

QUANTOCK MINISTRIES

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*A Bible teaching and preaching ministry
for the Christian community*

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THE SECOND COMING – FOUR BASIC PRINCIPLES

The return of the Lord Jesus in the clouds for the Church, His Bride, is a guaranteed event. Paul argues in 1 Thessalonians 4 v 14 – 17 that the certainty of the Rapture (the moment when we are “caught up”) is based on the certainty of the Lord’s resurrection. All Christians, dead and living, will arise with new bodies because He arose with a new body (Philippians 3v 21). The certainty of this event was affirmed by the Lord Himself (John 14 v 3) and by the two angels on the Mount of Olives (Acts 1 v 11). In 1 Corinthians 15 v 52 we are told this will happen “in a flash” and in 1 Thessalonians 5 v 2 we are told He will come “like a thief in the night”. In reply to the disciples’ query in Matthew 24 v 3 the Lord, having described some of the warning signs which will indicate the approaching end of the age, told them that people will just disappear in a most unexpected way (v 40 – 41). Indeed, v 37 – 39 of this passage and 1 Thessalonians 5 v 3 both confirm that despite all the warning signs the actual moment of His return for us will be in a time of apparent normality – not the sort of conditions that will exist at the end of the Tribulation!

While Bible-believing Christians accept the truth of these scriptures, it is the preceding warning signs that interest many, and rightly so. The Lord encouraged us to watch and pray (watching is so easy in the days of television, the internet and other media) and to lift up our heads (Luke 21 v 28) as we see these things happening (Luke 21 v 31). Present world events are causing many Christians to return to this subject and it is important to have some idea of what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church right now. This is not just that we should be well-informed, but we should be addressing the equally vital question of what the Church needs to be saying to the world on this matter. Ezekiel 33 v 1 – 9 reminds us of our essential duty as watchmen. The subject is far bigger than I can deal with here in a short study, but I would like to share just four basic principles that have been useful to me when approaching this whole area of biblical teaching.

1. The ages of history.

God’s dealing with humanity can be divided into seven ages (or eras, or dispensations). The usual division favoured by many Bible scholars is along these lines:

- a) The age of Innocence – Creation to the Fall
- b) The age of Conscience – the Fall to the Flood
- c) The age of Humanism – the Flood to Babel
- d) The age of Promise – Abram to Sinai
- e) The age of Law – Sinai to Pentecost
- f) The age of Grace – Pentecost to the Lord’s Return (the Church age)
- g) The age of the Kingdom – the Millennial Reign

During each of these ages God always moves by grace and requires a response of faith, but the means by which He shows His grace differs from age to age. This is in itself a fascinating study – for another time!

The ages that mostly interest us today are the age of Grace and the era that comes next - the Lord’s Kingdom on earth (Revelation 20 v 1 – 10). We are generally comfortable in our understanding of the previous change of age, Pentecost, when the law and the altar as God’s means of grace were replaced by the Gospel of the crucified and risen Saviour. However, not all the early Christians could immediately understand the enormous and historic change that had occurred, together with the implications for the worldwide spread of the Gospel, but Paul had no doubts. It is clear from Ephesians 3 v 2 – 11 (where Paul uses the words “administration of God’s grace” to describe ages, or dispensations) that he had a deep insight into God’s purposes. The force of his epistle to the Galatians is based on that understanding. James at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) had also grasped the point. History will only make sense from a biblical perspective when we understand the different eras of God’s dealings with his human creation.

2. The times of God’s judgement

As we have seen, during each of the ages of history God has established His means of grace, calling people to respond by faith. However, such is the disobedience of human nature that there is a time of judgement at the end of each era, before the

next era begins. So, the age of Innocence ended with the Curse (Genesis 3 v 14 – 19); the age of Conscience ended with the Flood (Genesis 6 v 5 – 8); the age of Humanism ended with the division of languages (Genesis 11 v 5 – 9); the age of Promise ended with judgement on the Egyptians through the plagues and the Red Sea drowning; the age of the Law ended with the Jew's rejection of the Christ and the subsequent (temporary) loss of their temple, their capital city, and their land (Matthew 27 v 22 – 25). The end of the age of Grace will be marked by the seven-year period called the Tribulation. It is this time of judgement that so exercised the disciples when they asked Jesus what would be the signs of His coming and the end of the age (Matthew 24 v 3). Matthew 24 v 4 – 44 and Luke 21 v 8 – 28 record the Lord's reply but it is not my purpose here to look at the signs given. The main description of the Tribulation itself is provided in Revelation chapters 6 – 18, and a brief summary is given in Isaiah chapter 24. It is noteworthy that there is also a time of judgement at the end of the Millennial Reign, and this is described in Revelation 20 v 7 – 10. Following that event the final great white throne judgement takes place of all those who have rejected God's grace in all seven ages (Revelation 20 v 11 – 15), after which the eternal order becomes complete (Revelation chapters 21 and 22) and "time will be no more".

