

Part II: The Knot Unraveling

Luke 12: 35 & 36

"Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him."

Chapter 5
The Gordian Knot
(A script for the End Times)

An Ancient Greek Legend

When a Greek colony in Asia Minor (Turkey) needed a new king, an oracle declared the father of gods (Zeus) had ordained that the first person to ride up to his (Zeus') temple in a wagon must be crowned. A farmer named Gordius innocently fulfilled the oracle while delivering a load of compost to spread on the temple flowerbeds. He was instantly made king, and he would prove to be a good one. His first action as king was to dedicate his wagon to Zeus and to place it near the temple, the yoke tied to a post by an intricate knot to prevent anyone from stealing it. Another oracle later declared that anyone who succeeded in untying the knot would conquer all Asia. The knot stayed tied until the arrival of Alexander, on his campaign to conquer the Persian Empire. He was invited to try and untie the knot. Taking a characteristically direct approach to the problem, he cut it with his sword. Zeus then honored Alexander's initiative by making the prophecy come true. Alexander went on to conquer Greece, Asia Minor, Persia, Egypt, and even parts of India - all of which he accomplished before he died at the age of thirty-three.

In the last chapter I suggested that a unique constellation of nations will appear in the last days, just prior to the onset of the End Times. In this chapter I want to suggest how current world events may be propelling all of us toward a final showdown between God and rebellious humanity. I will also suggest a possible scenario about how things might play out, based on my understanding of Bible prophecy. In the following chapters I will explain how I came to think this way.

In other words, I will untie the knot (as best I can), and then I will explain how I did it.

As noted in the last chapter Israel, Eurabia and the kingdom of the antichrist will play starring roles in the End Times drama. Today Israel is at the center of world events, the focus of much of the trouble that plagues the Middle East and, by extension, the world. Eurabia is growing in size as the European Union extends membership to Eastern European countries. It is also growing in unity, moving in the minds of many ever closer to a merger of European and Arabian cultures.

To consummate this union, Europe's increasingly pro-Arab and pro-Muslim leanings find expression in trade, security and cultural exchange agreements, transfers of technology, programs funding, and immigration policies that directly benefit Arab populations and Arab

nations. The Arabs increasingly infuse European society with Arab and Muslim values and culture, primarily through immigration, high birth rates and resistance to assimilation into the European mainstream, thereby securing an Islamic presence on the continent at a time when traditional European populations are growing slowly and, in some cases, declining due to low birthrates.

Such developments both facilitate and hinder the integration of European and Arab cultures as each seeks dominance over the process and over the ultimate outcome. And just as iron will not mix with clay, these societies will not alloy. Their movement toward unity is as much illusion as reality.

Still, developments continue in that direction. Europe grows increasingly anti-Israel in its drift toward proto-union with Arabia. Paying lip service to Israel's right to exist, Europe increasingly sides with Arab/Muslim demands for a Palestinian state on, and ultimately within, Israel's borders.

Meanwhile, forces and events in the Middle East will soon precipitate the rise of the third player on the world stage – the antichrist – who arises out of the Levant and Mesopotamia, or that region of the Middle East currently divided among the Arab nations of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

Perhaps he will be the leader of a newly independent Kurdistan after the breakup of Iraq, or a powerful Iraqi Sunni or Shia tribal or religious leader who, by skillful diplomacy and careful application of force, reunites Iraq. Perhaps he will be a Syrian politician or general who gains control of that country after a brief coup or civil war, possibly with secret aid from the West and even Israel in exchange for promises to suppresses terrorist organizations that currently find sanctuary in, and operate from, Syria. Perhaps he will be a Saudi general or prince who overthrows the monarchy with the help of the military rank-and-file and the clerics. Regardless of his origins, he will be the one man capable of ending the chronic strife that plagues the region and unite the populations of the Middle Eastern nations.

The antichrist subdues the Levant and Mesopotamia through intrigue, flattery, bribery and intimidation. With Lebanon, Syria and Iraq under his control, he sweeps through the Arabian Peninsula with a quickness that catches the world, and especially the West, by surprise. Before anyone can react, he creates a ten-nation confederation that serves as the core for an evolving Arab/Muslim super-state – a confederation bordered to the north by Turkey, to the east by Iran, to the west by Israel, and to the southwest by Egypt and Sudan. This confederation controls much of the world's oil production and most of the world's estimated oil reserves at a time of increasing demand and rising prices.

From a position of Arab unity and strength, the antichrist suppresses the remnants of terrorism and factionalism within his confederation and secures the flow of oil to the West and the East (for a price). Revenues from oil sales fund his programs to modernize his confederation and develop his military. Control of much of the world's oil production and oil reserves ensures his influence in world affairs.

The antichrist also establishes a seven-year treaty with Israel – effectively ending the Palestinian uprising and securing Israel's borders – but this will only be a temporary arrangement,

in his mind, designed to stabilize the region, gain support from and allay the fears of the West, and seduce Israel into letting down its guard. As part of the peace, the antichrist allows Israel to begin rebuilding the Jewish Temple alongside the Muslim shrines atop the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. He ends the decades-old trade embargo imposed on Israel by the surrounding Arab nations. He gives Israel favorable trading status with the nations of his confederation, and he allows Israel to receive oil transshipments from his oil-producing member states. Oil flows once more through Israeli pipelines to terminals on the Mediterranean Sea, and from these terminals to the West. It flows to Israeli facilities on the Gulf of Aqaba, on the Red Sea, and from these terminals to the East.

With its peace secured and guaranteed by the antichrist, Israel devotes less and less of its resources to its military and invests the resulting 'peace dividend' in its already advanced and productive industrial and agricultural infrastructure. Favorable trade status with antichrist's confederacy provides ready markets for a wide ranged of goods and services, including advanced weaponry. Revenues from oil transshipments flow into Israel's treasury. Peace and security attract foreign investment; Israel grows wealthy.

At this point the antichrist is hailed worldwide as a great man of peace. He has ended the strife between Arabs, and between Arabs and Israel. He has suppressed regional factionalism, terrorism and fundamentalism. And he has secured the uninterrupted production and flow of oil. His picture is on the cover of Time Magazine's 'Person of the Year' issue. He is nominated for, and receives, the Nobel Peace Prize. He is honored at the United Nations, at the Hague, at the Vatican, and at the White House.

However, not everyone is happy with this new 'state of affairs'. Muslim nations outside the confederation oppose the antichrist's treaty with Israel. The Arab League nations of North Africa suddenly see their power and influence greatly diminished. Turkey and Iran, which have had designs of influence in the Levant and Mesopotamia for decades, see instead a potential new and powerful threat from that region – Turkey, in particular, feels economically threatened as Iraqi oil, which had been generating revenues for Turkey by flowing through Turkish pipelines to Turkish terminals, begins to flow instead to Israeli terminals. All Muslim regimes outside the antichrist's confederation, and Arab regimes in particular, view his popularity with their own citizens as a threat to their hold on power. And Russia, which sought and gained influence in the region over the preceding decades, now finds itself in unfavorable competition with the antichrist over oil production and global markets.

Within a year of antichrist's treaty with Israel, these nations form an alliance and coordinate a massive attack against the antichrist's confederation and against Israel. Egypt, Libya and Sudan attack from the south. Turkey, Iran, Russia and their allies (Eastern European nations, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian Muslim nations) attack from the north and east.

At this point in his military career, it is all that the antichrist can do to wage war on a single front. Rather than dividing his forces, he quickly assesses that the southern arm of the coalition is the weaker and determines to use all of his offensive power against it first, while employing a defensive, delaying action to slow down the attacks from the north and east. If he can quickly defeat his enemies to the south, he can then turn and face his remaining enemies

without having to worry about his rear. The antichrist implements his plan and quickly defeats Egypt, Libya and Sudan; however, his delaying action in the north has had limited success. News reaches him that the northern and eastern arms of the enemy coalition have broken through his defensive positions and are streaming toward a critical link-up of forces in the mountains of Northern Israel, for a thrust at Jerusalem.

But before the antichrist can react to this news, further news reaches him that the attacking armies from the north and the east have been defeated, with losses exceeding a staggering eighty percent of forces deployed. The armies of Turkey, Russia, Iran and their many allies lay dead in the field, their weapons and supply trains abandoned, the few survivors fleeing in disarray and terror back across the frontier.

In the months following this seemingly miraculous victory and, as Israel cleans up the battle debris and buries the bodies of the enemy dead, many Israelis recognize God's hand in the events that have occurred in the Mountains of Israel. However, many more in Israel, all of Arabia, and most of the rest of the world believe the antichrist when he claims total victory over his enemies by his own military prowess and power. Reports from the survivors of the battle only add to the confusion. Many claim that they were subjected to massive surprise attacks from all directions, of bombs and missiles of fantastic power that seem to rain down on them from nowhere; of nature itself seeming to conspire against them with earthquakes, avalanches, torrential rain and murderous hail; of confusion among the armies, breakdowns in communication, conflicting orders, and misguided attacks; of not being able to find the enemy on the field and of mistaking allies for the enemy; of the critical and complicated link-up of forces degenerating into a melee of allies attacking and killing allies.

Adding to the confusion of these reports is another strange phenomenon. Many survivors of the battle seem to have suddenly found religion – a religion of a disturbing kind – one that conflicts with the religions and worldviews of the leaders of their home nations. Attempts are made to silence the survivors; some are shut away in asylums for the insane or imprisoned. Others are taken out and shot for traitors or cowards. A few melt into the general population, to begin lives as fugitives from the authorities.

Military experts, newscasters, sensationalists and rumormongers of every type conceal their ignorance or promote pet theories with fantastic assessments of events on the ground, and of the implications of the outcome of the war. Conjecture about the antichrist's arsenal run the gamut of the possible and impossible – of new and terrible super-secret super-weapons, of advanced stealth technologies and psychological warfare techniques, and even of effective weather control as a battlefield weapon. As happened so often in past wars, ignorance of the facts generates unrealistic assessments of the antichrist's military power. The general consensus is summed up in the military reality of the antichrist's survival and seeming absolute possession of the battlefield. Numbers do not lie. His enemies, whose armies had outnumbered and outgunned him by multiples of ten, lay prostrate and defenseless. His forces remain intact. He has won this war with stunning swiftness and minimal loss to himself. He is victor, indeed. And he is the darling of the Muslim masses, who proclaim him the undisputable leader of the Nation of Islam.

The antichrist quickly exploits his unexpected victory by quickly absorbing North Africa, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Central Asian Muslim nations into his empire. Russia, Eastern Europe, the European Union and Sub-Sahara Africa yield to his power. Antichrist suddenly dominates three continents, and his empire and client states stretch from the Atlantic in the west to the Arabian Sea in the east. All nations throughout the world hail the antichrist as the great conqueror of the age. In power and influence his empire is the equal to, or greater than, America, China and India.

With stunning swiftness, the antichrist has consolidated direct and indirect political, economic and/or military control over almost two-thirds of the world's population and most of global oil reserves and production. India and China, with their rapidly developing petroleum-based economies, fall well within the sphere of his influence. Japan, Korea, Australia, Southeast Asia, South and Central America – the list goes on of the nations that succumb to, and align themselves with, the antichrist. Suddenly he has virtual control over three, possibly four, (possibly all five?) of the permanent members on the U.N. Security Council, and control of most of the non-permanent members. He also dominates most of the U.N. member states.

As his political influence grows, the antichrist's power over the global economy tightens. Oil prices, as well as most of its production and distribution, are his alone to determine. Trade policies, agreements and tariffs are his to set. Currency values, international trade, and money transfers are facilitated or hindered by his design. The economies of nations, regions and even continents prosper or falter as he decides.

America is particularly traumatized by these events. It has suddenly lost control of access to Middle Eastern oil and has lost its status as the world's only superpower. The nation withdraws from most of its global entanglements, grows ever more economically isolated, and becomes preoccupied with growing problems at home (increasing national and personal debt, declining national wealth, energy shortages, faltering economy – the list goes on and on). As energy prices soar, America adopts drastic enforced energy conservation and energy rationing policies and scrambles to invest heavily in alternate energy technologies. However, these technologies prove too little and too late to replace non-existent cheap foreign oil, if ever they could have.

The American economy falters. Inflation, default on debt, and devaluation of the dollar and of paper wealth result. The home-building and consumer economies (which account for most of the nation's Gross Domestic Product) collapse. Unemployment soars. Entitlements disappear. Social programs such as Welfare, Social Security and Medicare are drastically curtailed. Defined pensions and other retirement saving plans (401Ks, 457s, etc.) lose much if not most of their value. National, state, local and personal debts become unmanageable burdens. Mortgages fail. Credit dries up. Home energy and commuting costs skyrocket. As energy prices soar and energy shortages grow more critical, remote suburbs, low-density development patterns, dependence on personal vehicles, and ownership of large houses – the American Dream – become financial liabilities to residents and to localities, energy liabilities to the nation, handicaps to economic recovery, and possibly threats to national security. Reprioritization of diminishing resources becomes necessary.

Migration to the inner suburbs, to towns, and to cities begins, reversing patterns of development that had characterized American society over the previous 100 years. Competition for inner-suburban and urban housing, jobs and services, together with the remixing of long segregated social, economic, racial, ethnic and cultural groups, generate severe social friction. Disruption of services (health care, police and fire, social-welfare) and shortages of deliverables (food, medicines and other consumables in addition to energy) further tear at the fabric of the nation. The need for new social structures designed to cope with these problems grows.

