system, which will virtually be under the control of the Antichrist, will brand them as 'reactionary agents of terror' who only preach bigotry. But then, they will be absolutely unstoppable and untouchable. The whole machinery of the world political system will be employed against them, but it will neither be able to silence

them nor crush them. “For if any man will hurt them, fire proceeds from their mouths and devours them”!

Their enemies will only succeed in killing them after their ministry comes to an end at the end of the first 3^{1/2} years allotted to them. At their death, the whole world community will rejoice over them as they “see”, from wherever they are located on the face of the earth, their dead bodies lying in the street of Jerusalem. The miracle of modern telecommunications, which enables the different communities of the world, geographically separated from one another, to watch and follow the same events at roughly the same time, will do the trick.

The news of the killing of the two prophets will be beamed live across the globe via the vast array of media platforms. For three and half years, these two roughly dressed, powerful prophets of God successfully challenged the power of the Antichrist and stymied his programme of world rule. But here lie their lifeless bodies in the street. Media reports of their death will be cause for instant rejoicing! “Interestingly enough”, as I write, “there is great controversy today among Israel, Jordan, the United States and the Palestinian Authority over *a proposal to install security cameras in the temple Mount area*” (Matt. Ward, “Rebuilding The Jewish Temple on The Horizon?”

www.prophecynewswatch.com/article.cfm?recent_news_id=66 Emphasis mine).

A detail of end-time Bible prophecy is being readied for fulfillment in due time. The future has cast a baleful shadow over the present.

The spirit of the times of the Antichrist has arrived—even in Israel!

Ahead of the dark rule of the Antichrist, in which he will inaugurate a reign of evil and lawlessness will reach its apogee, the world has been embracing and endorsing all that human societies across cultures have always held to be morally repugnant and unacceptable and therefore forbidden by law. A new moral order is on the rise in the name of human rights and equality.

The result is Psalm 94:20 fulfilled: “Can unjust judges be allied with you, those producing wrong in the name of law?” (CJB)

This is exactly what the godless elites of this hell-bound world have done. They have succeeded in turning *moral wrongs into civil rights*, legalizing same-sex marriage, abortion, etc., with growing agitations for same status to be accorded incest and bestiality! A whole programme of de-stigmatization and re-socialization, including the introduction of ‘non-offensive’ nomenclature and non-discrimination labels, has been rolled out in a bid to “call evil good, and good evil” and “put darkness for light and light for darkness” (Isa. 5:20).

Nevertheless, wrong is wrong and so is evil, no matter the intellectual and media whitewashing. The most High is not impressed and His judgment is near:

“It is time for Thee, LORD, to work: for they have made void Thy law” (Ps. 119:126).

No legalized sin or perversion highlights the conspiracy against the authority of God’s law than the legalization of same-sex marriage, bringing into sharp focus the end-time prophetic words of the prophet Isaiah:

“Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah” (Isa. 1:9).

The scripture here speaks not of a mere subculture, a minority lifestyle on the fringes of society, but the mainstreaming of homosexual behavior – as it is happening today! It speaks of a perversion accorded official recognition as a ‘legitimate’ form of sexual expression.

Such was the case in Sodom and Gomorrah who were said to be “exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD” (Gen. 13:13 NKJV; 18:20-21; 19:4-7; Jude 1:7).

The spirit of the times of the Antichrist has preceded his actual rise to world power. That is why the abomination of homosexuality has been accepted in Israel and elsewhere. For “not all Israel are of Israel” [that is, spiritually regenerated children of God (Rom 9:6-8; also Rom. 2:25-29; Gal. 4:28-29). For the record, Israel has only had a physical re-gathering, not a spiritual rebirth (Ez. 36:21-24; Isa.11:11-12).

But the time is coming, after the world rule of the Antichrist, when a “fountain” shall be “opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness” (Zech. 13:1; Isa. 36:25-29).

That’s when national Israel will recognize its long awaited Messiah, Yeshua – against whose universal rule from Jerusalem Satan sought to defile the holy city. “And they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for Him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for Him, as one that is in bitterness for his first born” (Zech. 12:10).

There’s hope for Israel. For “all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob” (Rom. 11:26).

