

NEW Horizons

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addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



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CGOM

Churches Of God Outreach Ministries

**With around two thousand
Christian denominations
vying for your attention, it's
easy to miss the important
issues of life and religion.
It's our hope that through
New Horizons our readers
will come to understand
the true meaning of the
Gospel of Jesus Christ.**

**The Gospel was proclaimed
by Jesus and by his apostles
in the clearest of terms - and
recorded for us in the Scrip-
tures. Over the centuries
that truth has been buried,
dug up, buried again. Our
desire is to restore the sim-
ple apostolic message. We
hope you will be excited
by what the Scriptures re-
veal about life, and the
horizons beyond**

*the views expressed by the writers are not
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new Horizons

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Some Christians live in a state of 'suspended animation'. We are 'waiting for God'. That is, we are living in the expectation that the return of Jesus is imminent, that he could return 'any time'

One devout believer I know never went out without leaving her home spick and span—just in case Jesus came back while she was away. Jesus, she said, could come back at any moment.

It's a view shared by millions. When Jesus returns, goes this concept, all the faithful will be lifted up to meet him.

The concept is known as 'the secret rapture', though the term is not found in the text - but perhaps expresses the emotion of that supposed event.

The Scriptures do indeed teach the certainty of his return: '*...This same Jesus who has been taken up from you into Heaven [or, the skies] will come in just the same way as you have seen Him going into Heaven*' (Acts 1:11). Elsewhere we read that '*...For if we believe that Jesus has died and risen again, we also believe that, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who shall have passed away*' (I Thessalonians 4:14). Further '*...we [ie the living faithful] won't go up to meet him ahead of his followers who have already died*' (v.15 CEV).

But will that coming be 'secret'?

Signs of His Coming

God has not left us in ignorance, but has laid a treasure trail of signs point-

ing to the return of Jesus.

- First—we don't know when! (Matthew 24:36, Acts 1:7). It is a moment known, at that time, only to the Father
- Mankind will, in the run-up, be experiencing normality. Life goes on - just as '*...in the days of Noah*' (Matthew 24: 37-39)
- Like the visitation of a thief, most will not expect it—or they would have been prepared (Luke 12:39-40, Revelation 16:15)
- Suddenly. believers will be plunged into tribulation (Gk *thlipsis*; distress) —hated, betrayed, persecuted, many martyred by '*...all nations*' (Matthew 24:9)
- It will be the worst of times ever - past and future (v.16)
- At that time, believers in

Judaea—on certain 'signals' outlined by Jesus - are urged to drop everything and 'head for the hills' (Matthew 24:15-18)

- Soon thereafter Jesus returns towards earth to establish his earthly millennial reign
- He commands the believing dead to rise to meet him '*...in the air*' (earth's atmosphere) . It is announced by the sounding of the (last: see p.8) Trumpet, (I Thessalonians 4:16, I Corinthians 15:52)
- Many of those resurrected will have been martyred in the previ-

ous distress (the time of '*...the tribulation, the great*—Revelation 7:14)

- Others will have 'come out' of the 'Tribulation', having experienced it (Revelation 7:14)
- Although highly symbolic, those in this first resurrection will rise to '*...stand by a sea of glass*' (15:2). It may be a reference to the 'firmament' that supports Christ's throne (Exodus 24:10, Ezekiel 1:26ff, Revelation 4:6)
- The '*seven last plagues*' on earth follow (Revelation 16) - with Jesus present to judge (*ch* 14:10)
- His coming will be seen worldwide (Revelation 1:7, Matthew 24:27) as his glory spreads around the planet
- Jesus descends to the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:4)

Security

In sum, unaware, mankind will suddenly be plunged into chaos—on earth and in the skies. The godly will be persecuted, many martyred in 'the tribulation'. Following the Tribulation Jesus returns, sending angels to '*...gather together his elect*' (Matthew 24: 29-31) , who will meet with him in earth's atmosphere.

Safe in the secure care of our Saviour, however, we need not fear the future, no matter how dire nor how it may personally affect each of us – even to involuntary martyrdom.

With righteous Job we may say '*...though he slay me, yet will I trust him*' (Job 13:15); and, in the face of his personal 'tribulation'; '*...shall we receive good at the hand of God, and cont'd p.3*

***So always be ready!
You don't know when
the Son of Man will
come***
(Luke 12:40 CEV)

Across most Christian denominations baptism is seen as the “admission ticket” to the faith. Is it free? Or is there a price attached? Should *you* be baptized?

