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"Preaching grace in the Dispensation of grace"
A Bible Study

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DOES ANYONE KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS?

BY RICHARD JORDAN

"And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed." -Romans 13:11

The past twelve months or so have seen another rash of "date setting" and prognostications concerning the timetable of our Lord's return.

In 1988 a man named Edgar Whisenant widely distributed a book professing to give the date of the Rapture based on the Jewish feasts of Lev. 23. His date--Sept. 11-13. 1988--caused quite a stir, even gaining the notice of the secular press. But, alas, September came and went--and no Rapture.

Not to be outdone, others immediately arose to declare the real, correct date to be May, 1989. If you are reading this--they misfired too!

All such speculations have one basic flaw: a failure to recognize sufficiently the distinctive character of Paul's apostleship and message. The present dispensation is called "the mystery" or secret, and was first revealed through Paul (Eph.3:1-9, Rom. 16:25,26). This dispensation is, in fact, a gracious interruption of the prophetic program.

It was after Israel refused the offer of the Messianic kingdom through the twelve apostles that God, in grace, interrupted the prophetic program, concluding "all in unbelief that He might have mercy upon all" (Rom.11:32):

"I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy."

"For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in " (Rom. 11:11,25).

We should bear in mind that while the ministry of Peter and the twelve was basically concerned with prophecy and the coming of Christ to earth to judge, Paul was basically concerned with the mystery and Christ's continued absence in grace. Even the Rapture is His coming into "the air" to take us away from the earth to be with Him in glory.

It is this event for which we wait. We do not look for signs or for some great change to take place on earth-- we look for Him, and He may come for us at any moment. Perhaps very soon--perhaps not.

TIMES, SEASONS AND SIGNS

In scripture "the times and seasons" as well as "the signs of the times" are not associated with the Body of Christ but rather with the Messianic kingdom and the ushering in of "the day of the Lord." They have nothing to do with the Lord's return to take away the Body of Christ but rather look to His return to the earth, later, to reign in majesty and glory.

See, for example, Acts 1:6,7 and I Thess.5:1-2:

"When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?"

"And he said unto them, it is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power."

"But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night."

In both these passages "*the times and seasons*" are clearly associated with the restoration of Israel's kingdom and the ushering in of the day of the Lord.

It should be further noted that in Paul's epistles, which give us God's program for this age, we are never once told to look for "the signs of the times." The simple reason is, as Pastor J. C. O'Hair said, "There are no signs of the times today because these are not the times of the signs."

When Paul speaks about "the last days" of the dispensation of grace (2 Tim. 3:1-5) he gives no more than general trends and movements--things that could be said about any period of time during this dispensation. Not once does he give specific signs to tell just when Christ will return.

The reason is clear: the lord would keep his people throughout the age of His rejection always watching, always waiting, always ready--regardless of current trends and events.

Every specific sign of the Lord's return (e.g., Luke 21:25-28) has to do with the coming of Christ to reign on earth and not one has yet been fulfilled.

We realize this last statement will raise an immediate objection: what about the 1948 founding of the nation Israel? We answer that while this may, indeed prove to be a foreshadowing of prophetic events, we know of no specific passage that can be cited as being fulfilled in the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel.

The general assumption is that Matt. 24:32-34 refers to this event but this is surely faulty, missing both the real intent of this parable as well as the nature of the present "dispensation of the mystery" (Col.1:25,26).

The key to understanding the prophetic outline set forth in Matt. 24 is the fact that the whole of our Lord's answer does not concern the end of our age, but rather the end of the prophesied Jewish age--yet in the future. But if Matt. 24 looks to the future "time of Jacob's trouble," to just what does the Parable of the Fig Tree refer? Let's see.

THE BUDDING FIG TREE

"Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh:

"So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.

"Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled" (Matt. 24:32-34).

The generation is that the Parable of the Budding Fig Tree is a reference to the reemergence of Israel as a nation and state--as in 1948. To this date is added, 40 years for the supposed length of a "generation " thus arriving at 1988.

While the identity of "this generation" has been widely debated--mainly due to the influence of Post and A-millennialism--the most natural reading seems the obvious one: the "generation" that sees the fig tree's new growth will also see the end of all the judgments. Thus the crux of the parable rests with the identity of the fig tree.

There are four trees used in Scripture to represent Israel the vine, the olive, the fig and the bramble. While all of these trees represent Israel, each has its own special area of emphasis, so that each represents a specific aspect of Israel's life and history.

The two trees that concern our present study are the vine and the fig trees. We say that the identities of both these trees are important because almost all commentators mistakenly identify the fig tree as representing the national life of Israel.