American society begins a process of social, economic and political adjustment unprecedented in its history. Efforts that promote sacrifice and unity are hindered by the nation's class-by-wealth, and by its racial, cultural and ethnic diversity. The wealthy try to keep what they have, while minorities and the newly poor perceive, rightly or wrongly, that they are becoming increasingly disenfranchised, or see opportunities to gain advantage as the nation adapts to cope with troubling times. Civil strife along economic, racial, cultural and/or ethnic lines, and possibly civil war(s), could result.

America further develops a xenophobic backlash to globalization and diversity. This backlash includes the erection of trade barriers, curtailment of immigration, possible deportation or imprisonment of illegal aliens, and low tolerances for diversity of all types. These trends stress relations with other nations and further tear at the fabric of the nation. Old social and international alignments disintegrate and new ones emerge. American society either 'rallies around the flag', turns to God, or rips apart at social, economic, racial, ethnic, cultural and/or regional seams.

While America struggles with its problems at home, the antichrist consolidates his power abroad by allowing, then encouraging, a global cult of personality that rapidly evolves into a new religion; one that directly challenges, then absorbs, at least three of the world's great religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He evolves, in the minds of many, from the figurative savior of the world to the literal savior of the world.

This cult finds its epicenter in Jerusalem – where better to supplant Judaism, Christianity and Islam than in a city sacred to all three? This new religion finds its priest in a cohort of the antichrist, a man with seeming supernatural powers. And it finds some of its most devoted adherents among the Jewish people who, as they had so often in ancient times, entrust their security in alliances with surrounding nations instead of with God.

Those in Israel, the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and Asia who refuse to embrace the new religion are denigrated as obstructionist to world peace, harmony and prosperity. They are marginalized to the fringes of politics and community, then penalized economically, then persecuted. Many succumb to the lure of antichrist's promises and seeming ability to reward those who yield to his agenda. Others succumb to his demands for loyalty and worship in order to avoid persecution. The numbers of the unyielding faithful dwindle, and these are shoved out of the mainstream of society. Out of the public mind and eye, labeled 'other than us' and 'not our concern', they are targeted outcasts. Their homes and possessions are confiscated. They are denied civil, legal and basic human rights. They are imprisoned and beaten. Vigilantes, predators of the weak, and the more fanatical of the antichrist-faithful kill many.

As the antichrist tightens his grip on the world economy, he increasingly dominates international, regional and national politics. His cult spreads with his influence, followed by the pattern of exclusion and persecution already established within his core empire.

Within a period of three and a half years from antichrist's treaty with Israel, he has largely achieved his goal of world domination. Still, some resist. Despite all efforts to suppress and silence them, a few religious 'fanatics' continually step forward to raise the cry of heresy, apostasy, false religion, and of God's impending judgments. They seem to pop up everywhere, in every nation and region and province and state and city and town, and somehow persist, despite the persecutions they suffer. And, maddeningly, they are most prominent in and around Jerusalem - the very headquarters of antichrist's new religion - and there they are a challenge to his cult, one that somehow grows far out of proportion to their numbers.

Until now the antichrist had been content to let others to deal with them. But that changes.

Now a titanic battle for the hearts and minds of humanity ensues between Goliath and David, between the triumphant antichrist and the downtrodden, faithful few. The antichrist, frustrated and fed up with this last obstacle to his lust for total power, takes matters into his own hands. Three and a half years into his treaty with Israel he moves to end all resistance by breaking his treaty with Israel and occupying Jerusalem. He seizes the Temple Mount and its shrines to Judaism and Islam. He confiscates the Christian churches. He launches a campaign to slaughter the remaining faithful worldwide, despoil their places of worship, and set shrines to himself in the most holy of cities.

Even as David slew Goliath with a stone, so shall a stone slay the worship of the antichrist. A stone, cut by the hand of no man and kept from the foundation of the world for an hour and a day, hurtles toward the earth. And the antichrist knows it is coming.

Antichrist's plans for the final conquest of the earth are interrupted by reports from astronomers around the globe. A massive asteroid has been tracked through the heavens. It is on a collision course with the planet. World attention galvanizes – the planet-busting, civilization-destroying event that scientists have predicted for decades is about to happen, and most (not all) look to the antichrist to do something about it.

Antichrist mobilizes the best minds and most advanced technologies of the world's nations. He proclaims that he will save the world by launching nuclear warheads at the asteroid to deflect it from its collision course with the earth. He issues commands, overrides objections, prioritizes resources and launches his missiles skyward.

The warheads explode, but fail to deflect the asteroid. As some scientists had predicted (but were quickly silenced), the explosions merely spall the surface, sending a cloud of debris raining down upon the world. Thousands of flaming fragments crash into the atmosphere and strike the ground across a third of the globe, setting massive fires. The asteroid, unstoppable, smashes into the atmosphere, heats to incandescence, and slams into the sea.

The impact throws huge columns of smoke, soot and debris into the atmosphere. It rocks the globe with massive earthquakes. The oceans churn and throw up huge waves, swamping ships and coastlines. Mountains and islands collapse into the sea. As clouds of poisonous dust

and gases spread rapidly around the globe, the light of the sun and moon dims to sullen redness. The earth heaves and cracks, and the hearts of men fill with terror. Only a few see, in these great and terrible events, a glimmer of hope; they lift up their eyes to heaven, from where soon will come their deliverer.

Over the following months the earth reverberates from the asteroid strike. The atmosphere roils with a witch's brew of toxic steam that spews from the impact site. The steam condenses and torrential rains dump poisons into the streams, rivers, lakes and reservoirs that sustain terrestrial life. Deadly currents sweep up sediments from the ocean floor, and life in the seas suffocates. Earthquakes, aftershocks, mudslides and ground subsidence topple buildings, crumple roads and bridges, bury towns and swallow whole communities. Men's minds crack.

Yet the asteroid strike does not destroy the earth. Civilization, shaken to its foundations, is not destroyed. Because the asteroid struck the sea, most of the habitations of men far inland from the coastlines and away from the mountains, though damaged, are not obliterated. Men stagger from their hiding places to walk upon a wounded planet, pick up the pieces and try to put their world back together again.

The antichrist's failure to stop the catastrophe loosens his hold on the world. He orders his armies to reassert his dominion over the nations, starting a global war that, over the next three years, will kill a third of the world's population. He renews his attacks on the religious fanatics, who have dramatically increased in numbers and boldness as a consequence of the asteroid strike. His followers kill many of them, and antichrist orders their bodies left lying on the streets unburied – and especially in Jerusalem – as a warning.

Then the impossible happens. After three days the dead stand up and rise into the sky heavenward. In the next instant the remnant of fanatics who had resisted antichrist's cult and are still alive join the resurrected dead in the air.

The rest of humanity witness this event; some begin to see the hand of God in world affairs, and some of these begin to rethink their loyalty to antichrist, and some of these may even begin to change their mind and ways.

But most do not.

The global damage done by the asteroid, exacerbated by antichrist's global war for dominance, takes a toll on the environment, which over the next three years deteriorates rapidly toward a total collapse. People die as a result of this worsening environmental damage, in addition to those killed by on-going nuclear, biological and chemical attacks. Disease runs rampant; life in the oceans dies; fresh waters foul; the harmful rays of the sun penetrate the damaged atmosphere and scorch the flesh of men; the caustic clouds thrown up by the asteroid, the fires, and the fallout of war block out the light; the grasses, the trees, the crops in the fields and the hearts of men begin to die.

Israel, who's destruction the antichrist intended from the beginning of his reign, becomes the particular target of his wrath. He launches an attack to destroy the nation and its people. His forces sack Jerusalem and kill many of its citizens in their homes and on the streets, but some escape into the wilderness.

As the destruction of the earth continues, antichrist's hold upon the world weakens. India, China, and other nations that had suffered less from the initial shock and aftermath of the asteroid strike move to exploit what they see as an opportunity. A multitude of armies converge once more on Northern Israel as antichrist's allies and potential enemies march toward the greatest battle the world has ever suffered.

But the battlefield, and indeed the whole world, convulses with the greatest earthquake of all time. The sky unleashes its tortured fury – thunder, lightening, and great hailstones. Mountains that had withstood the roiling of the earth previously now crumble. Cities that had remained standing, though damaged, finally collapse. And coastlines that had partially recovered from the fury of the sea three years before sink below the waves.

And despite all this, most of humanity refuse to repent of their evil ways, but curse God for their suffering.

Then the clouds split open and Christ appears in the sky – not as a Savior but as a Conqueror, bent on conquering and going forth to conquer. He descends to the tortured earth and plants His feet on the Mount of Olives, east of the shattered rubble of Jerusalem, from where He had gently ascended into heaven two thousand years before.

Suddenly the converging armies in Northern Israel have a common enemy. They turn their weapons from each other and southward. But with a Word from His mouth Christ destroys the armies and their commanders. He then casts the antichrist and his priest into a lake of burning sulphur. He binds Satan for a thousand years. The great battle is over – over before it begins.

Now the earth and all of nature, freed at last of the dominion of sinful man and hateful demon, can begin a healing, one that will culminate in the long promised re-creation.

Chapter 6
The Bride of Christ
(The Church – here today, gone tomorrow)

I Corinthians 1: 10

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no dissensions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

The last chapter suggests a possible scenario for the End Times based on my understanding of Bible prophecy. It is that and no more – a possible scenario, and by no means the only possible scenario.

This chapter summarizes what the Bible has to say about the role of the Church in the End Times – a subject that has over the centuries generated much debate and confusion.

The question is asked: What role will Christianity play in the End Times? What will happen to the Christians living around that time? Does the Church even have a role to play, or will the faithful somehow escape those terrible times? Will Christians have to stand against – and suffer the anger of – the antichrist? These are the big questions that Christians want to know the answers to whenever they discuss the End Times.

The answer is: It depends on whom you ask.

That is the short answer. And while seeming to be no answer at all, it is in essence the true answer. This will take a bit of explaining, so please be patient and read on. I will provide more of an answer in due course.

The New Testament records how the earliest followers of Jesus – the first Christians – went about spreading the word that all people could receive God's Holy Spirit and begin the process of regeneration. This spreading the word is something Jesus had told them to do. He said they were to spread the word to everyone, in every part of the world. As more and more people heard the word and received the Holy Spirit, they began to gather together on a regular basis for fellowship and support, and to teach and learn from each other how to become more and more conformed to God's will. At first their gatherings were informal, and the places where they gathered were often no more than a quiet meadow or riverbank or someone's home. Eventually they began to erect buildings especially for these gatherings, and these were eventually called churches.

As time went on differences began to appear between groups of Christians regarding how they organized themselves, how they worshiped, how they decorated their churches, the importance they gave to the various items they used in their worship services, how they

interpreted various parts of the Bible, and the relative importance they gave to the various elements of its teachings. These differences gave rise to all kinds of divisions among the followers of Jesus; a condition that all too often hindered God's efforts to have Jesus' followers – the Christians – spread His message of regeneration.

Over the centuries, these divisions have confused and even repulsed many who might otherwise have been receptive to this message. Too often these divisions have led to strife among Christians, even to the point where, tragically, Christians have fought wars against Christians and killed each other, which would give anyone who saw it, or who heard or read about it (including myself) reason to doubt that those who fought such wars were really Christians at all. And I suspect that they were not.

Nonetheless, not all divisions within the Church are necessarily bad. Christianity as a faith is wonderfully adaptive. It is broad enough to include all peoples everywhere, from all cultural backgrounds and in all times, and especially in changing times. Differences that are merely adaptations designed to help people accept God's gracious gift of salvation and receive regeneration through His indwelling Holy Spirit can do no harm, so long as these adaptations do not become more important than the fellowship of all Christians, or become a substitute for a proper relationship with God (1 Corinthians, Chapter 9, verses 20 through 23). The problem arises when these differences become the definition of the faith. At that point, they become a substitute for what the Bible teaches is true religion, and are a form of idolatry.

Jesus during His earthly ministry warned His first followers that there would always be those who associated themselves with the Church who's motives would be less than, or other than, to receive His Holy Spirit and conform themselves to the Will of God as revealed in scripture. And He warned that such people would cause all kinds of trouble. He compared His followers – that is, those who truly want the regeneration of their minds – to wheat that a farmer plants in his fields. He compared the rest who associated themselves with the Church to weeds scattered among the wheat by the farmer's enemy. As the wheat and the weeds grow, the farmer cannot pull out the weeds without damaging the wheat, so the wheat and weeds grow together until the harvest. Then the farmer separates the wheat from the weeds, and he stores the wheat in his barns, and he burns up the weeds. (Matthew, Chapter 13, verses 24 through 30).

So it has been throughout the history of the Church that some people associate themselves with the Church but do not produce the right kind of seed, or the desired end product (in scripture wheat is often used to represent the kinds of people that God wants to produce, and reproduce, through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit). These weedy people have caused, and continue to cause, all kinds of trouble within the Church and interfere with its work. Some want to exploit the church as a power base for their own worldly agenda. Others want to pervert its doctrine to legitimize their own beliefs. Many want to ignore its fundamental principle of a right relationship with God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit because they do not desire to do things God's way, but want to continue doing things their own way. Often these kinds of people substitute a bunch of rules, rituals and procedures in place of a right relationship with God through the regeneration of their minds, and in this way attempt to change Christianity from a relationship with God into a 'religion'.