Until then, the sign of “the abomination of desolation” will continue to crystallize in Israel – as a warning to us that the end of the gospel age is approaching at a faster rate than ever before!

The Antichrist Demands Worship and Fights the Saints

When this crucial sign of ‘the abomination which makes desolate’ is fully actualized, the Antichrist will barge into the temple in Jerusalem – in the middle of the last seven years – and present himself as deity worthy of worship (2 Thess. 2:2-4). This is what will touch off the last great persecution against the saints known as the “great tribulation” because the Antichrist will demand worship as a matter of international law, which the saints will refuse to comply with. At this point in time, the Antichrist will unleash all his fury on the saints of the Living God what the scriptures call a “war with the saints”, and he will *overcome them* but not *conquer them*:

“I behold, and the same horn made war with the saints and prevailed against them” (Dan. 7:21).

“And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power given him over all kindred’s and tongues, and nations.

“And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:7-8).

With the machinery of world government behind him, the Antichrist will act to harass, oppress and even martyr some of the saints, but the witness of the Lamb’s Book of Life is clear that he will not succeed in conquering them—making them comply with his decree to worship him! The saints remain faithful to God. Revelation 15:2 foretells their spiritual victory of righteousness over the Antichrist:

“And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire: and them that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image and over his mark, and over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass having the harps of God” (Rev. 15:2).

Before then, the Antichrist will prevail physically in his war against the saints. This will set the saints fleeing from his persecution as he tries to enforce the decree requiring all men to worship him:

“Then let them which are in Judea flee into the mountains.

“Let him which is in on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house:

“Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes.

“And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that given suck in those days!

“But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter neither on the Sabbath day:

“For then shall be great tribulation such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor even shall be” (Matt. 24:16-21).

It’s the ‘war against the saints’ under way with the passage describing the impact it will have on the saints at the micro level—how they will live through those terrible times of persecution which the Antichrist will prosecute as though he were waging a war with a deadly enemy!

Already, the saints are in retreat, on the run! It's a natural reaction the Master Himself recommends – "flee"! Make haste to flee elsewhere on seeing "the abomination of desolation" standing in the holy place". Don't delay! That's why having very young children with you at that time could prove a deadly encumbrance.

Another encumbrance could be in the form of the Sabbath or a cold winter season. So pray about it. The time of the "great tribulation" is not an off-prayer season. Therefore, we are to pray for God to reschedule our inevitable flight from occurring on the Sabbath so we will have no qualms about fleeing on His holy day or risk doing what is not allowed on the Sabbath. Similarly, we should pray to avoid having to flee in a bitter cold weather.

But flee we must! The unprecedented time of "great tribulation" has come (Dan 12:1; Rev 7:13). The abomination of desolation – the deification of the Antichrist plus the setting up of his image (Rev 13:14) in the Jerusalem temple – has given rise to the prophesied Great Tribulation, which is the Antichrist's war with the saints. The two events are causally related (cause and effect relationship).

And there will be no place to hide humanly speaking – except that the faithful God promises His people a place of refuge in a time of trouble (Rev. 12:14; Ps 27:5; Isa 4:5-6).

In these days of biometric passports and GPS-enabled surveillance systems, *the electronic trail* of fleeing tribulation saints (using formal points of entry and departure) could easily give away their whereabouts. But take heart: Jesus would soon be coming!

In Matt 10:16-23, Christ forewarns His disciples of the perils of preaching His gospel in a hostile world of evil. While the hostility of the world towards the bearers of God's truth would characterize the entire gospel age right from the days of the original apostles, it will significantly peak in the very last days towards the return of the Saviour. In that short intense period of spiritual tension, a period which will cover the duration of the rule of the Antichrist, "brother deliver up the brother to death and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for My name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved. But when they shall persecute you in this city, flee ye into another, for verily I say unto you, ye shall not have gone other the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come".

Israel (where the Antichrist will kill the Two Witnesses prior to proclaiming himself 'god' in the temple in Jerusalem) will be the epicentre of the persecution the Antichrist will launch against believers worldwide and therefore typifies the kind of persecution believers elsewhere will endure. The hatred will not be confined to Israel, but "ye shall be hated of all men for My name's sake". If so, the eschatological (or end-of-age) application (in the run-up to Jesus' return) applies universally.

