

The Blessed Hope

by H. A. Ironside

As one thoughtfully reads the words of our Lord Jesus recorded in the early verses of John 14, and the teaching given in the Pauline Epistles in regard to the hope of the Church, it becomes increasingly evident that there is not the least hint that believers of this dispensation were to look forward to a long series of events preceding the return of the Lord Jesus to raise the dead in Christ and change the living and take them to Himself in the Father's House. This blessed hope is always presented as imminent, which it could not be, if one had to suppose that the destruction of and then revival of the Roman Empire, the rise of the Antichrist, and the great tribulation, must precede that glorious event. Yet there are other scriptures that very distinctly show, as we have seen, that there will be saints on the earth when these conditions prevail; but I trust it has already been made clear that they will not belong to the Church, the Body of Christ.

There are in fact two distinct stages of our Lord's return presented in the New Testament. He is coming *for* His saints. This is the rapture which precedes the great tribulation. He is going to be *manifested* with all His saints when He descends to exercise judgment on those who have persisted in rejecting His grace, and when He will set up His glorious kingdom to reign in righteousness over this world. In other words, while the Old Testament and the four Gospels, together with other scriptures, plainly predict Christ's second coming to establish His kingdom on this earth, it is part of the mystery hidden from past ages that when He comes He will have with Him a Bride to share His throne, as well as a host of other redeemed saints from all past dispensations in His train. I know that this is looked upon as a visionary interpretation by many, and the attempt has been made again and again to show that this view, which is often called "the Futurist Theory," was originated by Spanish Jesuits in order to turn away opprobrium from Rome. But the fact of the matter is that the Jesuit writers in question, Alcazar and Ribera, simply set forth what was taught with more or less clearness by some of the church fathers in the first three centuries of the Christian era, and

was lost sight of later.

Others again have tried to put the stigma of demonism upon the precious truth that the Lord may return at any time to take His saints to be with Himself preceding the great tribulation, endeavoring to link this with certain theories taught by the late Edward Irving and his followers in the early part of the nineteenth century. But any one at all acquainted with Irving's actual teaching can see how truly false this is. From the time when prophetic truth long neglected came again into prominence, there was a great deal of confusion regarding the two aspects of the Lord's return, mentioned above; but eminent Bible teachers who weighed all the scriptures carefully and prayerfully before God, were led little by little to see the distinction between the Church as the Body of Christ and the saints of a coming age who would be witnesses for the Lord in the time of the tribulation, and would share with Him in the manifested kingdom. The more carefully these views have been examined by men of God dependent upon the teaching of the Holy Spirit through the Word, the more they have been seen to be distinctly in harmony with divine revelation.

In recent years, particularly following the [First] World War, there has been a recrudescence of Post-Tribulationism, brought about largely by the fact that so many stirring events have taken place which seem to foreshadow the actual conditions that will prevail during the time of Jacob's trouble. Already the Roman Empire seems in process of revival. The rise of dictatorship gives us to understand how readily the great world-ruler of the coming day will forge his way to the front and be acclaimed as the very representative of God Himself. The return of thousands of Jews to Palestine, involving the rehabilitation of that land, is certainly preparing the way for the very events depicted in the prophets and by our Lord Himself, which are to take place in the last days. All of these things, and many others that might be added, seem to have swept some dear brethren away from their moorings, and losing sight of "that Blessed Hope," they are now fixing their attention upon events rather than on the Person who is coming. The effect of this is not a healthy thing. It results in occupying the heart and mind with earthly things instead of with the coming Saviour. It has led many to think that perhaps after all we are entering even now into the great tribulation, if, in fact we are not actually through the greater part of it, and just waiting for the

revelation of the Antichrist and then of the Lord's actual descent to the Mount of Olives, and the establishment of the Kingdom.

But the very fact that we see conditions shaping themselves for tribulation times should only lead us to realize the nearness of our Hope. At any moment now the Lord may descend from Heaven to raise the dead and change the living, and then will come the dark days predicted in both Testaments for apostate Israel and apostate Christendom.