And perhaps the most harmful are those who, through wishful thinking, associate themselves with the Church, usually in name only, in the vain hope that this alone will somehow suffice to satisfy God (as opposed to receiving His Spirit and keeping His rules). They call themselves Christians, but do not exhibit in their lives the teachings of Christ, which are the evidence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. There are so many of these that, to the uninformed, they appear in fact to be the Church. And so easy is their way to a 'right' relationship with God (that is, no relationship at all, but only a sham) that there are always too many who will follow their example.

Matthew 7: 13 – 14

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

A day of reckoning is coming, but until then the life and work of the Church must grow and mature with weeds in its midst. Jesus summed it up quite bluntly when He told His first followers that not everyone who called Him 'Lord' would He recognize as His own, but only those who did the Will of God through the regeneration of their minds (Matthew 7, verses 15 through 27; Titus, Chapter 3, verses 1 through 11).

Yet even those who have received this regeneration can cause problems if they allow themselves to be misled, or mislead themselves, by motives other than to understand and do God's Will. As I have already noted, the work of regeneration through the indwelling Holy Spirit is a lifetime's work; and it is often frustrated by weaknesses and misunderstandings in the minds and souls of those who have received the Spirit. The Church struggles from within, as well as from without. Still, it is God who struggles with its shortcomings, and while the work may be frustrated, even seemingly set back at times, in the end God always wins out.

The Bible clearly states that, in God's Mind, neither the buildings we call churches, nor any of the divisions into which the Church has fragmented, nor those who associate themselves with the Church for the wrong reasons, are His Church. In the New Testament He identifies His Church as those who have received His Holy Spirit and, though sometimes faltering, are genuinely seeking God's help to become the kinds of people He wants them to be. He calls these people His Church, the Body of Christ, and the Bride of Christ, and He has a very definite role for His Church to play in the times prior to, during and after the End Times. Unfortunately, because of the divisions that have developed between Christians, differences of opinion and belief about the Church's role in the End Times have also emerged.

The question is asked: What does God mean when He identifies His Church as the Body and Bride of Christ?

The answer is: All Christians everywhere – that is, all those people who have received the Holy Spirit and have begun the process of becoming the kind of people who want to, and increasingly will, obey God's rules – are part of a single spiritual fellowship, regardless of the building in which they worship or the division with which they associate.

This spiritual fellowship is the Body of Christ – the living, breathing, walking, talking and doing Manifestation of His Presence in the world today. All who have within them the guiding, directing Holy Spirit are kindred souls and are recognized by God as His servants, as His children, and as parts of the Body of His Son, Jesus Christ. And anyone who does not have within them the guiding, directing Holy Spirit is not recognized by God as His servant, or as His child, or as a part of the Body of Christ, regardless of what they call themselves or the church or division of Christianity to which they claim membership.

Just as our bodies have many parts, each performing a function, so each Christian is a part of the Body of Christ. Each has their own special function, and usually many functions, as determined and revealed to them by the Holy Spirit.

And how can it be otherwise? The Bible states plainly that Jesus is the Head of this Body, directing each part to perform its functions for the benefit of the Whole and in accordance with His Will, just as the parts of our bodies work together under the direction of our minds (I Corinthians, Chapter 12, verses 12 through 27).

So, when I said in the introduction to this book that I am a Southern Baptist with merely Christian tendencies, I meant just that. I grew up in and, when I became a Christian, joined a Southern Baptist church, the Southern Baptists being one of the many divisions of Christianity in the world today. But as the Holy Spirit renews my mind and I conform more and more to the Will of God – a process that will never be completed in my lifetime but which God assures me will be accomplished – I concern myself less and less with what it means to be a Southern Baptist (as opposed to some other division of Christianity, such as Methodist, Lutheran, Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox) and concern myself more and more with what it means to be a servant and child of God, and a part of the Body of Christ.

But there is more to this Body of Christ. In the Bible, the Church is also described as the Bride of Christ.

In the chapter of this book about Ground Rules I noted that prophetic language is often difficult to understand because of its use of imagery to convey meanings for which we do not have adequate words. The image of the bride to describe God's Church is one such instance. It is enough, I think, to say that the love God has for His Church, and the love His Church has for Him, is much like the love that should be between a bridegroom and his bride. Voluntary union, partnership for life, shared dreams and life goals, promises to stick together regardless of future circumstances, consideration for the needs and desires of the other, and a willingness to sacrifice for the other, are just a few of the terms that describe the ideal union between a bridegroom and his bride. And bridegroom is one of the descriptive terms that the Bible uses for Jesus Christ (Revelation, Chapter 21, verses 2 through 9).

The imagery of the body, and especially that of the bridegroom and his bride, conveys the idea that Christians have a very special and exclusive relationship with God that has yet to see its ultimate fulfillment. For almost two thousand years now, since the very first Christians received the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Church (as God recognizes the Church) has, with the protection, guidance and help of the Holy Spirit, been growing and maturing, just as a healthy body grows and matures. And God has been preparing His Church over all those years for a more perfect union with Himself through the perfecting of our minds into the kinds of people who want to, can – and will – keep His commandments, and thereby join in perfect fellowship with Him.

But this perfected maturity and union is still in the future. Today the Church is scattered among the many divisions, and this both complicates and confuses the message of God's Plan for the redemption and renewal of the earth. Some of these divisions seem to ignore what the Bible has to say about the End Times. Others even seem to deny that it will happen at all. Those that make it central to their teachings are divided over its details.

Generally speaking, however, among Christians who do study these things, there seems to be three opinions about the role of the Church in the End Times. Some believe that the Church will not have a prominent role in the End Times, but will be taken out of the world just prior to the onset of the great and terrible events that will characterize those troublesome times. Others believe that the Church will have to endure those times to the end, holding fast to their faith in, and loyalty to, God in the face of all the troubles to come (just as the Church has done for almost two thousand years). And some believe that the Church will have to endure through part of the coming troubles, but will be taken out of the world prior to the final climatic events. This 'taken out of the world' is commonly called the rapture.

The question is asked: What do we mean when we say that Christians will be 'taken out of the world'?

The answer is: Rapture – it is not a word you will find in the Bible. It is a descriptive term that some Christians use to describe something wonderful God has promised He will one day do for His Church. At some point in the future, God will awaken the spirits of those Christians who have died and they shall join Jesus Christ in the air. And in the instant after He does this He will raise those Christians who are still alive to join Jesus and the awakened spirits of the dead. Then the awakened spirits and the physically living will be given new, incorruptible bodies. The Body of Christ will have at last come to maturity, and the Bride of Christ will have entered into a perfect union with Christ who is God, and the Church will return with Him to rule the earth that God has determined to renew from the beginning of time – just as He always said He would do.

The question is asked (again): So what role will Christians play in the End Times?

The answer is: The same role they have played since the founding of Christianity.

When Jesus appeared to His followers after His resurrection, He commanded them to wait for Him to send to them His Holy Spirit, and then to spread the word throughout the world of the regeneration of the mind that was now available to all who wanted it (Acts, Chapter 1, verses 3 through 5). He commanded them to bear witness to the Holy Spirit's power to transform people and to do so in the most practical of ways – by serving as living examples of this life-changing power through their words, deeds and lifestyle, and by helping each other, and those believers who would follow, to grow more and more into the kinds of people who would want to obey God and would obey God. And He commanded them to continue doing these things until the end of the world – that is, until He returns to the earth at His Second Coming (Matthew, Chapter 28, verses 18 through 20).

It has been almost two thousand years now since He said these things. And despite many setbacks, much opposition, much interference by those who Jesus had described as weeds, and despite the shortcomings of and divisions among His own followers in every generation, His Church has prevailed and prevails today.

The time between when Jesus issued this command (the Great Commission) and the End Times is the period of history that Christians call the Church Age, and also the Age of Grace. This time is God's very generous gift to humanity; a period of time, seemingly long as men measure time – eighty generations and counting – in which He is patiently waiting for people to decide whether they will accept His gracious offer of regeneration through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit or continue to go their own way.

But this Age of Grace will not last forever; the time of its end may even be near, and the work of the Church may be nearing its completion. As I have said, some Christians believe that the Church will continue in its work until the onset of the End Times but will be removed from the earth before all the bad things begin – indeed, some believe that the Rapture will be the first sign of the onset of the End Times. Others believe we will have to endure through part of the End Times, but will escape the worst of it. And others believe that we will have to endure in our mission until the end.

The debate among Christians over this matter I think hinders the Church in its mission. Our time is better spent going about our Heavenly Father's business and trusting Him with the whole affair – He who has promised never to forsake us, but to see us through thick and thin until He is pleased to bring us to our heavenly home.

Pray for the best, and prepare for the rest.

A good commander keeps his armies ready for battle; if he is wise he will pray that they never have to fight. But an army that never intends to fight is no army at all.

The Bible plainly teaches us that the Church is engaged in a war with God's enemies for the hearts and souls of mankind. To wish for anything else is fantasy, or worse. So watch and pray, for we truly do not know the hour when He shall come (Matthew, Chapter 25, verse 13).

Chapter 7

The Seven Year Tribulation
(Time of sorrows, time of hope)

In earlier chapters I suggested that developments in Europe and in the Middle East may be rushing the world head-on toward the climatic events of the End Times, or toward what many Christians call the Seven Year Tribulation.

When I say these events are 'rushing the world head-on', I do not wish to imply that anything we may do can speed up, or for that matter slow down or prevent, the coming End Times. Some people talk as if this is a possibility – even some Christians talk like that, suggesting things like redoubling efforts to evangelize the world in order to accelerate the Second Coming of Christ. They may be well meaning, but they err in that, as Jesus said, only His Father in Heaven knows the day and hour of Jesus' coming, and God has known this bit of information from before the creation of the world (Matthew, Chapter 24, verse 36).

God knows everything, including everything we ever say and do, and how what we say and do will affect the outcome of anything, from whether we will stub our toes rushing around getting dressed tomorrow morning and be late for work or an appointment to anything we Christians may try to accelerate the Second Coming of Christ. All of it was written into the script of human history before it happened and plays its part, large or small, in the final outcome. The timetable is set. It cannot be altered.

Some who have figured this out have leaped to the conclusion that everything that happens is caused by God, even down to Him deciding before someone is born whether or not they will come into a right relationship with Him through the regenerating power of His Holy Spirit (Romans, Chapter 8, verses 28 through 30; Ephesians, Chapter 1, verses 3 through 14). I think this might be an error caused by reading certain scripture out of context. Certainly God knows before we are born what any one of us will decide and do regarding our relationship with Him. But the Bible plainly teaches that each of us is responsible for our decisions regarding this and most other matters. God cannot do wrong, nor can He cause anyone to do wrong or cause anyone to make wrong choices (James, Chapter 1, verses 13 and 14). And He wants no one to perish, but rather all to come into a right relationship with Him (2 Peter, Chapter 3, verse 9). So such interpretations of scripture seems to me to conflict with the meaning of the whole. I prefer to think that all this really means is that God knows what will happen (that is, He knows what choice we will make of our own free will), and He has planned for the consequences and outcomes of our choices. That can only give comfort to those of us who have of our own free will chosen to be His by faith and regeneration, and give cause to pause and reflect to those who have not.

The question is asked: What is the Seven Year Tribulation?

The answer is: Literally seven years of hell on earth.

The term 'Seven Year Tribulation' is another one of those terms that Christians use but is not found in the Bible. It is a term used to describe the seven years prior to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. According to scripture, these will be the years in which the antichrist organizes opposition to God's final plans for fixing all the problems on earth caused by rebellious humanity. It will begin when the antichrist makes a seven-year treaty with Israel and end when he breaks the treaty after three and a half years. Then, three and a half years after that, Jesus Christ will return to reclaim the earth.

The basis for the doctrine of the Seven Year Tribulation is found primarily in the Old Testament Book of Daniel. What information the scriptures provide about events of that time is found there, and also in the New Testament Book of Revelation. Some additional details are scattered throughout the Bible, the most important being the Books of Matthew, Mark and Luke, where Jesus warns His followers of the terrible events of those times and encourages them to remain faithful to the end. But Daniel and Revelation provide the bulk of the prophecies about the Seven Year Tribulation.

In the ninth chapter of the Book of Daniel an angel tells the prophet that God had ordained 490 years for the completion of His covenant with Israel, measured from the time that the Persian conquerors of Babylon decree that the Jewish people can rebuild the city of Jerusalem (which the Babylonians had destroyed) to the end of the age, when the Jewish people will at last recognize Jesus Christ as their Messiah (verse 24). These 490 years would be divided in two parts. The first part includes the years from the time of the Persian decree to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, or 483 years. Then an undetermined time will follow during which God would suspend His relationship with Israel – but not His covenant – and allow Israel to be destroyed as a nation, scattered as a people and eventually restored (verses 25 and 26, implied). At the end will be the final seven years, which are the Seven Year Tribulation (verse 27).

The question is asked: Why would God suspend His relationship with Israel for almost two thousand years?

The answer is: Of all the peoples of the world, the Jewish people should have recognized Jesus Christ as the One whom their own prophets had prophesied would come in the name of God to fulfill the covenant promises. But they did not – indeed, would not – recognize Him. Instead they had Him killed, not wanting to believe Him when He told them Who He was. They wanted to continue to do things their way rather than God's way.

So God let them. At least He let them for a time, and a good long time as men measure such things – almost two thousand years and counting. During that time He preserved them as a people (to honor His covenant with them), but allowed them to go their own way and fend for themselves otherwise, with very poor results for their efforts. Indeed, it is truly a miracle of God that they survived as a people at all.