Again, the command is, flee from place to place; be on the run. Only that pray to avoid fleeing on the Sabbath or in cold weather.

Here, neither is the validity of the Sabbath nor the seasonal occurrence of winter in question. The Sabbath would continue to be observed by the disciples of Christ, who enquired about the signs of the end in the first place. And so would winter come and go in its season. And it flowed so naturally. There was no hesitancy in the words of Christ. Indeed, He and His immediate disciples shared a common understanding that subsequent generations of true believers would continue to observe the Sabbath right up to the time of the great tribulation. It wasn't a matter for debate! "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9 NASB).

In contrast, the Antichrist will outlaw the seventh-day Sabbath of the Bible and declare Sunday the universal day of worship for all Christians, as was adopted at the ecumenical "Meeting of Nairobi" attended by the late Pope John Paul II in 1985. Now, you can appreciate why the main targets of the Antichrist's war will be Sabbath-keeping Christian believers!

The saints of the tribulation period walk the blood-stained, tear-soaked path of the ancient saints who were killed for the faithful testimony they bore to the truth of the gospel. The Antichrist's last war against the remnant saints is the evidence that vengeance is near, and the time has come for God to punish the wicked who oppressed His people. Finally, the Judge acts on the cry of the saints:

"And when He had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:

"And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

"And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled" (Rev 6:9-11).

The final round of persecution which will fill up the cup of the wicked (Ps 75:8) is the "great tribulation" in which the Antichrist will persecute believers not only for preaching and living the Word but specifically for refusing to worship him in addition to rejecting his mark – the "mark of the beast":

"And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgement was given unto them and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand year" (Rev 20:4).

The martyred saints fall into two groups, (however subtle it might seem). The former represent the martyred saints of old who were killed for the word of God. The latter, on the other hand, are the saints of the tribulation period on whom the Antichrist will try to foist his abominable image-worship and mark of identification which would also be used as a medium of exchange in place of cash (Rev. 13:15-17).

It will be a time of great difficulty for the saints, so much that “except those days should be shortened”, says the Master, “there should no flesh be saved, but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened” (Matt 24:22). The “shortened” time is the 42 months or 3½ years given to the Antichrist to rule the world, being the second half of the last seven years (Rev 13:5).

But there’s another reason why the days of the rule of the Antichrist and of the tribulation will be cut short.

Last-minute campaign of deception against the literal, visible return of the Messiah

Although the deceivers of the time will perform with so much zeal and power that “if it were possible they shall deceive the very elect” (Matt 24:24), they will not determine how long they will operate. Like the tribulation, their deception will be cut short.

The Antichrist himself will spearhead the campaign of deception operating in the fullness of the power of Satan. This is the one “whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders. And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion that that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thess. 2:9-12).

God will allow the world its heart’s desire to saturation point! They have no space for or appreciation of truth. So God allowed error and deception to monopolize the attention of men by withdrawing from them any inward work of His Spirit relating to conviction of sin or impressing on their conscience the error of their ways. That’s what scripture means by God sending them “a strong delusion”. (See Rom 1:24; Ps 81:11-12; Hos. 8:11-12; also Gen. 6:3; John 16:8-11). Deception now runs riot! The paraphrased Bible *The Message* puts it this way”...since they’re so obsessed with evil, God rubs their noses in it – gives them what they want. Since they refuse to trust truth, they’re banished to their chosen world of lies and illusion.”

It is a time in human history in which evil will not only thrive but will seem to have triumphed. Under the rule of the Antichrist, evil will simply be the norm in an overturning of all that is ethical and holy (as it has already begun with the legalization of evil).

That is why the Antichrist is called “the man of sin...who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped”. That is to say, he will, in attempting to take worship from God, present himself as a rival to God being himself “God” and exalt himself above all the honour of His name. He will oppose everything the creator commands, teaches, advocates, endorses, likes and recommends. The Antichrist will seek to oppose the will of God in every way and any way he can!