In Psa.80:8-19 a summary history of Israel is given which opens with the words, "Thou has brought a vine out of Egypt: *Thou hast cast out the heathen and planted it.* Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land." The record goes on to describe how this vine spread across the country from Jordan to the Mediterranean. It is clear that the vine represents Israel as a nation. See also Isa. 5:1-7.

But if it is the vine that represents the *national* life of Israel, what is the significance of the fig tree? Its first occurrence in Scripture will help us:

"And the eyes of them both were opened, and THEY KNEW THAT THEY WERE NAKED; AND THEY SEWED FIG LEAVES TOGETHER, AND MADE THEMSELVES APRONS" (Gen. 3:7).

The fig tree is here associated with man's attempt to cover his guilt before God. As Adam and Eve sought to replace the spiritual light that had once covered them with the poor substitute of a covering made by human hands, they give the fig tree its proper association--religion. And passages such as Matt. 21:17-20 demonstrate that the fig tree is particularly suited to symbolize Israel's religious history.

The parable of the "budding fig tree," then, has no reference to the restoration of Israel as a nation. Rather the reference is to the religious life of Israel to the day when the fig tree is seen sprouting (and flourishing) in the vineyard.

Thus when Matt. 24 is allowed to stand where it should in the program of God we see that it does not give us today in the dispensation of grace any real light on the timing of the Rapture. As significant--or insignificant--as the establishment of the modern state of Israel may prove to be prophetically, we simply have no real way of knowing for sure until and unless the Rapture we does take place.

THE SEVENTIETH WEEK

The most common means of Rapture dating is to seek to date the beginning of Dan.9's Seventieth Week since Dan.9:27 clearly sets forth the means of identifying this event. For example, Whisenant confidently declares "The 69th week of Daniel ends 6 April 30 A.D. at the closing of Jesus' tomb. The 70th week of Daniel ends seven Jewish years later on the Day of Atonement 1995, at the battle of Armageddon, 4 Oct. 1995, thus lasting seven Jewish years....Because the 70th week of Daniel starts 21 Sept. 1988 (the Day of Atonement 1988), the Rapture of the Church must precede the Peace Pact signing between Antichrist and Israel. Thus we look at Ros-Hash-Ana 1988 which is ten days earlier than the Peace Pact signing date, 21 Sept. 1988."

But even this seemingly foolproof procedure has a glitch, for there are a number of specific prophetic events which must take place before the Antichrist's revelation to begin that Seventieth Week period. Take, for example, Dan.7:24:

"And the ten horns out of this kingdom are ten kings that shall arise: and another shall RISE AFTER THEM; and he shall be diverse from the first, and he shall subdue three kings."

Space does not allow us to go through all the details of Dan. 7, but the verse is clear that this last king, who will "speak great words against the Most High," arises only "after" ten kings have risen to power. In other words, the path by which Antichrist rises to the position of Dan. 9:27 is preceded by tremendous political realignments in the Eastern Mediterranean area.

Our point here is that these things must be fulfilled prior to the revelation of Antichrist. Thus the idea that the Rapture can be dated by the revelation of the Antichrist is unsound failing to take into account other specific prophetic events which precede his revelation. The old idea that "seven years after the Rapture Christ returns to earth" must give way to further light and understanding. There is an obvious gap between the Rapture and the beginning of the Seventieth Week--a gap prophesied in Dan. 9:26!

NOW WHAT?

What then are we to make of all the date setting and sensationalism popularly associated with the Rapture?

First, we should remind ourselves (and others) of the need to clearly recognize "the preaching of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery." God's timetable for the dispensation of grace and the Rapture is not connected with the Jewish "ingathering" feasts, the beginning of Daniel's Seventieth Week or the rise of Antichrist. The basic element in the dispensation of grace is "the fall of Israel" and the temporary suspension of the program committed to her.

Because the dispensation of grace is not part of the prophesied program, no one can tell how long it will last or when it will conclude. There are no signs to mark the approaching of its termination and the Rapture of the Body of Christ. Believers from Paul's day till now were told to be "*looking for that blessed hope*" and "to wait for His Son from heaven." And unbelievers are not given even the slightest assurance that it will last for another day or that judgment will not strike tomorrow!

These are indeed wonderful days filled with great opportunity and need for the sharing of the unadulterated message of grace committed to our trust--and we should be using each day to that end! Little wonder that Paul wrote to the Romans--and us:

"And that, knowing the time, that NOW IT IS HIGH TIME TO AWAKE OUT OF SLEEP: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.

"The night is far spent, the day is at hand: LET US THEREFORE CAST OFF THE WORKS OF DARKNESS, AND LET US PUT ON THE ARMOUR OF LIGHT" (Rom. 13:11,12).