At the end of this undetermined time a king – the antichrist – will make a seven-year treaty with Israel (Daniel, Chapter 9, verse 27). This requires, of course, that Israel is once again a nation, which happened in 1948. God will use Israel's interaction with the antichrist during this seven-year treaty period to perfect the Jewish people – He will at last fulfill the promises He made to their ancestors, to bring their descendents into the relationship He intended from the beginning, that of obedience to Him through faith in Jesus Christ and the regeneration of their minds by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

In the midst of the seven year treaty period the antichrist will break the treaty and attempt to destroy the Jewish people, first by perverting their worship of God to worship of the antichrist, and then by killing as many of them as he can (Daniel, Chapter 9, verse 27). The antichrist will have three and one half years to accomplish this before Christ returns (Daniel, Chapter 12, verses 8 through 11).

In the Book of Matthew, Chapter 24, verses 15 through 28, Christ warned His followers about these events, and even referenced the passage in Daniel noted above. He assured them it would happen shortly before He returned to reclaim the earth at the end of the age.

So here we have the seven years of hell on earth – a seven-year period, after the antichrist has risen to power, in which he plots, then attempts, to destroy Israel by deception, perversion of their worship of God, and persecution.

The Book of Revelation also references this seven-year period, dividing it into two periods of three and one half year each. During the first three and one half years, God's Spirit-filled followers warn Israel and the world of the coming trials (Revelation, Chapter 11, verses 3 through 11). During the second three and one half years, the antichrist is allowed free reign over the earth (Revelation, Chapter 13, verses 5 through 10). Here we have mirrored the same seven years, divided into two parts, prophesied by Daniel.

The prophet John wrote the Book of Revelation in the first century A. D. while a prisoner of the Romans, exiled to the Island of Patmos, which is located in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea near modern-day Turkey. The Book of Revelation has mystified and fascinated its readers, and it has encouraged and yet troubled the Church, for almost two thousand years. It is the last Book to be included in the Bible, and it almost did not make it.

The question is asked: Why is the Book of Revelation so special?

The answer is: Revelation is a very intense book, both in its imagery and its subject matter. And the hardest thing to reconcile regarding its content is the horrible future it prophesies for humanity and God's role in that future. How could a merciful and loving God, who is so willing to help us with our problems (if we are willing to let Him), end things so brutally? How could Jesus Christ – the Good Shepherd, the Suffering Servant, and the Savior of the World – be also its Conqueror? How can unconditional forgiveness be resolved with unrestrained wrath?

As far as the future of humanity is concerned, it is ours to choose and plain that we, as a race, will choose to destroy ourselves if God does not step in and do something about it. And

Jesus Christ is both Savior and Lord – too often we focus on the 'Savior' part of His Person and conveniently forget that He is also 'Lord of lords' and 'King of kings'. He may be gently received, but He will not, in the end, be refused. Finally, contrary to what some people want to believe, there is no unconditional forgiveness of sin. 'Repent and be saved' is the clarion call of the Bible (Matthew, Chapter 4, verse 17; Mark, Chapter 1, verse 15; Luke, Chapter 13, verse 3; Acts, Chapter 2, verse 38).

The question is asked: Do all Christians believe in a literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation?

The answer is: No. Throughout its history, the Church has had differing opinions regarding what Revelation, and the Bible in general, has to say about God's plan for the future of the earth.

A full discussion of the different opinions that Christians have about the End Times prophecies goes beyond the scope of this book. But in general, some Christians interpret the prophecies either literally, as actual future events (a position I take in this book) or as allegorically, having already been fulfilled in symbolic ways.

Those Christians who interpret the prophecies allegorically believe that God will use the Church to fulfill His Plans for the redemption of humanity and the renewal of the earth. The Church will spread the good news of salvation and regeneration to all people and eventually convert the whole world to the Christian faith, ushering in an eternal age of peace. Then will Christ rule the world from heaven, or some believe He will descend from heaven and rule the earth personally.

Those Christians who interpret the prophecies as having already been fulfilled believe that many of the prophecies in Revelation were fulfilled in the first century A. D. with the destruction of the nation of Israel. Some also believe that the Church has replaced Israel as God's covenant people, and that the struggle between good and evil revealed in prophecy is playing out within the context of history.

There are also variations within all of these interpretive positions.

The question is asked: Who then is right, when sincere seekers of God's Purpose and Plan come up with different answers?

The answer is: All of them, and none of them. All of us have answers. None of us have all the answers.

The devil is in the details, the saying goes, and a favorite strategy of Satan's is to thwart our understanding of God's truths (and to set us at each other's throats) by distracting us with our lack of understanding. But that can only work if we let it.

Only those who have the answers they want have all the answers, and they are always wrong. Honest and sincere seekers of God's truths will always come up short, and admit it.

Some things we can know for certain. But other things we can know only in part, and other things still only when God is pleased, in His own good time, to reveal them to us.

Patience, humility, and faith are qualities God wants us to learn before we can know the whole truth about anything worth knowing. A teachable mind is, of course, one that can be taught. To learn is to learn what God wants to teach us, to learn from our mistakes, and to learn when the time is right for learning. A child entering kindergarten can learn their ABCs; a post-graduate thesis on languages is beyond his or her abilities until many years later. With respect to the Bible (and especially Bible prophecy) we are – all of us – somewhere in between.

As already noted, I take a literal view regarding prophecy. This, by necessity, requires me to honestly say that I think those who take a less literal view are in error. This in no way suggests to me that they are not my brothers and sisters in Christ; there is nothing in scripture that disqualifies someone from a saving knowledge of grace and regeneration simply because they hold differing interpretations on such matters as these.

Still I am compelled here to ask how different interpretations may influence a Christian's attitude toward their service to God.

Who, exactly, are Christ's faithful servants? Those who eagerly anticipate His coming? Those who doubt His coming? Those who do not believe His coming? Those who do not want to think about His coming?

Too often Christians are tempted to dismiss contemplation on the particulars of Christ's coming because the subject is difficult to understand, the interpretations are so many, and the implications for the future of the world are so unpleasant. But where is the passion for His coming in any of this? Where is the watching and praying? 'Thy Kingdom come' – what exactly do we mean when we pray these words from the Lord's Prayer?

And is such anticipation, in truth, so much doom and gloom theology, as some would charge? Is it really any more doom and gloom than what we see in the world today? Are the times of tribulation confined to the end of the age? Men and women and children suffer daily – many for their faith in Christ, but many more simply because of sin in the world. Are their trials and tribulations to be discounted? The world crucified Christ our Master – should we, His servants, expect better treatment from the world for ourselves? He plainly warns His followers that the world will hate them, just as the world hated Him (John, Chapter 15, verses 18 through 21). Are we Soldiers of the Cross, engaged in spiritual warfare, or are we conscientious objectors?

Certainly all who are Christ's will have to endure troublesome times at the end of the age – but wouldn't that be worth it? To see an end to all sin and suffering – wouldn't that be worth it? To see an end to all abuse and exploitation, all sickness and all untimely deaths – wouldn't that be worth it? To see the coming of Christ in power and majesty – wouldn't that be worth it? Each of us should on occasion ask ourselves what, if anything, we would be willing to sacrifice to see all of this come to pass. Our answers may be revealing, with respect to our true commitment to 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

Should every generation anticipate His coming? Should any generation anticipate His coming? Should our generation anticipate His coming? No generation can assume it is the one

that will see Christ coming in the clouds. Only one generation will see that blessed event and be caught up in the air – and that generation will know it only when the time is right. But should not every generation anticipate that event at some time to come? Such anticipation is the only way to receive the blessings promised to those who anticipate His coming. Such anticipation is the only way to avoid the punishments reserved for those who add to, or take away, from that which is prophesied to come at the end of the age. After all, to dismiss End Times prophecy as allegory and symbolism is to speak of it differently than of other prophecy. Were the prophecies of Israel's destruction and Judah's captivity allegory? Were the prophecies of the fall of Babylon, the rise and fall of Persia, the conquests of Alexander the Great and the division of his empire into four kingdoms all allegory? Were the prophecies of the coming Messiah, the Suffering Servant, all allegory? Were the prophecies Jesus quoted to validate His claim to be the Messiah allegories? Were the prophecies the apostles quoted announcing the arrival of the Church Age allegories? If these prophecies literally came to pass, why doubt that the End Times prophecies will also come to pass?

That said, whatever the interpretation a Christian holds about the End Times should serve as an inspiration to motivate them in the fulfillment of Christ's Great Commission – that is, to spread the message of salvation and regeneration to all people everywhere. In this, all Christians are indeed likeminded, and our differing interpretations or views about End Times prophecy should in no way hinder us in our mission.

Ultimately we share the same goal – to reach the whole world for Christ in obedience to His Great Commission, to help the weak and clothe the naked and comfort them that mourn, to give to those in need, forgive our enemies, pray for those who abuse us, and seek the triumph of God's Plan for the redemption of humanity and the renewal of the earth, whatever we may believe regarding the particulars of His Plan for the re-conquest and renewal of the earth. When the blessed Day of Jesus' Arrival dawns, we will each be judged by how well we followed His instructions, and by the kinds of people we have become. All the rest will by then be behind us, and who was right and who was wrong will have passed from significance (I Corinthians, Chapter 13, verses 8 through 12).

Chapter 8

Revelation
(Come and see)

Revelation 4: 1

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

The Book of Revelation is also called the Apocalypse, a word that has passed into common usage to mean a time or period of great turmoil and destruction. But what the word really means is 'to reveal that which is hidden' – to unveil. That is why many modern translations of the Bible entitle the last book of the Bible 'Revelation'. It is in fact a record of what God revealed to one of His prophets about His ultimate Plan to invade and re-conquer the earth. And no study of the End Times is complete without reading what it has to say.

Here I provide an overview of my understanding of the Book of Revelation, which can be difficult to follow without first understand how Revelation is structured. It is, in fact, a series of visions, or revealings (revelations) by God, and not one continuous narrative. Each vision builds upon those that precede it, providing more and more details of God's Plan. We need to keep this in mind if we are to make any sense of it, as I think some err in their understanding of the prophecies of Revelation by interpreting it is a continuous chronicle of sequential events.

Revelation, Chapters 1 through 5

The Book of Revelation opens with blessings and greetings to seven churches in Asia (that is, Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey). The prophet John affirms that Jesus Christ is the first-born Son of God (the first of many sons and daughters of God, that is, all who trust His as Savior and receive His Holy Spirit (Romans, Chapter 8, verses 12 through 16). He affirms that Jesus was raised from the dead and is already the Ruler of the kings of the world. He affirms that Jesus, by His death, has freed us from our sins and made us a kingdom of priests who serve His (and our) Heavenly Father (I Peter, Chapter 2, verses 5 and 6). And he affirms that Jesus will return to earth one day to reclaim His right as Lord of lords and Kings of kings.

Then John records the vision of the future that he receives while a prisoner on the island of Patmos for preaching the Word of God and witnessing for Jesus Christ. Here is Jesus Christ the Warrior-King that the Jews and Jesus' first followers had been anticipating when He came to them as the Suffering Servant (Isaiah, Chapter 52, verses 13 through 15; John, Chapter 12, verses 23 through 33). He is, at the same time, the sacrificial Lamb of God (John, Chapter 1, verse 29). Jesus' sacrifice satisfied, once and for all time, God's Justice and cleared the way for all who would, in every century, receive His Holy Spirit for the regeneration of their minds. Now He is

ready to fulfill God's Plan for the re-conquest and renewal of the earth. He has seven stars in His right hand and a sharp two-edged sword comes out of His mouth. The seven stars are the seven angels of the seven churches. The sword is the Spirit and Word of God (Ephesians, Chapter 6, verse 17, Hebrews; Chapter 4, verse 12). He walks among seven gold lamp stands, which are the seven churches.

John then gives words of encouragement and warning to the churches in Asia Minor that existed in John's day and, by extension, to every church in every age. The seven churches receive both praises and rebukes from Jesus Christ, depending on their spiritual condition. The significance of these seven churches, in our own time, lies in their being representative of all churches in all centuries, and what Jesus has to say to them applies universally to all who call themselves 'Christians'. As noted earlier in this book, seven is a number that, in scripture, can represent completeness or totality, especially when associated with God. Here the seven churches that John addresses in his vision are seven literal churches, but these churches represent the complete, or total Church, with whom God has close association indeed.

After addressing the seven churches, John receives a vision of heaven and of God in His Glory (Chapter 4), and information about the author of the vision – Jesus Christ, Whom all angels and men will one day acknowledge and Lord of lords, King of kings, and the Master of heaven and earth (Chapter 5). Here Christ is described as both the sacrificial lamb – the One who died to redeem rebellious humanity – and as the Lion of Judah – the conquering King who will fulfill God's promises to Israel. He has seven horns (all powerful) and seven eyes (all seeing and all knowing). He was slain, yet lives. And by His death and life he has redeemed from the death penalty of sinfulness people from every nation and tribe (the Church) who are a nation of priests (serving God and mankind) and who one day shall rule the earth with Christ.

Having gotten John's attention and imparted to him the importance of what is being revealed (and hopefully also to anyone who reads what is written in Revelation) the rest of Revelation speaks to the great and terrible events of the End Times, and of things beyond.