Baptism is one of the “rites of passage” in many religions, not least in Christianity. The rite was practiced, for example, by the Sumerians (3rd millennium BC). It was integral to those embracing Judaism. And, of course, is particularly known to the Christian world through John the Baptist. Jesus, himself baptized by John, commanded his disciples “...going, therefore, disciple all nations, baptizing them...” (Matthew 28:19). And from the earliest beginnings of the Christian church the rite was enjoined on all converts to the faith. The apostle Peter on the first Christian Pentecost urged his hearers to “...repent, and be baptized” (Acts 2:38).

In Roman Catholicism baptism is one of the seven “sacraments”, and is administered almost always shortly following the birth of a child into a Catholic family. Most denominations today baptize infants. But it wasn’t always so. Peter’s hearers, for example, were mature adults.

Lesson From History

During the first couple of centuries of the Christian faith, baptism of adults was the sole practice. To become a Christian was a serious life choice. Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah were ostracized from the community, with loss of job, status, family ties. They were even beaten in the synagogues. Peter’s hearers were entirely Jews (or proselytes) gathered from around the world in Jerusalem for the age-old festival of Pentecost. They were totally committed to the divinely revealed faith of Israel - to the observance of the weekly Sabbath and the annual holy days (*see* Leviticus 23) and to the precepts of

the “Law of Moses”. But something was missing.

At Sinai, some fifteen hundred years before Jesus’ birth, Israel had entered into a covenant with God. They would, in return for obedience to God, be “*a special treasure to Me above all people*” and they would be “*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Exodus 19:1-8).

As a nation, they failed to keep their side of the covenant and lost God’s protection. The separate House of Israel and the House of Judah were taken from the land of promise and exiled to Assyria and Babylon. Only the House of Judah returned, and chastened by seventy years of exile they were diligent in observing the Law. But the general ethos of the nation in the time of Jesus - as today - was one of mere outward observance. Just as today, there was lip service paid to “being good”. But the hearts of most people festered with self-serving which surfaced in violence, greed, oppression, tax fraud, aberrant sexual behaviour. John, Jesus - and the apostles - challenged this.

Change of Heart

The challenge of the teaching of Jesus demanded a fundamental *change of heart*. Not just the outward obedience of the Ten Commandments but a new and personal relationship with the Law-giver.

The guilt associated with all human sin could, in Israel, be removed through the tiresome round of divinely prescribed animal sacrifices. But these could never bring forgiveness: “*For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sin*” (Hebrews 10:4).

The awfulness of human sin demanded a greater sacrifice. But now in Jesus, the divine representative, all sin could be forgiven. He is “*the*

Should You Be Baptized?

Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

God’s Grand Design

In further revealing God’s grand design for mankind, Jesus unveiled a new covenant. Now the same divine Law would no longer be written on stones but in the human heart. The power that enabled Jesus to live in perfect harmony with the heavenly Father was now - through his sinless life, death and resurrection - made available to humankind. God would dwell in us by means of His Spirit and we could literally become His sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters of Jesus His Son.

But it required “repentance” - a genuine sorrow for our transgression of the divine Law which results in a changed life. Repentance demands mature reflection on past and present behaviour. It demands an understanding of “sin”. It demands a readiness to count the awesome cost of discipleship - to the point of martyrdom, if need be.

It required, too, the knowledge that only the sacrifice of “the Lamb of God” - Jesus of Nazareth, God’s appointed victim - was sufficient to bear away all the sin of mankind.

Baptism, then, is possible only for someone of mature mind.

A Watery Grave

In the Scriptures there is but one form of baptism. That’s by the submerging of the repentant individual in water. The apostle Paul describes it as a watery grave: “*Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we are*

buried with him through baptism into death" (Romans 6:1-11). And emerging from this watery grave - we would drown if we stayed under the waters! - is symbolic of our resurrection as "a new creature in Christ" (vv.4-5). Mere sprinkling - or hosing - fails to convey this significance!

Rising out of the water, every sin has been forgiven. We are clean! The Lamb of God, Jesus of Nazareth, has taken all the sin of each of us upon himself through his suffering and his sacrificial death on the hill of Golgotha - "the place of the skull". His life blood, lanced by a Roman spear, poured from his lacerated body.