It’s their season. It is a field day for false prophets, and the Master has not failed to warn us of the form their last-minute campaign of deception will take. Under the auspices of the Antichrist, while the great tribulation is on-going, Christ says, a great army of false Messiahs and false prophets will freely operate, amid a display of supernatural powers, with the sole aim of gaining recognition as the Christ of the scriptures returned to earth when, in fact, the return of the true Christ will be just a few years away! It’s a last-minute tactic of the devil to win over all mankind, even the very chosen of God, at that crucial period of the end. However, the Saviour is always ahead of him and has given us enough clues to differentiate His return from the false claims of the false Christs. The difference mainly lies in the *manner* of the return – with the methods and approaches of the false Christs as different from that of the true Messiah as darkness is from light!

First, with regard to the false Christs, you will not know their appearance (or re-appearance) by yourself; someone will have to tell you about it:

“Then if any man shall say unto you, lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not
“For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders, insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.
“Behold, I have told you” (Matt 24:23-25).

One purpose of the false reports of Christ’s return, apart from a clear intent to encourage belief in a mere impostor, is to make the faithful despair of waiting for the glorious appearance of the Messiah Yeshua because of the many prior false claims. I can imagine many fantastic tales being spun, among them claims to being reincarnations of the Christ. But that’s not the way Christ will return. Nor will He come in any of their other ways. He would come the way He say He would, and it can’t be counterfeited by any man or demon!

Next, the agents of the false Christs will announce to the public that Christ has arrived (“he is in town!”) but at a secluded place. Don’t believe that too. For the return of the true messiah will be evident to all – like the lightning in the sky:

“Wherefore if they shall say to you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold he is in the secret chambers; believe it not

“For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the West; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

“For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagle be gathered together (Matt 24:26-28). (See also Luke 17:23-24).

The return of Christ will be a spectacular visible event which will take the world by storm in its suddenness and explosive power!

But wherever there is a carcass, vultures are sure to be there to eat it. This is in contrast to the visible return of the Messiah from the heavens. The “carcass” in question is a figurative expression referring to the spiritual corruption of the false Christs around whom people of like spiritual nature gather like vultures hovering over the carcass of a dead animal. The attraction is natural and mutual. Shortly, the judgment of God will expose them as carcasses indeed, and birds of prey will feast on them (Rev 19:14-18)! Devotion to error, as though it were truth, leads to nowhere but more and more corruption and ultimately destruction.

Finally, “He that shall come” is coming. The true Messiah is coming, and the sheer brilliance and power of His coming will command the attention of the entire world population. That happens AFTER the “great tribulation”.

The Second Coming and Ascension of Saints—only AFTER the Tribulation!

The doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture, which teaches a secret catching away (or ‘rapture’) of the Church before the start of a seven year tribulation period, is quite popular among evangelical Christians.

But does popularity or wide acceptance amount to truth?

In the sequence of end time events, the ascension of the saints (or ‘the Rapture’) does not precede the tribulation period. And Christ was careful to make that clear in His words:

“Immediately AFTER the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: then shall all the tribes on the earth mourn and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. “And He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet; and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds from one end of heaven to the other” (Matt 24:29-31).

The Second Coming of Christ and the catching away of the elect of God are contemporaneous events; they occur at the same time. A plain reading of the above text without any preconceptions clearly shows this.

There will be no prior secret rapture of the Church in which Christ will appear in the air invisibly, followed by a seven-year tribulation period, at the end of which Christ will appear a 'further second time'—this time visibly to the world—to snatch away a second batch of saints called the 'tribulation saints'!

Not in my Bible! Nor in any other believer's Bible for that matter. Yet pre-tribulationist teachers and their followers insist on this rather convoluted order of eschatological events in which Christ is made to stage *two different second comings*. (They will vehemently object to labelling this a third coming!)

To start with, is the pre-tribulation rapture concept Biblical?