Here I will summarize what is recorded in Revelation regarding these things, as best I understand them and can convey:

Chapter 6

John has a vision of a scroll with seven seals which, when broken, will allow the prophecies written on the scroll to be made known; and John makes abundantly clear that the one who reveals the contents of the scroll is none other than Jesus Christ. As each seal is broken, a cast of characters appears together with a snap-shot of events to come – each revealing the substance, or the essence, of the End Times:

The first seal is broken, and the antichrist appears, riding on a white horse and wearing a crown, and armed with a bow. He is a conqueror and a king.

The second seal is broken, and war and anarchy follow close on the heels of the antichrist.

The third seal is broken, and ruinous inflation, famine and want follow after war and anarchy. But those who are wealthy or hold privileges will be able to prosper.

The fourth seal is broken, and death and hell sweep over a quarter of the earth, to kill with war and famine and disease and wild animals.

The fifth seal is broken, and those who will be persecuted by the antichrist and his followers – those who will oppose him in the name of God, and whom he will kill for preaching the Word of God during his reign – appear in heaven.

The sixth seal is broken, and John gets a hint of the terrors of the last days of the End Times, when God will intervene in the carnage that rebellious humanity brings upon the earth.

At this point nothing could be plainer, and no further interpretation is necessary. God does not mince words here – when the time of the end approaches, the antichrist will arise and bring with him a terrible future of human (not Divine) making; war, famine, pestilence, and death upon the earth. He, and those who choose to follow him, will oppose God, and he and his followers will persecute those who remain faithful to God. But in the end the followers of God will triumph, and God will enforce His will upon unrepentant humanity.

As we shall see, the antichrist will be a man – a man possessed by Satan, who is himself the overlord of all the rebellious angels who are the enemies of God and humanity. The antichrist will oppose God's Plan for bringing humanity into a right relationship with God through His indwelling Holy Spirit. He will persecute and kill as many as he can of those who stand with God and against the antichrist and his kingdom. And because of his opposition to God, and the opposition of those who follow him instead of God, terrors will be unleashed upon the earth.

The first six seals read like an overview of the Seven Year Tribulation; a series of brief scenes that provide a snap shot of what will happen, like the preview of a history documentary or a movie trailer aired on television. They provide a clear warning of what will happen and introduce a principal player in the drama and give a hint of what will follow – the antichrist, who will bring war, famine, death, unbridled evil and persecutions, until God finally intervenes to end the horrors to come.

At this point in John's vision, there is a pause in the breaking of the seals.

Chapter 7

Here John sees God preparing a special group of people for the coming trials. These will be Jewish believers who oppose the antichrist's rule. They are given the Seal of God upon their foreheads and in their minds.

The question is asked: What is the Seal of God?

The answer is: The Seal of God is nothing less than God's indwelling Holy Spirit – the same Spirit that has, since shortly after Christ's ascension into heaven, been available to all who would receive it.

The New Testament of the Bible confirms this interpretation. In the Book Ephesians, Chapter 1, verses 13 and 14, the writer assures the followers of Christ that they are marked with a seal, and goes on to say that this seal is, in fact, the indwelling Holy Spirit. In Ephesians, Chapter 4, verse 30, Christ's followers are again assured that they are sealed with the Holy Spirit, Who will see them through to the day of redemption and the end of the age.

The 144,000 Jews, or Israelites, given this seal will be descendants of Abraham. They will also be followers of Christ during the End Times and will oppose the antichrist during the second half of the Seven Year Tribulation, when the antichrist is allowed to try and destroy Israel and end the worship of God on earth. The number thus sealed may be literal, but most likely is figurative, representing every one of the descendants of Abraham who will accept the indwelling Holy Spirit. It represents the complete (all inclusive) and final (finite) number of the Jewish nation who will come to Christ during those terrible times. As prophesied in the Book of Daniel, God's plan for the descendants of Abraham will be completed during the End Times.

Today Israel is back within the lands God had promised to the ancestors of the Jewish people so long ago, after almost two thousand years of dispersion. But the Jewish people, as a people, do not acknowledge that Jesus is the One that God had promised to send to redeem the nation and secure its place forever among the nations of the world. However, as we will see in the chapter about Israel, we are beginning to see a change in attitude and belief, at least among some Jewish people, who are in fact at long last receiving the Holy Spirit into their lives and acknowledging, in the Jesus their forefathers had crucified, the promised Messiah – the promised King Who will redeem Israel. And this recognition among Jewish people, of Jesus Christ as their Messiah, is a sign of the approaching End Times.

John also sees another group of people, clearly distinct from the first. These are in heaven and praising God. An angel tells him that these are Christ's followers who are "coming out of the Great Tribulation" (verse 14). This is the Church, or those believers who are Christians that have already received the indwelling Holy Spirit and who remain faithful to God through all life's trials.

Some have suggested that, because they are shown here already in Heaven, the Church will be taken out of the world (raptured) prior to the onset of the Seven Year Tribulation. But the phrase "coming out of the Great Tribulation" could mean that the Church may be taken out at any time – prior to, during, or at the end of those terrible times.

Chapter 8

Here John sees the breaking of the seventh, and last, seal. Seven angels are given seven trumpets to blow – but before they are commanded to do so, the prayers of God's people are acknowledged; for it is the prayer of all God's people, the prayer that there shall one day be an end to the rebellion on the earth and a restoration of God's Will in all things, and especially in the affairs of men.

'Thy Kingdom come. Thy Will be done on earth, as it is in heaven'
– 'for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the Glory forever,
amen'. (Excerpt from the Lord's Prayer, Matthew, Chapter 6,
verses 10 and 13, King James Version)

This has been the prayer of the Church for almost two thousand years. Either we mean it, or we do not. God hears the prayers of His Church, and He delivers on them. This is the power of prayer.

Here John sees great tribulation poured out upon a rebellious and unrepentant humanity. Here is the Wrath of God, or the Day of Wrath prophesied throughout the New Testament (Romans, Chapter 1, verses 18 through 32; Ephesians, Chapter 5, verses 1 through 10; Colossians, Chapter 3, verses 4 through 7; Revelation, Chapter 14, verses 10 through 11 and verses 18 through 20; Revelation, Chapter 15; Revelation, Chapter 16, verse 1). And as we shall see, it starts at the mid-point of the Seven Year Tribulation, not at the beginning.

Another argument used to suggest that the Church is raptured at the beginning of the Seven Year Tribulation is God's promise that His Church will not suffer His Wrath (I Thessalonians, Chapter 5, verse 9). But again, if the outpouring of God's Wrath occurs in the middle of the Seven Year Tribulation, then the Church may have to endure at least some of the hard times to come.

God has never promised that the Church would be safe from persecution, even unto death, at the hands of His enemies; He has promised only to give His Church the strength to endure it (Matthew, Chapter 5, verses 10 through 16; John, Chapter 15, verses 14 through 21). Throughout its history, the Church has suffered persecutions, and countless Christians have been killed for their profession of faith. Christ warned His first followers that, in the last days, those who followed Him would have to endure such treatment.

I believe that the Church will be tested during the first half of the Seven Year Tribulation, just as Christians today have their faith tested, even unto death, if not in America or the West, then elsewhere in the world. The troubles of the first half of the Tribulation will be manmade, and not of God. How so? Review again the first five seals: first seal – a madman bent on conquest; second seal – war, the means of conquest; third seal – famine, the handmaiden of war; fourth seal – death and hell (evil) sweeps the earth as a consequence of the chaos of war, famine, and pestilence; fifth seal – persecutions of those who preach the message of God's Mercy and

Judgment. So far, it all looks like what men and women have been doing to each other with awful regularity throughout history – but magnified greatly as the end of the age draws neigh.

Is this the Wrath of God, or the wrath of humanity? This is Bosnia, Somalia, Darfur, and all the world's human tragedies all rolled into one, on a global scale – America and Europe will not be spared – hardships and persecutions may yet come to a neighborhood near you and I. And Christ plainly warned that this kind of trouble would increase in severity as the End Times approach – prior to the great and terrible Day of the Lord.

If you are one of those people who are inclined to blame God for any of the terrible things that men and women visit upon each other (which He is not), then why do you not ask Him to end it? He will be glad to oblige you – indeed He will one day come and end it all. That is what Bible prophecy (and this book) is all about.

In the rest of Chapter 8 of Revelation, John sees what God's Wrath is really like, poured out on unrepentant humanity. The seventh seal is broken, and the last half of the Tribulation begins.

A trumpet sounds – the first of seven, a call to repentance, a warning of the approach of a wrathful God, a herald to the coming King of kings – and hail and fire mixed with blood rains down upon a third of the earth's surface, igniting great fires.

A second trumpet sounds, and a burning mountain strikes the sea and sinks a third of the ships on the sea and destroys a third of the life in the sea.

A third trumpet sounds, and a flaming star poisons a third of the fresh waters of the earth.

A fourth trumpet sounds, and the light of the sun and moon is dimmed globally.

Sound familiar? It should to anyone who has read about, or watched television specials about, an asteroid or comet striking the earth. And this might be what John is seeing in his vision.

In the second chapter of the Book of Daniel, the prophet interprets the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. In this dream the king sees a great statue representing the empires that will, from Babylon on, have dealings with Israel and, through Israel, with God. Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome and Eurabia are represented – all empires between Rome and Eurabia are excluded in this vision, as Israel did not exist as a nation during the centuries between the fall of Rome and the rise of Eurabia. In this dream a mountain hurls at the feet of the statue – Eurabia – and destroys the whole, then grows to fill the earth. This mountain could be an asteroid that God has held from the creation of the universe for just this purpose.

A mountain in scripture can also represent the presence, power and kingdom of God (Genesis, Chapter 2, verses 1 and 2; Exodus, Chapter 3, verse 1; Exodus, Chapter 15, verses 17 and 18; Psalms, Chapter 11, verse 1; Psalms, Chapter 48, verse 1; Isaiah, Chapter 11; Daniel, Chapter 2, verse 45).

A double meaning, but the same – God in the form of Jesus Christ is indeed coming to establish His rule over the whole of the earth. And when He does this, no one will miss out, or misunderstand what is happening (Romans, Chapter 14, verses 11 and 12; Philippians, Chapter 2, verses 10 and 11).

Shortly after Christ sent His Holy Spirit to indwell His first followers one of these, Peter, filled with the Spirit, prophesied that, in the last days, men would see strange portents (signs of things to come) in the heavens (Acts, Chapter 2, verses 17 through 21). In other words, in the last days God will show us wonders in the heavens above the earth – how better to describe an asteroid hurtling towards the planet?

In 1801 A. D. astronomers first discovered the asteroids (Ceres). By 1980 scientists recognized that an asteroid could strike the earth with devastating effects. In 1981 the first conference was held to discuss the hazards asteroids and comets posed to civilization [1]. By the late twentieth century many scientists suggested that past impacts of meteors, asteroids and comets might have caused mass extinctions of animal and plant species on global and regional scales, and might also have caused the decline of several ancient Mediterranean civilizations and the Dark Age of Europe. In July 1994, the world watched as the comet Shoemaker/Levy 9 slammed into the planet Jupiter, sending debris plumes the size of the earth into the Jovan atmosphere, and the world took note of the potential peril asteroids pose for the earth. Today astronomers are certain that it is only a matter of time before the earth suffers a similar catastrophic impact.

We have only to look at the moon's cratered surface to see that worlds on occasion do collide. Perhaps it has always been there for us – God's signpost to humankind that mountains really do fall from the sky – to be read at the end of the age when we can at last decipher its meaning.

Prior to the discovery of asteroids, such things were consigned to the realms of fantasy and religious superstition. As late as the middle of the twentieth century few thought that an asteroid or a comet could destroy life on our planet. Yet almost two thousand years ago Peter said that, at the end of the age, humanity would understand what he was prophesying. It seems that now we do.

Chapter 9

A fifth trumpet sounds, and smoke and demons pour from the pit of Hell, to torment unrepentant humanity – that is, all who do not have the seal of the Holy Spirit – for five months.

A sixth trumpet sounds, and four demons bound in the Euphrates River are loosed, together with an army of 200,000,000 soldiers who will kill a third of humanity with fire, smoke and brimstone.

In scripture demons are sometimes represented as rulers of nations (Daniel, Chapter 10, verses 11 through 21), and Satan is called the ruler of the earth (Luke, Chapter 4, verses 1 through 8; Ephesians, Chapter 2, verse 2). Also rivers and waters can represent nations (Ezekiel, Chapter 29, verses 1 through 3, and Chapter 32, verses 1 and 2; Revelation, Chapter 17, verse

15), even as the sea can represent a multitude of nations (Isaiah, Chapter 17, verses 12 and 13; Daniel, Chapter 7, verses 2 and 3; Revelation, Chapter 13, verses 1 through 3).

Today the Euphrates River flows through four Middle Eastern nations – Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. And it flows through the territories of four distinct ethnic groups – Turks, Kurds, Arab Sunni-Muslims, and Arab Shiia-Muslims. The river also flows through the heart of what I believe will be the antichrist's empire. Putting it all together, this trumpet could signal a global war initiated by the antichrist, a war fought with horrific weapons of mass destruction fully capable of destroying humanity unless God stops the carnage (Matthew, Chapter 24, verses 21 and 22).

Chapter 9 ends with an incredible indictment against rebellious humanity. Despite all they have suffered at the hand of the antichrist (that is, at their own hands, for following him) and with all the evidence of God's great displeasure and power to punish made so plain, they will not repent and turn to God and cry out for His Mercy.