Until Jesus returns (unlike the sacrifice of the Passover which will be observed after he comes back), baptized Christians annually observe a memorial of his suffering and death in the Lord's Supper 'on the night he was betrayed' (I Corinthians 11: 20-26).

Also significant in baptismal symbolism is the concept of being washed - again perfectly represented by immersion. Paul was confronted by Jesus for persecuting believers. He said: "Arise and be baptized [Gk = immersed], and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16, Hebrews 10:22). The water here is symbolic of Christ's blood shed for us: "...to him who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood" (Revelation 1:5).

Your Choice

Every one of us - all mankind - has "fallen short of the glory of God". His plan for each of us is that we share in His glory - a process that requires we become spiritually mature. By nature God is absolutely pure, and none of us can enter the divine Family loaded with our sin. God's love for us has in Jesus the Messiah provided a path to forgiveness. In baptism we acknowledge our determination to change our inborn

hostility to God and His law ("repentance"), emerging from the water clean in His eyes through the righteousness of Jesus.

God's "glory" is not some ethereal pie-in-the-sky. He offers us (John 3:16) the choice of extinction - or of living for ever in partnership with Him as joint-heirs with Jesus Christ in a real material universe in which the divine plan will endlessly unfold.

The example of Jesus, himself immersed by John, and the example of the practice of the early church confirms that baptism is the prescribed path into the Body of Christ, his church. It is symbolic of our death to the 'old man' - that nature we brought into the world with us. It is symbolic of our 'resurrection' as a new creation in Christ. It is symbolic of the washing away of our sin - our falling short of the glory of the Creator - in the shed blood of our Saviour.

If you are willing to pay the heavy price of discipleship, you must coun-

sel about baptism. Each of us is faced with a stark choice of living for ever - or death.

God wants you to choose life! **Ω**

Waiting for God...cont'd from p.1
shall we not receive evil? (ch 2:10)

Be Ready

Since sin entered our world every spin of the earth has seen its troubles—punctuated from time to time with localized plenty, as in the modern West.

As Christians we live in expectation of the return of Messiah to bring the good times to *all* of mankind. Unsurprisingly, when the 'signs of his coming' envelop us we think 'this could be it'. Through the centuries this has been our hope. But our brief flirt with life—individually and as a species— is but a drop in the ocean of eternity.

When Jesus returns, however, is in the will of the Father—and it will be the perfect time for man. His message is that we '...be ready' (eg Luke 12:40).

Repeatedly Jesus counsels us to 'overcome'. To conquer, to subdue. We are at war—a war of the spirit—and no matter how long we may live, no matter how long Jesus appears to delay his coming—we are to keep fighting.

Those Christians who accompany Jesus at his return are '...called and chosen' (Revelation 17:14). They are invited to be his followers. They have been chosen because they accepted. But, said Jesus, they are also '...faithful'. In face of persecution, despite all that life throws at them—they have proven trustworthy, and faithful.

Let's ensure we are ready! **Ω**

CALLING ALL INTERNET USERS!

The Outreach Ministries website lists over a hundred Bible-based articles which address issues frequently on the minds of Christians. You may download any, or request print copies. There is, too, a section of on-line audio sermons, links to associated groups, back issues of *New Horizons* and an on-line magazine for our younger readers.

Be sure to take a look at

Quotations from the Bible in New Horizons are from translations which clearly express the meaning in modern terms

The Sign of the Sabbath

The Sabbath, too often, is viewed as a burden. In fact, it is a sign of our intimate and joyous relationship with our Creator

King Solomon passed on some words of wisdom: ‘...Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth’ (Ecclesiastes 12:1). And unknown by most, we are specifically told how and why: ‘...Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy...for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it. (Exodus 20:8, 11).

Any diligent Bible student will know exactly when this ‘Sabbath’ is. Not Monday or Friday or any other weekday—but the *seventh* day, Saturday. Despite attempts to bury it, Saturday has been the weekly Sabbath since man’s beginning.

[If you think Sunday is the Sabbath, do request the free booklet **Why Observe Sunday?**]

Origins

Back, then, to the beginning. Having had creative activity on six days ‘...on the seventh day God finished his work which he had made; and he rested [ceased] on the seventh day from all his work which he had made’ (Genesis 2:2). On the seventh day He created a day of spiritual refreshment for His creation.

But note that this seventh day was not ‘just another day’. For ‘... God blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it: because that in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made’ (v.3).