The word "rapture" is not found in the scriptures, though as an idea it's certainly there. It comes from the Latin word *rapturo* which means to "snatch away" or "carry off". The equivalent term in Greek, the language in which the New Testament was originally written, is *Harpazō* (Strong's #726). It means "to seize, catch (away, up), pluck, pull, take (by force)...To carry away, to hurry off; spoken of persons (John 6:15; Acts 8:39; 23:10; 2 Cor. 12:2, 4; 1 Thess. 4:17; Rev 12:5)" (Expanded Edition *Strong's Complete Word Study Concordance*, P.2034 AMG 2004). The only problem is the *Harpazō* or the rapture has been misinterpreted by pre-tribulationists to mean what it does not mean in the Bible. Their main 'proof text' is 1 Thess. 4:16-17

"For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:
"Then we which are alive and remain shall be CAUGHT UP together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord".

In the text under discussion, we are told plainly that the saints of the living God, both the dead and the living, will be "caught up" (*Harpazō*/*rapturo*) to meet our returning Lord "in the air" as He descends from heaven" with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God". But our pre-tribulationist friends hear no sound and see nothing visible, but rather an invisible rapture accompanied by the silent blast of a very silent trumpet as Christ invisibly descends from heaven!

To them, the operative word is the saints meeting the Lord "in the air". He never landed on the earth but hovered in the air to receive the saints--and that is the first phase of the rapture. And it all takes place before the seven-year tribulation breaks out with the coming of the Antichrist.

During those seven years of trouble, so goes the pre-tribulationist teaching, people who heard the gospel but ignored it or remained uncommitted Christians will, on realizing that the rapture

has occurred without them, turn to Christ in repentance and faith. But then, the Antichrist will have ascended to power ushering in the seven-year tribulation period. It is therefore these believers of the tribulation period that will face the wrath of the Antichrist and so are called the 'tribulation saints'.

To pre-tribulationists therefore there are two kinds of saints: The church-age saints 'raptured' before the tribulation, and the tribulation era saints called 'tribulation saints'. But as an open-minded study of the Bible will easily confirm, tribulation saints are those church-era saints who will live through the 3 ½ year tribulation period. These are not some latecomers to Christ who will be exposed to the fury of the Antichrist unlike their 'raptured' counterparts who responded to the call of the gospel in good time. Nay, they are precious saints of God who happened to be alive at the time of the rule of the Antichrist, and God did foretell that they will suffer persecution and martyrdom as their predecessors suffered in centuries past (Rev 6:9-11). (By the way, were the persecuted saints of old 'latecomers' too?)

The position of honour granted them before the throne of God in heaven totally demolishes the idea that tribulation saints are some sub-standard believers in the sight of God, compared to the supposedly pre-tribulation 'rapture saints' who are spared the wrath of the Antichrist:

“And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, what are these which are arranged in white robes? And whence came they? [see v.9] “And I said unto him, Sir thou knowest. And he said to me, these are they which come out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. ¹⁶They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.¹⁷ For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Rev 7:13-17).

This same group of saints, made up “a great multitude, which no man could number of all nations” (Rev7:9), are counted among the glorious company of the resurrected/translated saints we earlier read about in Rev. 20 as having been enthroned as judges; “and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (vv. 4-6).

Now the question to ask is, where is the scriptural evidence of the arrival in heaven of the saints that were supposed 'raptured' before the tribulation?

Some point to Rev. 13:6^b, but the natural interpretation (in the context of the whole of scripture) is to see “those that dwell in heaven” as the angels of God (see Ps 89:6-7; Mark 12:25; Heb. 12:22; Rev. 5:11). It's far-fetched to say that these dwellers in heaven whom the Antichrist slanders along with God are the raptured saints when the scriptures do not say so

specifically. Moreover, “the last/7th trumpet” (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16; Matt. 24:31; Rev. 11:15), which will announce the return of Christ to receive His saints, both the living and the dead, unto Himself, will not have sounded at this time (in Rev. 13) when the Antichrist will only have begun to rule!

Similarly, the scriptures indicates nowhere that great masses of people will come to repentance during the tribulation period (which, by the way is not seven years but 42 months or 3 ½ years, that is, “a time and times and the dividing of time”, Rev. 13:5; Dan. 7:25). On the contrary, the scriptures indicate that not even the plagues God will unleash on the world during the rule of the Antichrist will awaken in people remorse for their sins, let alone bring them to repentance. Instead, they will become more defiant and speak more blasphemies (Rev. 9:20-21; Rev. 16:8-11; cp. 9:4-5).