Another view that has clouded the faith of many who cannot see but that at least some saints will be caught up before the great tribulation, is what is commonly known as "the partial," or "firstfruits rapture." This, however, is in plain contradiction to the testimony of the Holy Spirit given through the Apostle Paul and our blessed Lord Himself. The Saviour made no distinction among His heavenly people when He said, "If I go, I will come again and receive you unto Myself." He had just foretold the defection of Peter, but He did not even hint that unless Peter is restored he will have no part in the Father's House. In fact, He addressed Himself particularly to him, when He said, "Let not your heart be troubled;" as one may see, if instead of breaking the chapters as we have them in our English Version, we read from chapter 13 right on into chapter 14. He of course had made provision for the restoration of the soul of His disciples, as He does for all of us; but He gave no suggestion that any would be left behind when He would return for His own. In the Epistles the rapture is seen to be all-embracing. We read, "They that are Christ's at His coming;" not they that are eminently faithful, nor yet they that speak with tongues, nor they that have been baptized, or any other proviso; simply, "They that are Christ's." And again, in 1 Thessalonians, we have the simple statement, "We which are alive and remain shall be caught up together." There are no distinctions made between mature and immature Christians in these words. If other scriptures be cited that seem to indicate that some will not be ready when the Lord comes, a careful examination of the context will show that in each instance the reference is to the coming of the Son of Man at the end of the great tribulation, and not to the descent of the Lord to the air to receive the saints of this dispensation and past ages to be with Himself in the Father's House.

Therefore it may be confidently affirmed that neither post-

tribulationism nor partial rapture theories are taught in the Word of God. It would not be possible in the limits of this paper to follow all the definite objections to the position we have taken, nor can we hope to satisfy every mind. But it seems perfectly evident that the Blessed Hope is intended to be the daily expectation of the believers, which could not be, if certain events must of necessity take place before its fulfilment.

Moreover, if I put anything in my thinking between the present moment and the return of the Lord, I am losing that which is of infinite value in connection with my personal walk and Christian experience. "Every man that hath this hope in Him purifieth himself even as He is pure." I know of nothing that is so effectual in controlling the heart and mind of the believer so that his one aim and object will be to walk in holy separation to the Lord Himself, as the thought that at any moment He who has redeemed us may return and take us to the Father's House. One may hold certain intellectual views of the second coming of Christ, even the view of the pretribulation rapture, and not be practically sanctified thereby. But if this Hope holds me, it cannot but result in increased personal piety.

Then, too, we need to remember that it is at the return of the Lord for His saints that He will go over our record as servants when we stand before the judgment-seat of Christ. At that time, we are to be rewarded according to the deeds done in the body, and our place in the coming kingdom indicated. It is then that the crowns of reward are to be distributed, and in this connection it is very significant to note that in the Book of Revelation, we see the twenty-four elders crowned and enthroned around the central throne of God and of the Lamb (chaps. 4 and 5), before the solemn judgments begin to fall upon the earth. Practically all futurist interpreters are agreed that in chapters 6 to 19 of Revelation we have the great tribulation period. It is then that the wrath of the Lamb and the wrath of God will be poured upon the habitable earth, and Satan will be cast down from the heavenlies, having great wrath, knowing that his time is short. These are the circumstances of the great tribulation and we are looking for Christ as our Deliverer from the wrath to come. Whatever view we may take of the symbolic elders, whether we think of them as twenty-four individuals, or as representing the entire heavenly priesthood, which to me is clearly the true interpretation, there is this to bear in mind; they are seen crowned in Heaven before the

judgments begin.

Let me put it this way. a. The tribulation period does not begin until the Lamb receives the seven-sealed book and breaks the seals. b. But the Lamb does not receive the book until crowned saints are seen in Heaven. c. No saints have yet received their crowns, nor will there be crowned saints in Heaven until the judgmentseat of Christ is past. d. The apostle Paul declares definitely that the crown of righteousness will be given to him and to all who love Christ's appearing in that day. This is the day of manifestation following our Lord's return for His saints. e. Therefore, it seems plainly evident that the great tribulation cannot possibly begin until after the rapture of the Church.

There is much more that might be said, but I leave the matter here, commending the entire subject to the spiritual judgment of the people of God, feeling assured that the more carefully this matter is weighed, the clearer it will be that the Church, the Body of Christ, is not to look forward to a time when the wrath of God will be poured out upon this world, but is to live in daily expectation of the Lord's return to take us to be with Himself ere the time of grief begins.

Others have written far more fully and more ably on this question than I. May it be ours to search the Scriptures daily whether these things be so, and to live in the power of that Blessed Hope.

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