Chapter 10

Here is another pause in the unfolding vision of future events. It begins with an announcement that the Mystery of God is soon to be revealed with the blast of the seventh – and last – trumpet.

The question is asked: What is the Mystery of God?

The answer is: The fulfillment of God's plan to redeem the earth – among other things.

In the New Testament, there are three specific references to the Mystery of God. The first two references are in regard to God's plan to redeem humanity and the world through the ministry of Himself in the Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, which was indeed a mystery to people until Jesus Christ completed His ministry on earth, ascended into heaven, and sent His Holy Spirit to indwell his followers (Colossians, Chapter 2, verses 2 and 3; and I Timothy, Chapter 3, verse 16). The third reference is in Revelation, Chapter 10, noted above (verse 7).

There is also in the New Testament references to other mysteries, such as the New Covenant relationship God now offers to all people during the present Age of Grace (Ephesians, Chapter 3; Colossians, Chapter 1, verses 26 through 28), the relationship of the Church to Christ as His Body and His Bride (Ephesians, Chapter 5, verses 23 through 33), the ministry of the Church (Revelation, Chapter 1, verse 20), the coming of the antichrist (II Thessalonians, Chapter 2), and the great End Times apostasy, or perversion of the true worship of God (Revelation, Chapter 17).

There is also another Mystery – one that will be fully revealed and accomplished at the blowing of the last trumpet – and this is the Rapture.

I Corinthians 15: 51 – 52

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

The seventh trumpet referenced in Revelation, Chapter 10, is the last trumpet recorded in scripture, and it will blow at the mid-point of the Seven Year Tribulation.

Many who insist (or maybe wish) that the Rapture of the Church must occur at the beginning of the Tribulation have tried to discount the association between the references to the last trumpet in I Corinthians and the seventh (and last) trumpet recorded in Revelation. But there it is. And already we have seen there is much in scripture – in Revelation – to suggest that the Church might have to endure at least part of the Seven Year Tribulation.

I have always found the arguments used against the association between the last trumpet, referenced in I Corinthians, and the seventh trumpet, referenced in Revelation, to be far more complex, and far more convoluted, than simply reading the scriptures as written and taking them at face value. As I have noted earlier in this book, scripture should always be interpreted literally, unless there is a compelling reason from scripture to think otherwise. And as I have never been convinced by anyone to do otherwise with respect to the timing of the Rapture – however much I might wish to escape the beginning of the Tribulation myself – I must think that the Rapture will occur sometime during the Tribulation, and not before.

Some suggest that Christ will come suddenly and unexpectedly for His Church, and therefore we should be perpetually ready for this blessed event (Luke, Chapter 12, verses 35 through 40). According to this doctrine (imminence), the Rapture could have occurred at any time over the last two millennia of Church history (although it obviously has not, as of this writing). It could happen right now (as I write these words). It could happen tomorrow, or at any time prior to the unfolding of the End Times. If it were restricted to sometime during the last seven years of human history (the Tribulation), then it could not occur unexpectedly.

Vigilance is certainly a virtue we should practice. However, according to scripture, we can in fact know the season of Christ's coming (Matthew, Chapter 24, verses 30 through 34), if not the hour or the day of Christ's coming (Matthew, Chapter 24, verses 36 through 41).

According to scripture, the Rapture will occur at the last trump, and before the outpouring of God's wrath. The last trump mentioned in scripture is the seventh (and last) of the so-called trumpet plagues of Revelation. The seventh (and last) of the so-called trumpet plagues heralds the outpouring of the seven bowls of God's wrath on unrepentant humanity. Therefore, the Rapture occurs at the seventh trumpet in Revelation, and just before the outpouring of God's wrath.

Now, some will say that this is pretty simplistic, maybe even childish, logic. But if of such is the Kingdom of Heaven, let me be counted among them.

Already we have seen that there is much in scripture – in Revelation – to suggest that the Church might have to endure at least part of the Seven Year Tribulation.

The mission, ministry and rapture of the Church are all part of the same thing. When we are done with the work God has set for us to accomplish, He will call us home. Yet how can God strike the earth with such terrible punishments as those associated with an asteroid strike and a global war while His Church is still there to suffer it?

With respect to wars, the Church has always suffered, and continues to suffer, right along with the rest of humanity. Wars are not the Wrath of God, but that of men. The same is true for most natural disasters. Wars and natural disasters are not the Wrath of God, or even 'acts of God', but acts of depraved humanity (wars) and the consequences of an earth out of balance (natural disasters). Far from removing the Church from harm's way, God fully expects the Church to always reach out to people with the message of regeneration through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, especially in troublesome times, and to put action to words through deeds of kindness and by all kinds of assistance and sacrifice rendered to relieve suffering.

With respect to the Church suffering from an asteroid strike or anything else that is a manifestation of the Wrath of God, there may not be many true followers of Christ on earth by the middle of the Tribulation to be affected. At worst, many will abandon their faith in the face of persecutions (Matthew, Chapter 24, verse 10). At best, Christians may be absent from that portion of the earth where the immediate impact and aftermath occurs (about a third of the earth). God, in His omniscience and omnipotence, could easily see to it that the faithful are not be in the wrong place at the wrong time – and those faithful who are on the earth at that time will soon be raptured, before the global effects of the asteroid strike (or any other manifestation of God's Wrath) are fully realized.

Jesus Christ told His followers that, at the end of the age, when they would see signs in the heavens, distress among the nations, the sea and the waves roaring, and men's hearts failing them for fear, then they should look up, for their redemption is coming in the clouds with power and glory (Luke, Chapter 21, verses 25 through 28). It all sounds a lot like some believers will definitely be around to witness at least the beginning of the events described in the first six trumpet blasts. And true believers, who have the Seal of God (the Holy Spirit), would be immune to the onslaught of demons that occurs with the fifth trumpet – Revelation clearly states that these demons can only torment those without this seal – and why mention this fact at all if there were not those present with this seal?

There will, of course, be those Jewish believers and followers of Christ mentioned in Chapter 7 of Revelation. But what of the others mentioned in the same chapter?

Do not misunderstand me – I do not look forward to suffering the trials of those times myself, and if God wants to take the Church out of the world before these things occur I will be as happy to go, and as relieved to have escaped, as anyone. But what if we have to endure, at least some of it?

One of Christ's parables concerned ten virgins who were to light the path of a bridegroom with their oil lamps as part of a late night wedding party (Matthew, Chapter 25, verses 1 through 13). The bridegroom did not come as early as the virgins anticipated, and five of the virgins (who had not taken the precaution to bring extra oil) let their lamps go out and missed the

festivities. The bridegroom, of course, is Christ, coming for His bride, the Church. And until He comes we are to be ever ready and vigilant, however late the hour (verse 13).

We are commanded by Christ to shine our lights into all of the world, for all to see in us the truth of His regenerating power through the Holy Spirit (Matthew, Chapter 5, verses 14 through 16). We ought to take the precaution to have enough oil to see us through the night – even if we do not need it (Mark, Chapter 13, verses 32 through 37).

After the announcement that the seventh – and last – trumpet is about to sound, John is given a little scroll and told to eat it. He is warned that the scroll will taste sweet, but it will sour his stomach.

John then hears a great pronouncement, but he is not allowed to record it – some things must, for God's own good reasons, remain a mystery to the very end. This requires faith – but then, faith is the foundation of God's Plan for the regeneration of the hearts and souls of men (Hebrews, Chapter 11). Faith is belief in things unseen (for we are spiritually blind until we receive regenerative sight) and confident assurance of things to come (for the future is God's to determine). And together with hope (expectation that God will deliver on His Promises) and love (obedience first and feelings second), these are the three things, in the end, that will remain (I Corinthians, Chapter 13).

Perhaps the sweet/sour nature of the scroll is a reference to the paradox of the prophecies concerning the End Times – good news for those of us who long for Christ's coming but – oh, the suffering!

Would that God and humanity could be spared those terrible times. This alone should be enough to motivate us to remain loyal to His Great Commission and at least try as hard as we can to tell as many as will listen the message of salvation by grace and through the regeneration of minds by the indwelling Holy Spirit – our Seal of God and proof against the terrible times ahead.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 continues the pause of Chapter 10, and provides some backfilling. Here John is shown the outer courts of the Temple of God and is told that these would be given over to the Gentile (non-Jewish) nations for three and a half years. He also is shown the ministry, death and resurrection of God's two witnesses, who will serve as God's messengers to humanity during that same three and a half year period.

With respect to the Temple, this could be a reference to the antichrist's assault on the faithful in Israel, and around the world, during the first half of the Tribulation. The antichrist will be partially successful (taking over the outer courts), but will not succeed in destroying the true worship of God. It could also be a reference to the Third (Jewish) Temple being built alongside Islamic shrines already occupying the Temple Mount.

The question is asked: Could Israel rebuild the Jewish Temple alongside the Muslim shrines already on the Temple Mount?

The answer is: Yes.

At least, that is the short answer.

The debate continues – sometimes rages – over the exact configuration and location of the first and second temples (the ones destroyed by the Babylonians and the Romans, respectively) and more particularly the location of the Holy of Holies, or the inner sanctuary of the temple which only the high priest was allowed to enter, and then only once a year (Yom Kippur).

Many theories have been raised and studies made regarding the location and configuration of the Temple and its various elements. Some have suggested that the Holy of Holies is located under the Dome of the Rock, at the center of the Mosque (or Shrine) of Omar, built by Muslims in the seventh century A. D. If so, then this important Muslim shrine would have to be removed before the Temple could be rebuilt in its original location. Such action would, of course, precipitate violent reaction from Muslims around the world.

The plain fact is that, to date, no one has settled the matter of the Temple's location with any definitive authority. In fact many Orthodox Jews refuse to visit any part of the Temple Mount for fear of inadvertently stepping on the spot of the Holy of Holies or some other sacred location.

But would such knowledge be absolutely necessary before the Temple could be rebuilt? What if the location of the Holy of Holies was less important to the Jewish religious establishment than merely having a rebuilt temple on the Temple Mount? What if the form of Judaism became more important than the spirit of Judaism?

Since the destruction of the second temple by the Romans in 70 A. D., devout Jews have of necessity worshiped God in places other than Jerusalem or on the Temple Mount. This development could be part of the meaning of a prophecy Jesus Christ made to a woman at a well while visiting a city in Samaria during His earthly ministry, saying:

John 4: 21 – 24

- - - "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

While many devout Jews continue to pray daily that God will allow them to rebuild the Temple, others are less certain that it should be rebuilt or that it could be rebuilt prior to the beginning of the Jewish Messianic era. Those who want to rebuild the Temple remain deeply

divided over the appropriate locations and configurations of the various structures and holy places.

But perhaps none of this really matters in the end. Perhaps, in the End Times, the decision of where to locate the Third Temple on the Temple Mount will be less a religious decision and more a political decision. Such a development would not be without precedent. Throughout its ancient history, Israel time and again sacrificed its worship of God on the altars of power politics and international diplomacy. Indeed, it was often the main business of the Old Testament prophets to condemn such behavior.

Jesus Christ himself, the greatest of all the prophets (besides, of course, being the Son of God, Very God, and the atonement for the sins of the world) condemned the religious establishment of His days-on-earth for their apostasy, heresy, spiritual blindness and worldly mindedness. And what did the religious establishment do? It conspired with the Romans to have Him nailed to a cross.

Perhaps, in the End Times, the debate over whether and where the Third Temple should be built will be moot. Perhaps the decision regarding its location will be made by a religious establishment more interested in accommodation and earthly power politics, and less interested in spiritual authority.

And given such possibility, a study of the Temple Mount and its shrines suggests an intriguing possibility. There is plenty of space on the northernmost portion of the Temple Mount to accommodate the Third Temple – if one is not too picky about location. The only problem area would be the outer court of the Temple – the Court of the Gentiles – that would include the portion of the Mount occupied by the Dome of the Rock.

But this might be the meaning of a prophecy where the prophet John is given a measuring rod and told to measure the Temple – all but the outer court, which is given to the Gentiles.

The two witnesses could be two of the ancient prophets sent back to earth (as some suggest) to oppose the antichrist's false religion. Or they could represent the Church and the Jewish faithful. They are called the two olive trees and the two lamps that stand before God. In the Book of Romans, Chapter 11, both the descendants of Abraham and the Church are identified as branches of God's olive tree (verses 11 through 23). And in Revelation, Chapter 1, the seven churches are identified as seven lamp stands (verse 20). Whoever they are, at the end of three and a half years (the first half of the Tribulation) the beast that comes up out of the pit (Satan, unrestrained and loosed upon the earth, at the blast of the fifth trumpet) will kill them. Their bodies will be left lying in the street for the whole world to see. And so depraved is humanity by that time that most will rejoice at the sight.

But then a miracle occurs. The two witnesses come alive again, and they stand up, and they are taken up to heaven, even as their enemies watch (the rapture). A great fear overtakes all who see it, who recognize God's hand in this matter. And still they do not repent.

Then the seventh – and last – trumpet sounds, announcing that the victory of God is soon to be realized with the Second Coming of Christ, and at this time the Church is raptured.

Chapters 12 through 14 and the first part of Chapter 15 continue the pause and backfilling begun in Chapter 10.

Chapter 12

Here is a very brief overview of Satan's failed attempts to thwart the fulfillment of Israel's destiny to be the mother of the Messiah – God in human form, or Jesus Christ – Who, by His sacrifice and victory over death, broke the power of Satan to accuse humanity before God. It ends with a promise that a remnant of Israel will survive the onslaught of the antichrist.