Here we have this piece of time set apart - ‘hallowed’ - as a special memorial of what God had accomplished and blessed. Twenty-four hours uniquely different from the rest of the week. No other day will be sufficient.

Signs

In other words, the seventh-day Sabbath is a *sign*. It’s a sign of the relationship we have with the Creator: Creator and creature.

We are all familiar with signs—or tokens. They represent something.

***But first, you must start respecting the Sabbath as a joyful day of worship. You must stop doing and saying whatever you please on this special day. Then you will truly enjoy knowing the LORD
Isaiah 58:13 CEV***

You exchange wedding rings as a sign of your mutual relationship. You exchange gifts as a token of your love.

But note that such a sign represents an *existing relationship*.

In Jesus’ day, some of the Jews had all but deified the sign. But they had *lost the relationship*. Hence their hard-hearted bigotry which spilled over into the persecution of Jesus and his disciples—and even their own people.

Doesn’t that attitude remind you of some contemporary Christians? For some, Sabbath is a burden encircled by strict rules.

Rather, God’s Sabbath was always designed as a blessing: ‘...If you turn away your foot from the sabbath [ie respect it], from doing your pleasure on my holy day; and

call the sabbath a delight, and the holy of the LORD honourable; and shall honour it, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words: then shall you delight yourself in the LORD’ (Isaiah 58;13-14).

A day, then, for rest, for contemplation, for communication with our Creator and our brethren. A day to confirm and deepen our relationship with Him—to ‘*delight ourselves in Him*’.

Identity Crisis

Note: a wedding ring from another person isn’t a proper sign of your relationship with your spouse! You wouldn’t wear it unless your relationship were unhealthy, unless love were absent.

Similarly, ‘wearing’ the Sabbath sign identifies a Christian as a worshipper of the Creator. No other sign does so.

You may be familiar with ‘the great command’: ‘...Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. This is the first and most important commandment’ (Matthew 22:37-38 CEV). It’s a reference to the first *four* of the Ten Commandments. They define God, tell us who He is and how to identify Him. Wrote the prophet Ezekiel: ‘...hallow my sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I am the LORD your God’ (Ezekiel 20:20).

One day in every seven - year in, year out - there’s a unique opportunity to deepen that most important relationship: *our personal relationship with our Creator*.

No other day, no matter how popular, is an appropriate sign. **Ω**

Evangelism 101

No—not another ‘*how to evangelize*’ article! And not because evangelism isn’t necessary. Indeed it is our lifeblood as Christians—and a command of Jesus: ‘...*Go to the people of all nations and make them my disciples. Baptize them*’ (Matthew 28:19 CEV).

There have been endless lists of do’s and don’ts for the practice. Largely, the churches of God have hidden behind a mountain of literature: magazines (like *NH!*), booklets, articles, study courses. And such do have an important place—I personally began a voyage of Bible discovery through the gift from a colleague of a magazine.

Purpose

At heart is the *focus* of evangelism. It is to present the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ to all of mankind.

The fact that the churches use so many acres of print highlights the vital importance of *knowledge*. It’s impossible to truly understand the Gospel without it. And in this twenty-first century Jesus himself—as portrayed in the Scriptures—is a virtual unknown.

Anyway, how many of those who are spiritually blind - and indifferent - will actually pick up a religious magazine or pamphlet? And if they do cast a glance—will they comprehend?

Invitation

Since the beginning of the Gospel its message has been variously received—as detailed, for example, in the ‘parable of the sower’ (Matthew 13). It was and has remained a matter of faith. The invitation to believe (have faith) goes out but usually falls on deaf ears. The circumstances of life, the negative spiritual culture, the

Those disposed by life’s circumstances to the good news will respond. But they need first to be reached: ‘...*How can people have faith in the Lord and ask him to save them, if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear, unless someone tells them? And how can anyone tell them without being sent by the Lord? The Scriptures say it is a beautiful sight to see even the feet of someone coming to preach the good news [Gk. evangelize]*’ (Romans 10:14-15 CEV).

And who is ‘sent’? That’s the commission Jesus gave to his church before his return to Heaven (Matthew 28:19).

Ignorance

How, then, are we to breach the wall of ignorance of the true Gospel? The knowledge has in some form to be communicated—by word of mouth or by other means. And in understandable form.