Not being asleep to what is going on around us but being alert to every opportunity to live for and serve our soon coming Savior--this is the Pauline way to be looking for His coming.

"Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light..

"See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise,

"Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

"Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:14-17).

INSTRUCTION FOR THE SICK:

A DISPENSATIONAL CONSIDERATION

"Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities" (1Tim.5:23).

In this verse we find a remarkable instruction given by the Apostle Paul to Timothy. The dispensational light which is given by this passage on sickness is often overlooked! Timothy, according to this Scripture, was plagued by stomach problems and "often infirmities." These could have been easily relieved under the kingdom program of the Twelve Apostles and in the early, transitional ministry of Paul. But in Paul's latter ministry after having received the full knowledge of the mystery he no longer had such powers (cf. Phil. 2:2f., 27II Tim.4:20).

Paul's instruction to Timothy was not:

1. That he had sinned and needed to confess his sin to be healed.
2. That Satan had inflicted this upon him and that he must "deny it."
3. That his faith was weak or lacking and that if he would only believe God's promises and pray the "prayer of faith" that he would receive deliverance from his sickness.
4. That he should call for the elders of the church (he was one!) and have the anointing with oil.
5. That his healing was in the atonement and that he was to "claim it."

6. That he should use special handkerchiefs or aprons.
7. That he should get into a "healing line."
8. That he should simply "pray about it."

No! Paul gives Timothy only one piece of instruction. Paul prescribed the common medicine of that day-- wine (*It should be remembered that Luke, the beloved physician, was a companion of Paul*). Paul prescribed a medicine:

".....USE A LITTLE WINE...."

(It should be noted that he did not say "drink a little wine," but "us a little." Drinking would imply taking wine as a beverage, while using is a means to an end.)

Paul's instruction was for medical attention to be given to the weakness and frailty of his corruptible body. Paul gave no further hope than that which could be received through medical resources. Does that seem strange or "unspiritual" to you? What happened to the ministry of Paul? A new order, a dispensational change had completed its transition and was now in full operation. No longer was the attention of the believer to be placed upon the "physical" with its many miraculous signs, wonders and healings. Now the believer was to focus upon that which was real and lasting--the eternal, the unseen (2 Cor. 4:18).

"Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:2,3).

We can learn much from Paul, our pattern (1 Tim. 1:16) and apostle (Rom. 11:13). We learn from him that deliverance is not the answer to our physical infirmities:

"And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

"Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities..." (2 Cor. 12:9,10).

"...I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

"I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:11,13).

THE SINS THAT ARE PAST

"Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:

"Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of SINS THAT ARE PAST, through the forbearance of God;

"To declare, I say, at this time His righteousness: that He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Rom. 3:24-26).

It is clear from this passage that Paul did not demand repentance and baptism for the remission of sins as Peter had done at Pentecost.

The finished work of Christ at Calvary had now been fully manifested, and the apostle, by the Spirit, offered the righteousness of Christ and that along for the remission of sins.

Many believers, however, have stumbled over the phrase, "sins that are past" inverse 25. They conclude from Paul's words that Christ's righteousness only avails for the sins of their past life, before conversion, and that their security thereafter must depend upon their own conduct.

But this is not what is meant by "sins that are past." Heb.9:15 sheds clear light on the passage:

"And for this cause he (Christ) is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of THE TRANSGRESSIONS THAT WERE UNDER THE FIRST TESTAMENT, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance."

Though the Israelites were required to bring blood sacrifices to God under the "first testament" (the Law), we know that "it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins" (Heb. 10:4). It was really Christ's blood" which was only later to be shed for the remission of their sins, that saved them. Old Testament believers were not saved by the blood of the old covenant but by the blood of the new covenant, not by the blood of bulls and goats but by the blood of Christ. Only this was not as yet made manifest.

Notice Paul's words in 1Tim.2:5-7:

"For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;

"Who gave Himself a ransom for all, TO BE TESTIFIED IN DUE TIME.

"Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity."

Notice: "One mediator--a ransom for all--to be testified in due time--whereunto I am ordained a preacher and an apostle." That the "due time" for this to be testified arrived with the ministry of Paul is further demonstrated by Rom.3:21-26:

"BUT NOW the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets:"

"Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:

"Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of SINS THAT ARE PAST, through the forbearance of God;

"TO DECLARE, I SAY, AT THIS TIME His righteousness: that He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."

Paul is the "due time" testifier of all that Christ accomplished at Calvary and when Paul declared Christ's righteousness "for the remission of sins that are past" he means simply that though it could not be declared "at that time," it was really Christ's righteousness that availed to take away the sins of past generations and that believers of the past were saved, not by their own righteousness but by His.