One other scripture pre-tribulationists cite in support of their view that the Christians will be removed to heaven before the tribulation is the assurance Christ gave to the Church in Philadelphia in Rev. 3:10: “Because thou hast kept the word of My patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world to try them that dwell upon the earth”.

Sure, the coming of the Antichrist in which “strong delusion” will be at work is a world-encompassing trial which will test every person on earth. But what does it mean for God to keep the faithful from the hour of trial? Does it mean they will not experience trial or that the trial will not overcome them? Historically, how has God delivered his people in the time of trial?

In the first place, there’s no mention of God removing believers to heaven (by the rapture). That is reading into sacred scripture what is not there. But what we do know is that throughout scripture God stands by His people in times of trial and provides them “a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13 see also Isa 43:2-4; John 10:27-28). That’s why believers who happen to be alive at the time of the tribulation will be divinely sealed (apart from having their name in the Lamb’s book of life) to insure them against the temptation of receiving the mark of the beast (Rev. 7:2-3, 9; 14:1; cp. Ez. 9:4). At the tail-end of the Antichrist’s rule as God sends His trumpet judgment of plagues upon the Antichrist–led world of wickedness (Rev 8), this same seal will serve to protect the people of God from harm (Rev. 9:4-5, cp. 16:2). The plagues are an expression of the wrath of God (see Rev. 15:1), and this is what God has promised to keep His people from ever experiencing (1 Thess. 5:9; Rev. 18:4-5) – not the wrath of the Antichrist which pre-tribulationists tend to confuse with the former.

Scripture is clear that the wrath of the Antichrist (which is but an expression of Satan’s fury, Rev. 12:12) will be directed at the remnant saints who keep the commandments of God and

have the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 12:17; 14:12)—as opposed to the wrath of God which will be “revealed from heaven” against the wicked (Rom. 1:18).

Bible prophecy calls the final expression of this heavenly wrath “the seven last plagues” or bowls of God’s wrath (Rev. 15:1, 16:1). While the seal of God will continue to protect living believers as the bowls of God’s wrath are poured out in rapid succession (Rev. 16:2), they will not be caught up in the world-engulfing mayhem and destruction of the seventh plague, which is the war of Armageddon. They will be ‘caught up’, in the nick of time, to the safety of heaven (Isa. 26:20-21; Rev 15:2, 18:4, 20) at the sign of the Son of man in the sky and the blowing of the seventh trumpet, announcing the takeover of the kingdoms of this world by Christ (Rev. 11:15). They will then accompany Christ back to earth to execute judgment on the wicked in the war of Armageddon (Rev 19:11-21; Jude 1:14-15; Ps 149:4-9). These are the translated saints (I Cor. 15:51-52) who together with all the resurrected saints (many martyred during the tribulation) are pictured in heaven praising God and having “the marriage supper of the lamb” (Rev. 19:1-8).

As in the days of Noah and Lot, deliverance and judgment will take place at roughly the same time (Rev. 14:14-16 vs 17-20; cp. Luke 17:26-30; Mark 4:26-29). The sign of the coming Son of man will set the peoples of the earth wailing, but the sounding of “the trump of God” leads to the ascension and ingathering of the saints (Acts 2:19-21; Luke 21:27-28; Rev. 1:7).

The imminent unexpected return of Christ spoken of in scripture, which pre-tribulationists suppose argues for a pre-tribulation rapture of the Church, does not discuss the timing of the tribulation at all. Nor does it imply that we cannot perceive the nearness of the second coming from the end-time signs. If it were so, of what use would be the signs by which we are to discern the times? (Matt. 16:2-3, Luke 12:54-56).

The imminent, unexpected return of Christ (Matt 24:42-51) impresses on the believer the need to stay spiritually alert and prepared at all times. This consists not only in vigilance but also a life of continual obedience – especially after you have come to know from the signs that the Master’s return “is near even at the doors” (Matt 24:33). However, you cannot and will not know the *exact moment* (as Christ put it “that day and hour”) of His return which is scheduled to take place “AFTER the tribulation”! (v. 36). Like the flood in Noah’s time, the Second Coming will catch people unawares. They are busy living it up, partying and clubbing and marrying and being married to. Life is good and seems to be getting better. They have no sense of the nearness of Christ’s return or of an impending judgment. But suddenly Christ bursts in and gathers His saints unto Himself while the rest are taken away in judgment (vv. 37-41).