By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another
John 13:35

The *Bible Society* has a lesson here—translate the Word into the local language, though that is a learned skill, and a gift, beyond most Christians. Others are skilled to reach millions through the electronic media.

So, what can the rest of us, who don’t have the skills, do? Appeals to ‘come to church’ fall on deaf ears. Contemporary music may attract younger folk for a time—but soon palls. Street corner evangelism in our age may spark curiosity but rarely bears fruit.

Relationships

human desire for ‘comfort’- all conspire to ‘blind’ to the truth.

A local church may run a ‘campaign’ and draw an audience. But the oft-repeated cry is ‘*why don’t they stay?*’

How do we attract and persuade those visitors to a solid long-term membership and involvement in the work of the church?

Much church growth derives from ‘church-hopping’. Dissatisfied with one denomination the individual is serially attracted to others. Understandable—if he or she is truly seriously seeking to hear and understand the Word of God. But is that enough? We need more than knowledge. We need relationships.

The first Christians didn’t assemble in mega-churches, but usually intimately in private homes (*eg* Acts 2:46, 5:42, 20:20). They ate together, they learned together, they prayed together, they worshipped together.

And perhaps that’s the key to successful evangelism. People need people. We all thrive best in relationships. A healthy church is a loving church, and an unbeliever will more readily be drawn to it—and inclined to stay. Let’s each first look inward to our own assembly.

The early Christians met in open assemblies. They didn’t know who would come through the door - perhaps attracted by the singing! [Note Paul’s counsel to the Corinthian brethren: ‘...*Suppose everyone in your worship service started speaking unknown languages, and some outsiders or some unbelievers come in. Won’t they think you are crazy?*’ (I Corinthians 14:23 CEV).]

And, as pointed out by John (John 14:35), for ‘outsiders’ true discipleship is measured by the standard of our sincere, loving, visible relationship with one another.

If this is lacking perhaps we need to re-take ‘*Evangelism 101!*’ **Ω**

Bible readers are often puzzled by the apparent failure of Jesus to return from heaven. Wasn't he to come 'soon'? '...I come quickly', '...the time is short' were first century claims carefully recorded in the New Testament

Millions of Christians live in expectation of the return of Jesus. It will follow on the heels of universal chaos, mass destruction, and virtual extinction of the human race. Then follows a thousand years under the benign rule of the King of kings. As that has not yet happened - how do we explain those 'quickly' texts? Were the apostles just plain wrong?

A favoured response—by sceptics, by some lapsed believers - is that the Bible record is simply a work of fiction. Jesus didn't exist. Someone started a new religion that was as mythical as all other religions. Others believe that what is portrayed as 'end-time events' were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. The vast majority of Christians, of course, live in expectation of the *future* return of Jesus. Can we make sense of these texts?

The notion that Jesus didn't exist nor found 'Christianity' has long been cast into the dustbin. Only the willingly ignorant believe that. So what do those 'I come quickly' statements mean? Was Jesus wrong? Or, did the apostles just get mixed up? Such questions cast doubt on 'inspiration'.

Christians in general—no matter what traditions they add—believe that neither Jesus nor the apostles were subject to error. That is the bedrock of theology; we can't pick and choose. We may struggle to understand the text as it has come down to us, but the foundation teachings are clear. (Hence the need to 'sit lightly' in the exegetical saddle.)

The Last Days

To be clear—no-one knows the date of the return of Jesus. Endless chro-

nologies have proven to be plain wrong.

Jesus, however, did give some signs of his imminent return—in Matthew 24, for example. Look out for them.

God in Control

Since the days of the apostles an endless succession of mockers proclaim: '...Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation' (II Peter 3:4). Such are willingly ignorant of the divine plan. They reject the fact that God intervenes in history, and has overthrown entire civilisations to preserve and further that plan. The 'last days' will again witness such an intervention, writes the apostle - whether believed or scoffed at.

Clearly, the generation that followed Jesus did not see his 'second coming'. Nearly two thousand years have passed since the words were spoken and we are still waiting! Let's look at some of those texts.

John records God's message to Jesus: '...The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants the things which must shortly come to pass: and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John; who bare witness of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, even of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that reads, and they that hear the words of the prophecy, and keep the things which are written therein: for **the time is at**

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is for many a
'Book of Mystery'

unsigned articles are by the Editor

The Final Generation

hand' (Revelation 1:1-3).