Some have suggested that Chapter 12 chronicles Satan's attack on the Church, which they believe supplanted Israel as God's agent of redemption among the nations. Others suggest that it chronicles his attack on both.

As noted earlier in this book, God has not abandoned His covenant with Israel. He fully intends to honor His part in it to the end of the age. In John's vision, the prophet sees a woman whose dress is the sun, who has the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars. In Revelation, Chapter 1, seven stars represent the angels of the seven churches. Here are twelve stars, and they represent twelve angels (one for each tribe of Israel). The imagery echoes a dream that Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, recounted to his brothers (Genesis, Chapter 37, verses 9 through 11). In this dream God affirmed that Joseph, a grandson of Abraham, would one day rule over his eleven older brothers, who with Joseph founded the twelve tribes of Israel.

The Church has been God's agent under another covenant for almost two thousand years; still, as we see in Revelation and elsewhere in the Bible, He is not finished with Israel.

Chapter 13

Here is chronicled the rise of the antichrist and his false prophet, the antichrist's conquest of the earth, the success of his false religion, and his persecution of the faithful, both Jew and Gentile (the remnant in Israel and the true Church). History repeats, even to the end of the age. The antichrist and his false prophet will be the last and the worst of a long line of 'new world order' demagogues who, since the time of Babel, have sought to bring their brand of heaven on earth to the masses. The results have always been, and will be to the end, the same – war and anarchy, persecution and murder, death and destruction.

It is important to note that the antichrist is allowed (the operative word here is 'allowed') to oppose God and persecute the faithful and rule the earth, and that he is allowed to do this for three and a half years (verses 5 through 10). This period is probably the second half of the Seven Year Tribulation, wherein God allows the antichrist free rein. For without God's permission, the antichrist can do nothing.

This follows the pattern of history, wherein God allows humanity a chance to choose their fate – to worship and obey God, or to go their own way. Unfortunately, most always choose to go their own way. As with any demagogue, the antichrist needs the support of the masses. In the

end it is they who empower him as much as does Satan, and they will be as accountable as Satan for the consequences.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 begins with praises for the Jewish believers, who oppose the antichrist to the end. It continues with a declaration that world evangelism is completed; something that Christ told His followers must be accomplished and would be accomplished just prior to His return (Matthew, Chapter 24, verse 14). Then there is a declaration that foretells the imminent destruction of Babylon (more about this to come), a declaration that foretells the fate awaiting the followers of the antichrist, an encouragement to the faithful to endure to the end, and a description of two harvests – one of grain and one of wine grapes.

In scripture the harvest represents the ingathering of the souls of men at the end of the age (Matthew, Chapter 9, verses 36 through 38). The grain represents the fruit of the Holy Spirit, or the souls of the faithful followers of Christ (Matthew, Chapter 13, verses 1 through 40). Here we see the harvest of those who are faithful to Christ – the rapture – and this is the first harvest, which seems here to occur at the midpoint of the Seven Year Tribulation.

Another interpretation might suggest that this passage references the harvest of those who become Christians after the rapture, as well as the faithful Jewish believers. Many of these will be martyred during the second half of the Tribulation.

The second harvest is another matter entirely. From the imagery of the text, this is clearly the harvest of rebellious humanity. In scripture, the grape harvest represents the Judgment of God against rebellious humanity (Jeremiah, Chapter 25, verses 15 through 33). After the Church is raptured away the rebellious also will be gathered in.

When it comes to seeing God, no one will be left out – or get away – depending on how you look at it.

Chapter 15

The first part of Chapter 15 prophesies the victory of God that is to come and reveals the redeemed in heaven after the rapture, safe at last from what is about to happen. They stand beside a sea of glass mixed with fire and sing praises to God

In Chapter 4 of Revelation, John sees this sea of glass before the throne of God, but does not see at that time fire mixed in it. In prophecy a restless sea often represents restless humanity, and fire often represents the Holy Spirit. Perhaps this glassy sea represents redeemed humanity in heaven, free at last of sin and rebellion and at rest. If this is the correct interpretation of this sea, it is significant that in Chapter 15 it is mixed with fire. Here is redeemed humanity in heaven, together with the Holy Spirit, Who is taken out of the world with the raptured faithful. The removal of the Church and the Holy Spirit from the world is prophesied to occur at the point in the Tribulation where the antichrist is revealed for what he is – that is, as the false messiah

who is given authority to act for three and a half years – the last half of the Tribulation (II Thessalonians, Chapter 2, verses 6 through 8).

The rest of Chapter 15 picks up the narrative of End Times events – the coming Wrath of God poured out upon an unrepentant humanity.

Chapter 16

Here John witnesses the outpouring of God's Wrath. These are bowls, or vials, filled with His anger at the stubbornness of unregenerate men.

The first bowl is poured out upon the earth, and sores break out on the bodies of the followers of the antichrist. Notice that these sores only affect the followers of the antichrist – by this time those who had remained faithful to God have been raptured.

The second bowl is poured out upon the earth and the oceans and their life-giving plankton and sea creatures finally succumb to the affects of the asteroid strike and die. All the seas become completely fouled.

The third bowl is poured out upon the earth, and all the fresh waters are fouled, perhaps from the years of fallout from the soot and acid clouds thrown up by the asteroid impact.

The fourth bowl is poured out upon the earth, and the sun scorches the bodies of men, perhaps because the ozone layer has been damaged by the asteroid strike – and still men do not repent. Instead, they curse God.

The fifth bowl is poured out upon the earth, and the antichrist's kingdom is plunged into darkness – and men curse God.

The chronicle of plagues represented by the first five bowls could, as suggested above, be the growing effects of the asteroid strike, or the effects of the global war antichrist wages, or a combination of both. Scientists have speculated about the long term effects of such disasters – pandemics, wholesale extinction of species, pollution of rivers and lakes, damage to the ozone layer, global dimming, global warming, global chilling – here we see that the worst case scenarios that the scientific community can imagine actually do have a basis in scripture, in prophecies uttered two thousand years ago.

The sixth bowl is poured out onto the earth and the Euphrates River dries up, and the kings of the east march their armies westward.

As noted earlier, the Euphrates River may represent the antichrist's kingdom. It's drying up may suggest that his power over the earth is ending. The invasion of the kings of the east (India and China?) seems to suggest this interpretation.

But the antichrist is not quite finished. He, his false prophet and Satan still hold influence over the leaders of the world, and they conspire to assemble the armies of the nations together at Megiddo, in Northern Israel, to oppose the imminent arrival of Jesus Christ at His Second Coming.

Then John hears the voice of Christ warning the world of something His earliest followers knew to be true – that He would come unexpectedly, as a thief in the night, and that those who would follow Him must keep themselves ready, even to the end of the world (II Thessalonians,

Chapter 5, verses 1 through 4; II Peter, Chapter 3, verses 7 through 10; Revelation, Chapter 3, verse 3).

Here are the antichrist, the false prophet, Satan and the armies of the earth assembled against the Son of God returning to reclaim the earth.

The seventh – and last – bowl is poured out upon the earth, and all nature convulses one last time, more violently than at any time since its creation – and still men do not repent.

Chapters 17 and 18

Here there is again a pause in the narrative, and John sees a vision of a great whore, Mystery Babylon, and her apostasy, murders and ultimate judgment.

Much has been speculated about who she is, and we will examine Mystery Babylon later in this book, in the chapter with that title. For now it is enough to note that, if this is the kind of thing that humanity has come to, after almost two thousand years of God's patient mercy, then it seems to me that it is indeed time to end it.

Chapter 19

And Christ ends it.

Here is God Triumphant descending to the earth to fulfill His promise to redeem a tortured planet from the willful disobedience of men and demons. And with Him is His Bride – the Church – prepared for the perfect union between God and mankind that He had intended from the founding of the world, now to be consummated in heaven and on earth.

But first He finishes the work at hand.

He casts the antichrist and the false prophet into the lake of burning sulphur. He slays the armies arrayed against Him with a Word from out of His mouth.

Chapter 20

Then He sends an angel from heaven to bind Satan for a thousand years, during which He and His Bride rule the earth.

At the end of this thousand year reign, Satan is once more let loose to deceive humanity – that is, those who will let themselves be deceived – and incredibly, after a thousand years of peace on earth and good will to all mankind, many will succumb to Satan's allure. These last rebels are quickly destroyed, and Satan is cast into hell forever, never again to plague the earth.

Then comes the Day of Judgment, when all the dead are resurrected and every person who has ever lived is judged by their words and thoughts and deeds, and by whether they had received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit for the regeneration of their minds and spirits. The spirits of those who had refused His Presence and Seal – they are given no resurrection bodies – together with Death itself and the abiding place of the dead, are cast into a lake of burning sulphur.

And here is a lake of fire (as opposed to a glassy sea mixed with fire). Here are the spirits of the rebellious confined – the spirits of men, women and demons – all who denied God His rightful sovereignty in their lives and who now reap the consequences of their rebellion – denial by God of all good things that God has created, except their immortal spirits, which they have themselves corrupted and made fit for nothing but confinement forever.

These are spirits corrupted beyond redemption by self-willed rebellion. They are denied the glorified bodies that God will give his Church – indeed, denied bodies of any kind. These are the spirits that have rejected in themselves the capacity to love as God defines love (that is, spirits that have rejected the qualities of faith, hope and love that manifest themselves in obedience to God and service to Him and others). These spirits are now denied the power to harm the earth or others; and they are imprisoned for eternity in one place with all kindred spirits – how better to describe hell than as a lake of fire?

Chapters 21 and 22

These chapters describe the recreation of heaven and earth. Here at last God delivers on His promises to make all things new, to abide with redeemed humanity in perfect union forever, and to begin again the rule of God and mankind over creation interrupted when men first rebelled so long ago. This is both physical and spiritual existence perfected. Beyond these facts, little additional information is given – but what is given is glorious. What had started out in the beginning as a perfect garden is described here as the perfect city, the City of God.

Chapter 22 extends God's invitation to all to join with Him and partake of His blessings and ultimate victory. All are invited. None need miss out. If only they will choose life in the Spirit over self-willed rebellion and death. For in the end there are but two kinds of people; those who will say to God 'Thy will be done', and those to whom God will say 'thy will be done' (C. S. Lewis). To choose God's way is to choose to dwell with Him forever in the heaven and the earth of His recreation. To choose any other way is to dwell forever in a hell of our own making. It is always in the end either God's way (obedience, peace, joy, and fulfillment in a perfect heaven and on a perfect earth) or our way (self-will, selfishness, and self destruction – for what can we make by ourselves and for ourselves but that?).

All good things come from God, and there is nothing good that is made that is not from God and of God (Genesis, Chapter 1). As noted in the preface to this book, God created people with spirits, souls and bodies. And He created our spirits to be subject to His Spirit, our souls to be subject to our spirits, and our bodies to be subject to both. When humanity rebelled against God, the order was reversed. Our spirits, separated from God, became slaves to our souls (that is, our earthly lives, or all those carnal desires and cares and self-centered aspirations that have become so important to us – more important, even, than a right relationship with God) and slaves to our bodies (Matthew, Chapter 10, verse 28). The whole process of salvation and regeneration reestablishes the proper order; but if we continue to rebel scripture makes plain we will one day lose both our bodies and our souls. And what is a human being without all three? What is the spirit without body and soul?

In the end, if we choose ourselves over God, we have nothing but ourselves (our immortal spirits), folded in on ourselves, and nothing – absolutely nothing – else.

The Book of Revelation ends with a warning not to add to, or take away from, what is written therein; with an affirmation from its author, Jesus Christ, that He is indeed coming again; with a longing plea from John that He indeed come; and with a blessing that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with all.

Much of what is written in the Book of Revelation remains a mystery and will remain so until the end of time as we know it. And much has been written about what is written in Revelation, and not all of it agrees on Revelation's meanings.

I have attempted here to give an overview of what I think it all means, as I hope God has given me understanding, with the full knowledge and admission of my limitations to receive, understand and convey anything of God, given that I am but a mere layman and a human being. In my effort to understand I have relied on the insight and knowledge of many able Bible commentators, some of whom I reference at the end of this book.

I have purposefully here given the barest explanations to many things, my purpose here being to focus on the events of the End Times as these unfold before our eyes. It is the mountain before us that we must climb. The far peaks are still before us and distant, and therefore we see less of them than we may wish. It is enough, however, to know they are there, and that we will reach those heights and know their secrets – but for now we give our full attention to the ground beneath our feet, and to the path before us we must climb.

The following chapters of this book provide additional information about some of these things.

On a final note, I wish to say that the Book of Revelation has received rather bad press, from its writing to the present. Indeed, it was almost excluded from the list of early Church documents that came to comprise the Bible. As the end of the age draws near, its critics can only renew and increase their attacks. How can it be otherwise? The Book of Revelation is both difficult to read and understand, requiring much study and meditation, and not too little of faith. And it can only be understood correctly at all by those who truly want to know God's – not mankind's – Plan for the future of humanity and the earth. It is unpleasant to learn from its text how far gone we are as a race, and how depraved we can be and, left to our own devices, how depraved we will become. And certainly Satan, and the antichrist after him, will want none of us to read it, take it seriously, or understand it correctly. After all, the book is God's Battle Plan for His retaking of the earth, and that can only spell doom to all rebels.