3. God's people are spared the times of His judgement

This is, of course, the whole point of grace. Yes, we are sinners and subject to the dreadful taint of original sin, but the eras of grace are given to us to escape from God's wrath by accepting the means of grace offered. Noah and his family were kept safe during the outpouring of God's judgement on the world of that day; Israel was kept safe during the tenth plague and crossing the Red Sea; those Jews who accepted Jesus were sheltered under the covering of Gospel grace and became part of the Church, together with believing Gentiles. (The tribulations of Christians, both Jew and Gentile, through the Church age must not be seen as an act of God's judgement, but rather the inevitable result of Satan's hatred of the Church, the Bride of Christ.) There is absolutely no reason to suppose God has lowered His standard of justice and will cause those who have accepted His grace to go through the time of His judgement at the end of this age (1 Thessalonians 1 v 10, 5 v 9, and Revelation 3 v 10). There are many powerful arguments in support of this position, but just one is considered here. 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 deals with the revelation of the ultimate human personification of evil, the antichrist (see also Revelation chapter 13). Paul shows how the spirit of antichrist has been present right through the Church age (v 7a, see also 1 John 4 v 3), but the final display of this spirit in one man cannot occur until a restraining influence is removed (v 6 and 7b). The only possible restraint with the necessary degree of power and authority is the Holy Spirit, whose presence in the life of every true Christian has been the defining characteristic of the Church age since the day of Pentecost. In other words, the Church must be removed first, and then the dominant personality during the seven years of the Tribulation can emerge in the graphic way described in v 9 – 12. His initial beguiling presence will bring about the longed-for peace treaty with Israel (Daniel 9 v 27a) but after three and a half years, when the temple will be rebuilt, he will echo the distant Antiochus Epiphanes, turn against Israel and cause the abomination of the temple (Daniel 9 v 27b, Matthew 24 v 15 and 2 Thessalonians 2 v 4). His attempt to partition Jerusalem by force will finally be stopped by the Lord Himself, returning with His Bride to take up His Millennial reign in Jerusalem on David's throne (Zechariah 14 v 2 - 9).

4. God allows the foreshadowing of future events

This is both an act of grace and a warning (Amos 3 v 7). The end of the age of Innocence did not come as a surprise, for God gave Adam due warning (Genesis 2 v 17). Noah was building his ark for up to 120 years, during which time he was a witness to the judgement that awaited the unrighteous. Although the Church age started at Pentecost, that new age of worldwide Gospel blessing was foreshadowed through the ministry of John the Baptist and by Jesus Himself, some time before the change of era occurred. Jesus also gave clear warnings of what would befall Israel if they persisted in their rejection. In our day we have foreshadows of both the coming Millennial Kingdom and the prior Tribulation. Our growing understanding that the Old Testament prophets had far more glimpses of the Kingdom age than of the Church age (Ephesians 3 v 5), confirmed by New Testament passages such as Romans 8 v 18 – 23 and Philippians 2 v 9 – 11, gives us eager anticipation for the forthcoming era. (It also helps us distinguish Israel from the Church.) Towards the end of this present age there will be an increasing foreshadowing of the period of judgement that comes first and it is this that is causing excitement just now. But it must not be confused with the reality of the Tribulation itself. For example, Revelation chapter 6 depicts the arrival of the antichrist as the world political leader (v2), rampant civil bloodshed (v4), bureaucratic control over food supplies (v6), and the terror of mass killings through disease, famine and accident (v8, where wild beasts could well include out-of-control mechanical forms of transport). The seals in chapter 6 go on to describe mass martyrdom, huge earthquakes, bombardment from space (asteroids?), blood moons and the blacked-out sun (extensive volcanic activity saturating the upper atmosphere?). While these grim events will occur during the Tribulation, we can already see early evidence of environmental and climatic disasters, signs in space, political control of huge swathes of the world's population, and internecine bloodshed, especially by and between the different branches of Islam - all to a degree never seen before.

Just imagine the world without any Christian influence, love, restraint or prayer covering. Such will be the nature of the rampant godlessness of that short judgement period, when only the restored Israel will be here as a witness to the one true God (Zechariah 8 v 23). For us, the blessed hope is not the arrival of the Tribulation judgement, with its unrestrained evil and disaster, but rather the sudden appearance of the Lord in the clouds for His Bride, and our being "gathered unto him" (2 Thessalonians 2 v 1 and Titus 2 v 13). Our present cry is: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22 v 20 AV). But while we wait, the great commission is still our duty and the salvation of others is still our goal (Matthew 24 v 44 – 46).