Some reasons for the apparent delay have been proposed. Peter, for one, addressed it: '... for the Lord, one day is the same as a thousand years, and a thousand years is the same as one day' (II Peter 3:8 CEV). The spirit realm is timeless. He continues: '...The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness; but is longsuffering to you-ward, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance' (v.9).

God is patient, allowing time for man to come to his senses, As in the days before the great flood of Noah (Genesis 6:3). Or in His delayed judgment - for four generations - on the Amorites (Genesis 15:16).

Which Generation?

Then there's the statement of Jesus that '...this generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away' (Matthew 24:34-35). Question: *which generation?* In this outline of future events Jesus ends with the resurrection of the saints (v.31). His hearers would, within a generation (70AD), experience these horrors. *But not the resurrection!*

This resurrection of 'the firstfruits' is the culmination of the proclamation of the Gospel. It accompanies the return of Jesus as King of kings and LORD of lords—universal sovereign in the secular and the spiritual realm. And it heralds the coming of 'the Day of the LORD'.

No Bible student argues that mankind has already experienced these. The resurrection has not yet happened. Jesus is not reigning on earth. The powers of evil **cont'd p.8**

The Great Escapism

The study of prophecy is a pursuit beloved of many, and from all faiths. We want to know what the future holds—for us personally, and for the world at large. As the Christian Bible reputedly is one-third prophecy it's no surprise that Christians are no less fascinated by it

As we have now reached the (perhaps notional) six thousand years since 'creation', there is a flurry of interest in 'the time of the end'. Thousands of prophecy books have been published, especially since the mid nineteenth century, each presenting the author's interpretation of end-time events.

Escape

The focus is often on what is termed 'the great tribulation' - a short period of total mayhem on earth, and a uniquely terrible event (Matthew 24: 21). For some, the focus is on avoidance—how can we escape its ravages. Various solutions are proposed: for example, a pre-tribulation 'secret rapture', or a 'place of safety' here on earth or elsewhere.

First it should be noted that God's people have frequently experienced *not* protection but fierce persecution and often martyrdom. Hebrews 11 is a litany of such. Indeed Jesus said: *'...if you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me, you will save it'* (Luke 9:24 CEV). A statement which—wrongly— has encouraged some Christians to actively seek martyrdom. Jesus predicted betrayal and death for some in that end-time (Luke 21:16).

What if you get it wrong, believing perhaps in avoiding martyrdom (saving your skin) by means of 'the rapture' - and that concept turns out

tribulation you will be whisked away—protected—to some remote location in the Middle East or Montana or Alaska? Will you 'miss out'? It may be helpful to look at a couple of escape accounts in the Scriptures.

Safe Places

What if God did indeed have a 'place of safety' for the righteous?

Abraham's nephew Lot - a just man, but living in a degenerate society— was unaware of the LORD's plan to deal with that society. Angels were sent to lead him and his family out of Sodom (Genesis 19).

Perhaps unwilling to leave his home and possessions *'...he lingered'*. States the record: *'...At first, Lot just stood there. But the LORD wanted to save him. So the angels took Lot, his wife, and his two daughters by the hand and led them out of the city'* (Genesis 19:16 CEV).

The account of Lot's 'escape' is mirrored in the end-time: *'...At the sound of a loud trumpet, he will send his angels to bring his chosen ones together from all over the earth'* (Matthew 24: 31 CEV). Brought, that is, to *'...meet the Lord in the air'*, together with all the faithful dead since creation (I Thessalonians 4:16-17).

God's messengers *'...took [Lot] by the hand'* and dragged him to a remote safe place. And in the end-time? Jesus again: *'...Remember what happened to Lot's wife. People who try to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives will save them. On that night two people will be sleeping in the same bed, but only one will be taken. The other will be left. Two women will be together grinding wheat, but only one will be taken. The other will be left'* (Luke 17:32-35 CEV). Did those 'left' —

to be a misunderstanding? Or, you believe that before the

like Lot's wife—refuse? Had their love for Christ *'...grown cold'*? Such is predicted.

So—don't fear! Remain faithful and God will 'take' you.

On the Spot

A different example, now. The prophet Elisha was encircled in a mountain-top township by a hostile army—scaring the wits out of his servant. Elisha himself had no fear. For, he told him, *'...they that be with us are more than they that be with them'* (II Kings 6:16-18). They were protected by *'...fiery horses and flaming chariots'*- a spirit host. As wrote the Psalmist: *'...You will not be harmed, though thousands fall all around you'* (Psalm 91:7 CEV). The all-powerful God can also protect as He sees the need—*right where we are*.