The unbelieving world had been deceived by the semblance of everyday life to ignore the signs of the end as well as the admonitions of scripture. We are not to imitate them. We should be able to discern the times and remain in a state of spiritual preparedness.

Although Christ will come unexpectedly like a thief in the night, we are “the children of light, not of night, that day should catch us off guard. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober” (I Thess. 5:1-8)

The watchword is “Watch”! Stay alert!

In the second chapter of 2nd Thessalonians, the prophetic cautionary message of the Apostle Paul is clear: The coming of the Lord will not happen unless the Antichrist is FIRST revealed, whose coming will be heralded by a great apostasy, a major shift from the faith. Let NO ONE deceive you in any way to believe otherwise! By this, Paul unmistakably suggests that believers of the generation in which Christ will return will surely witness the abominable self-exaltation of the Antichrist and His grand work of deception (vv. 3-4, cp. Matt 24:15)—AFTER which Christ will appear! If there was any credible pointer, this is it!

And he was at pains to stress this. The believers in Thessalonica seemed disturbed by a suggestion or belief that the Lord’s return was upon them. But Paul said no. “The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together unto Him” (vv. 1-2) will not happen “unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed” (HCSB). That is the definite sign which will precede and lead up to the Second Coming “AND OUR GATHERING TOGETHER UNTO HIM”. He indicates no secret rapture of the Church preceding the coming of the man of sin.

On the contrary, the stage is being set for the coming of the Antichrist.

The Government of the Antichrist is on the Rise—rising from the Sea day by day!

“And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy.

“And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion: and the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority” (Rev. 13:1-2).

It was a vision of a “beast” (kingdom) John saw rising from the sea, but it’s *now* a developing story in the news. Do ever hear it? Do you see it?

As almost all humanity sleeps, the superstructure of the world government of the coming Antichrist is steadily being superimposed on the governments and peoples of the world (Rev. 13:7_b). Bits and pieces of it feature in the news bulletin, represented by such terms as the

International Community, ICC (International Criminal Court), Earth Parliament, New World Order, etc. A world government is virtually in place in skeletal form, embodied to a large extent in the United Nations.

On the horizon is the phenomenon of a cashless society – an economic system run on a chip without which “no man might buy or sell” (Rev 13:16-17). It is a beloved concept. So loved that it is only a matter of time before governments the world over phase out cash and go cashless. Millions around the world, if not billions, are set to get chipped--under the skin!

Meanwhile, the third pillar of the emerging Antichrist government is not lagging too far behind. The one-world religion project is on course. ‘Look at all the religious extremists committing atrocities in the name of religion! This is the more reason why the different faith traditions should come together in unity in the interest of world peace and human brotherhood’. It is a tune all religious leaders who matter are singing. No wonder, the Christian ecumenical movement these days appears to be metamorphosing more into an inter-faith movement. It is a new spiritual Babylon, and ‘divisive Biblical truth’ will not be allowed to stand in the way (Rev. 13:4, 8, 14-15; 17:1-2; 18:2-3).

The message of the Third Angel has never been more imperative than NOW:

“ And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand,
“The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb:
“And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name” (Rev. 14:9-11).

An attitude of indifference is over, “for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed” (Rom. 13:11). The King is on His way. God bless you!

For more enlightenment on the prophetic events of the last hour, please contact:

Pastor Enoch Ofori Jnr.
Seventh Day Pentecostal Assemblies (Esreso)
P.O. Box RP 141, Chirapatre,
Kumasi, Ghana W/A
Mobile Phones: 233-02-7499933/233-24-4235015
Website: www.asdpagh.com; www.enochvangelism.org
Email: info@asdpagh.com

Broadcast Media

Garden City Radio (GCR Kumasi) 92.1 FM, Wednesdays, 5am to 5:30am

Trust TV (on Multi TV Decoder), Fridays, 8:30pm to 9:30pm

Please tune in at the scheduled times for fellowship and a life-changing encounter with God's Truth delivered in power.

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Stay blessed!

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