Daniel's three friends also had an 'escape experience'. Their resistance to Nebuchadnezzar's idolatry was punished by the furious King., who had them thrown into a super-heated furnace They survived (Daniel 3).

But note their response to the King's edict: *'...The three men replied, "Your Majesty, we don't need to defend ourselves. The God we worship can save us from you and your flaming furnace. But even if he doesn't, we still won't worship your gods and the gold statue you have set up'* (vv.17-18 CEV).

Daniel himself also escaped having *passed through* his 'tribulation' in the lions' den.

Different situations, different deliverances—but all in the control of our loving God: *'... the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him'* (II Chronicles 16:9).

Whether or not we know the precise

Escapism ...cont'd

details of future events, God will ensure protection where appropriate.

When Jesus returns—as he surely will and in the Father’s good time—those who accompany him are ‘... called, and chosen, and faithful’ (Revelation 17:14).

Stay faithful to him—be victorious to the end—and you need not fear whatever the future may hold. **Ω**

Seven Trumpets

Several interpretations of the symbolic ‘Trumpets’ of the book of Revelation are extant. One is historical—that they depict events from Jesus’ resurrection through to his return. But they clearly have end-time relevance, as depicted here.

The ‘last’ Trumpet (I Corinthians 15:52) implies others, and the book of Revelation details *seven* of them. In symbol they signify end-time events immediately before the return of Messiah—Jesus. In prophetic terms, the *Trumpets* provide the detail of the ‘*seventh seal*’.

They follow the Tribulation (the ‘*fifth seal*’) and awesome cosmic activity accompanied by civil, military and economic collapse (the ‘*sixth seal*’). (Revelation *ch* 6)

The *Seventh* (‘last’) *Trumpet* heralds the resurrection of the godly from all ages. The events depicted by the preceding six ‘Trumpets’ may begin on the final *Day of Trumpets* of our era, the remainder in the following months.

This is the prelude to ‘...the great day of his wrath’ (v.17) - also known as ‘the seven last plagues’ which are poured out ‘...in the presence of the Lamb’, Jesus. (Revelation 14:10)

[God’s ‘wrath’ (Gk *thumos*) is the expression of His righteous anger towards those who destroy His *kosmos*—and refuse to change despite frequent warning by the prophets and by angelic messengers]

Final Generation ...cont'd

have not been restrained. Nor has mankind experienced the ‘*seven last plagues*’ (Revelation 16) which occur at his coming and in his presence. (*ch* 14:10).

Prophetic Foretaste

The conclusion must be that events of 70AD in Judaea were but a foretaste of a future fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy—and yet to be fulfilled. There is, however, more to it than that. In a nutshell, the immediate return of Jesus was *conditional*.

Notice again Peter’s response to this question: ‘...*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness; but is longsuffering to you—ward, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance*’ (v.9).

Jesus’ mission began at the culmination of centuries of divine patience: ‘...*Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent you, and believe in the gospel* (Mark 1:14-15).

He came ‘...*in the fulness of time*’ (Galatians 4:4), and His message was one of *repentance*. God’s plan had focused in the nation of Israel (Matthew 15:24). They were the model to which all would aspire. But despite warning upon warning they despised the true way and killed His messengers. At the appropriate pre-set time the Father sent the Son. They rejected him, killed him.

No Change

Repentance didn’t happen. After forty years of further divine patience and apostolic preaching the axe fell on unrepentant Israel. The Temple, the centre of divine worship, was destroyed and the people were slaughtered or scattered. The old way passed and the true faith became personal. The public worship of the LORD would no longer be confined to Jerusalem and a material Temple - but centred in individual human

hearts indwelt by the Spirit of God (See John 4:21-24).

Those prophetic time passages are, in other words, conditional. Indeed this is clear from the inclusion of the Greek particle *an*. It is not directly translatable into English by a word but is implied. An example is in this very passage in Acts - *ch* 3:20. ‘...*it denotes that the action of the verb is dependent on some circumstance or condition*’ (Arndt & Gingrich: *Greek-English Lexicon*).

The time was indeed then ‘*at hand*’. As was ‘*the end of all things*’. The ‘*coming of the LORD*’ did indeed ‘*draw near*’. It was ‘*the last time*’.

But only if Israel had repented.

In God’s good and perfect timing, however, He will intervene to save Israel and all mankind—both from physical annihilation, and spiritually.

Only God in His perfect timing and out of His compassion knows how long any individual, any nation, needs to prepare to receive His abundant overflowing blessing. **Ω**

He who solemnly declares all this says, ‘Yes, I am coming quickly’ (Revelation 22:20 WNT)

The Role of the 'Minister'?

'... whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister' (Matthew 20:26)

'...are they ministers of Christ?' (II Corinthians 11:23)

It's generally accepted that 'every church needs a minister' What is disputed is his - or her - role. Within Christianity there are indeed many ecclesiastical structures—ranging through the hierarchical (as in the Roman church or some contemporary sects), to the Anglican churches, to the informality of some of the 'house churches'. What, then, of popes and archbishops and bishops *etc*? Do these offices derive from the Christian Scriptures?

- Search the New Testament text, however, and but two church offices are listed: *'...to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons'* (Philippians 1:1). Elsewhere the 'bishops' (Gk *episkopi*, overseers) are equated with *elders* (Titus 1:5, 7), while Peter urges the elders to *'...Be shepherds of God's flock which is among you'* (I Peter 5:2)
- These *elders, bishops, shepherds* are appointed within individual congregations. They are not appointed over dioceses, nor does any one 'bishop' (however titled) rise to supremacy over any denomination-or indeed the entire Church of God. The rumpus over female bishops in the Anglican community is, on this basis, an irrelevance. So, too, the Papacy. The office of 'bishop' as today generally understood had no place in the church for at least a century from its beginning. Any 'superiority' arose from respect for individuals (Polycarp, for example) who were exemplary for their faithfulness to the apostolic teaching and their dedication to the service of Christ. They exercised *moral* authority—only. Every office bearer answered, answers, directly to Jesus
- Much of the confusion extant in church office arises from the model used. Episcopal churches compare their offices to the Old Testament priesthood. The early church, however; was based on the synagogue model
- It's general practice to divide the church into *clergy* and *laity*—referring, of course to the 'ministry' and the 'flock'. Again, a practice not derived from the Scriptures. *Clergy* derives from the Greek *kleros*, meaning an inheritance. Note Peter's comment: *'...Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage [Gk kleros], but being ensamples to the flock'* (I Peter 5:2-3). The real 'clergy' are those brethren - the *'...flock of God'* (v.2) - committed by the Lord to the care of the 'shepherds'
- A key to the function of church leaders derives from the instruction by Jesus to his apostles: *'... '... whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister [Gk diakonos, servant]'* (Matthew 20:26). This attitude underpins the care to be exercised by those appointed to positions of leadership in the church of God. Biblical leadership is not authoritarian: *'...you know that foreign rulers like to order their people around. And their great leaders have full power over everyone they rule'* (v.25 CEV). That's not what Jesus prescribed for his church! The apostle Peter, too, emphasizes this attitude (I Peter 5:1-3). This does not mean there is no discipline and authority in any local assembly. Such, properly exercised, is essential for order and is God-appointed
- The only other New Testament-sanctioned office' is that of *deacon* (Gk *diakonos*). The word simply means a servant, and is an everyday word - *eg* the attendants at the marriage feast at Cana (John 2:5). It is used by Jesus of himself (Matthew 20:28) and by the apostle Paul (I Corinthians 3:5). Early in the life of the church it was specifically applied to men and women (Romans 16:1) appointed as 'servants of the church' for administrative functions (Philippians 1:1, I Timothy 3:1)
- Additionally, Christ imparts spiritual gifts to *all* of 'God's heritage' to benefit his purpose (I Corinthians 12). Some have gifts that, when nourished and exercised, equip them to function as dedicated evangelists (*eg* Ephesians 4:8-12). Others have those qualities that equip to function as pastors of the flock and teachers of the Word, or as servants ('deacons') of the local assembly (I Timothy 3:1-13)
- The term 'ordain' (Gk *kathistemi*—Acts 6:3, Titus 1:5) is widely misused. It is simply an *appointment* - through the laying-on of hands (Acts 13:3) - by the local church to a recognized function or office of leadership of an individual who is seen to have the appropriate qualifications/gifts. It is a public procedure, as illustrated in Acts 6, but elaborate ritual is not Biblically supported Ω

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