Yet the book begins and ends with blessings – blessings for those who read it and teach its meaning, and blessings to those who read and learn correctly its meaning. Indeed, the last statement in the book is a blessing to everyone.

I said at the beginning of this book that I began my study of the End Times as a consequence of my taking God at His word – that He will give special blessings to those who

read and hear what He has to say about this important subject. I have indeed been blessed by, and in, this endeavor.

Let me here paraphrase John's blessing at the end of Revelation and end this chapter with a blessing:

'May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.'

Endnotes:

[1] The Spacewatch Project, University of Arizona (<http://spacewatch.lpl.arizona.edu/history.html>)

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Chapter 9

The Gog/Magog War
(All roads lead to Jerusalem)

The Book of Revelation tells us how and where the End Times antichrist will arise and how the Seven Year Tribulation will unfold; but other books of the Bible record the short and brutal war that rockets the antichrist to the heights of world domination. The details of this war are found primarily in two sources: the Old Testament Books of Ezekiel and Daniel. However, other details are found throughout the Bible.

Both Ezekiel and Daniel were Israelites living at the time when the nation of Israel was conquered by a mighty empire of the times, Babylon. This was a very hard time in the history of Israel, a time when the nation had drifted far from obedience to God. He had continually warned them of the pending consequences of their disobedience, and He continually pleaded with the Israelites to return to their proper relationship of trust in, and obedience to, Him. To these ends, God sent them prophets, who warned the Israelites of their folly and encouraged them to decide rightly to return to Him. When they refused to heed these prophets, God allowed the Babylonians to conquer Israel and carry many of the Israelites off as captives. The prophets comforted these Israelites in their captivity, gave them encouragement that their sufferings would one day end, and declared that the Israelites would again inhabit the land God had given their ancestors. Ezekiel and Daniel were two of these prophets.

In the Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 38 and 39, the prophet recorded a prophecy of a great (but brief) war waged against Israel at the end of the age, when Israel is again restored and its enemies once more seek its destruction. That this war occurs at the end of the age is implied by two things: this war is like no other in history regarding the mix and scale of forces arrayed against Israel, and it occurs at a time when Israel lives within its borders in seeming peace and safety.

That Israel is again living within its ancient borders as an independent nation has been an 'official' fact since the Jewish people in Palestine declared their independence and sovereignty in 1948, a declaration quickly sanctioned by most nations shortly thereafter. But not all nations recognize Israel as a legitimate state, and at no time since its reestablishment has Israel known peace. At this writing Israel is surrounded by nations that seek its destruction – it is quite literally an armed camp with enemies at its gates. To secure the nation's continued existence Israel maintains military and civilian security forces on constant alert, fights a running battle with terrorists and its Palestinian neighbors, and builds walls along its borders to protect its citizens from attack. Peace for Israel is elusive; even Israel's attempts to surrender land for peace backfires, encouraging Israel's enemies to make greater demands on its territory, its sovereignty, and its security.

The prophet Ezekiel received a vision of a time in the future when Israel has returned to its homeland and is living in peace within its borders (Ezekiel, Chapter 38, verse 8). At that time, a great coalition of nations will conspire to attack Israel. The leader of this coalition is Gog, the

ruler of the land Magog and the chief prince of the lands Meshech and Tubal. Other nations associated with Gog are identified as Gomer and Togarmah.

Some have interpreted this war as occurring at the end of the Thousand Year Reign of Christ and His Bride, which begins after the Tribulation. And in Revelation, Chapter 20, we do read of a last great rebellion led by Gog and Magog, which culminates in the fiery destruction of these last rebels after a thousand years of peace for both Israel and the Gentile nations. But in Ezekiel we read that, after the war he recorded in his prophecy, Israel will spend several months burying the war dead and several years salvaging the debris of battle. In Revelation, Chapter 21, we read that, at the end of the last great rebellion, God will recreate the earth. Why bother to clean up after this last battle if God is going to recreate the earth?

Bible scholars have tried to determine the identity of Gog and the locations of his kingdom and allied nations, but with little success. It seems the best anyone can determine is that these lands lie to the utmost north of Israel (Ezekiel, Chapter 38, verse 6 and verse 15). A glance at a map of the modern political landscape identifies the modern nation of Turkey and the nations of the Caucasus region, together with Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, in this part of the world. Other nations who join Gog in his attack on Israel may be easier to identify. These include Persia (modern Iran) and Cush (the land of the Nile region, or Egypt and Sudan) and Put (North Africa, perhaps Libya), together with their allies (verse 5). And as I write these words, we may be seeing the beginning of the gathering of the nations that will comprise the Gog/Magog coalition.

At the time of this writing, a highly vocal advocate of Israel's destruction is Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who threatens to wipe Israel off the map even as his nation rushes to develop nuclear weapons and the missiles to deliver them. A man who believes strongly in the Shi'ia Muslim equivalent of the End Times, in September of 2005 President Ahmadinejad ended a speech at the United Nations with the following words:

"O mighty Lord, I pray to you to hasten the emergence of your last repository, the promised one, the pure and perfect human being, the one that will fill the world with justice and peace. O lord, include us among his companions, followers and those who serve his cause."

Address by H. E. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad President of the Islamic Republic of Iran before the Sixth Session of the United Nations General Assembly – New York 17 September 2005
www.un.org/webcast/ga/60/statements/iran050917eng.pdf

One could almost mistake this as a Christian's prayer to God for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. But it is not. President Ahmadinejad was appealing to Allah (the god of Islam) for the return of the Twelfth Imam, or the messiah that many Shi'ia Muslims anticipate will arrive at the end of the age during a period of widespread warfare and epidemics. According to Shi'ia beliefs, the Twelfth Imam will destroy Israel and establish Islam as the world's only religion. No doubt, President Ahmadinejad and many of his countrymen would prefer this be the Shi'ia

version of Islam widely practiced in Iran, as opposed to the Sunni version widely practiced in the Arab nations of the Levant, Mesopotamia and Arabia.

Ancient Persia was master of empires long before the founding of Islam, and at times Persian kings ruled most of the Middle East. But in the seventh century A. D. the Arabs, united by a new religion (Islam), forged an empire of their own and eventually conquered Persia, and many Persians converted to Islam. Not long after Islam's founding differences of belief arose regarding the manner of succession of leadership and sources of religious authority, resulting in several schisms, the greatest of which was the Sunni/Shi'ia schism. Over the succeeding centuries the centers of Sunni Islam gravitated to Arabia (Saudi Arabia) and Anatolia (Turkey) and the centers of Shi'ia Islam gravitated to Southern Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Persia (Iran), setting the stage for a cultural tug of war between Sunni Arabs and Turks and Shi'ia Persians.

Persia (now Iran) for centuries sought to control what is today Southern Iraq with its large Shi'ia population, Shi'ia holy sites and prominent Shi'ia schools. From the seventeenth century the Ottoman Turks frustrated Persian ambitions in the region. In the nineteenth century British and Russian imperial ambitions in Central and Southern Asia kept the Iranians off balance. When the Ottoman and Russian Empires fell in the first decades of the twentieth century, lingering British influence and power in the region kept the Persians at bay. Throughout the last decades of the twentieth century Saddam Hussein and his secular Ba'athist regime in Iraq held the line against Iran.

In 1979 Iran was thrown into turmoil when Shi'ia fundamentalists overthrew the pro-Western, American-backed Shah and seized control of the government, a development that raised the prospect of a religious war between Shi'ias and Sunnis that would engulf the Middle East. The Iranian revolution gave Saddam Hussein an opportunity to settle old border disputes between Iraq and Iran, and in 1980 Iraqi armies invaded Iranian territory. After initial successes, the Iraqi invasion bogged down into a war of attrition. Fearing a possible Iranian victory and the prospect of Shi'ia fundamentalism spreading throughout the Middle East, the United States gave Saddam Hussein limited support against the Iranians, until the two sides negotiated an end to the war in 1988.

In the last decade of the twentieth century Ba'athist Iraq served as a brake on the spread of Shi'ia fundamentalism from Iran, as well as a brake on a growing Sunni fundamentalism (Wahhabism) originating in Saudi Arabia. The situation remained stable until America and its allies invaded Iraq in 2003, toppled Saddam, and promoted democracy in post-Saddam Iraq.

America had already invaded Afghanistan on Iran's eastern border and toppled the Taliban regime in the opening salvo of America's war on terrorism after 9/11. With America now on Iran's eastern and western borders, it seemed that yet another world power had arrived on the scene to frustrate Iranian ambitions to dominate the region. But in the 2005 Iraqi national elections the majority of Iraqis – who happen to be Shi'ias – established a Shi'ia dominated government. This generated much criticism for America and alarm among Sunni Arabs throughout the Middle East, who feared that Iraqi Shi'ias would align themselves, and their nation, with Shi'ia Iran.

Iran supports Shi'ia militias in Iraq (even as Saudi Arabia and Syria support Sunni militias), helping to fan the flames of the sectarian conflict as Iraq struggles to pull itself together in the post-Saddam era. Iran also supports Hezbollah and other Shi'ia-terrorists organizations in Southern Lebanon that continually threaten or attack Israel, most recently with large barrages of Iranian-made rockets and missiles – weapons of relatively short (but increasing) range and tipped with conventional (non-nuclear, non-chemical, non-biological) warheads – for now. All of this suggests that Iran's ancient appetite for empire has survived into the twenty-first century, fully whetted.

In contrast to the tensions between Sunni-Arabs and Shi'ia-Persians, Iran's relations with other nations on Ezekiel's list have proved mutually beneficial: Turkey, Russia and Pakistan, in particular, maintain good relations with Iran. Both Russia and Pakistan are instrumental in Iranian progress toward developing nuclear and missile technologies.

Another ongoing development in the region that might suggest a convergence of alliances among the nations comprising the Gog/Magog coalition is the issue of Kurdish independence. The Kurds are an ethnic group whose homeland includes Northern Iraq, Eastern Syria, Eastern Turkey and Western Iran. Since the fall of Saddam the Kurds have gained considerable autonomy in Iraq, fueling long suppressed desires among Kurds for independence and a nation of their own.

Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran have for decades acted to suppress Kurdish autonomy within their respective territories. An independent Kurdistan, carved out of Northern Iraq, would certainly fuel unrest among Kurds throughout the region and give Turkey and Iran common cause. If a Kurdish nation carved out of Northern Iraq and possibly Eastern Syria should become a part of the antichrist's kingdom (perhaps as one of the ten kings who will comprise the antichrist's confederacy) Turkey and Iran would have additional motivation to join forces.

But before the Gog/Magog coalition attacks Israel in the End Times, Israel must be living in peace in its own land. This is something that can only occur when Israel's peace is secured. God has always called upon Israel to trust Him for its security, but throughout its history Israel has trusted in treaties with other nations, to its downfall.

In the End Times, Israel will once again make a treaty with other nations (this time with the antichrist and his confederacy) to secure its peace. This will occur at the beginning of the Seven Year Tribulation, and Israel will think it has at long last achieved the peace it desires. But this peace will have dire consequences for the nation. The rise of the antichrist may seem an answer to regional instability – the arrival of a strong man who will somehow defuse the sectarian powder keg threatening to explode in the Middle East. But his success will be fleeting. Israel's treaty with the antichrist will tempt the nations beyond the antichrist's ten-nation confederacy to conspire against Israel. As noted previously, the antichrist's confederacy may include the predominantly Sunni Arab nations in the Levant, Mesopotamia and on the Arabian Peninsula. Turkey borders these nations to the north, Iran to the east, and Egypt and Sudan to the west and south. All of these nations will be principal members of the Gog/Magog coalition. The Gog/Magog attack could be triggered by the antichrist's peace treaty with Israel and Israel's rebuilding of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem – that, together with Kurdish independence and the

on-going rivalry between Sunni Arabs and Shi'ia Persians for dominance of Islam and of the Middle East, could provide plenty of motivation.

What some call an insurgency in Iraq, and others call a civil war, is nothing less than the latest manifestation of a centuries-old intra-civilizational clash between Sunnis and Shi'ias, Arab and Persians, for dominance of Islam and the Middle East. The regional war that many see on the horizon between Sunnis and Shi'ias (and which today is building in war-torn Iraq) may be nothing other than the war envisioned by Ezekiel over 2,500 years ago.

It is sobering to think that America's decision to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam could serve as a catalyst for this prophesied war. If this proves to be the case, the blowback (unintended consequences) of America's actions would literally be of Biblical proportions.

The Gog/Magog attack will take Israel and the antichrist, as well as the European Union and America, by surprise. This can be inferred from Ezekiel, Chapter 38, verse 13, which suggests that the merchants of Sheba, Dedan and Tarshish will question why Gog has attacked. Sheba and Dedan are names associated with ancient trading centers on the Arabian Peninsula. Tarshish is a name associated with the lands of the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic coastlines, or modern-day Europe and, by extension, perhaps America. The question's reference to who is attacked could apply equally to Israel and the antichrist's kingdom, as both at the time will be at peace.

But God will not be taken by surprise. He will intervene and destroy the bulk of the invading armies, destroying five-sixths of the attacking forces in the mountains of Israel (Ezekiel, Chapter 39, verses 1 through 8). So great will be the destruction of the invading armies that the Israelis will require seven months to bury the dead (verses 11 through 16). As a consequence of God's intervention against Israel's enemies, many in Israel and around the world will begin to understand that He will always honor His covenant with Israel (Isaiah, Chapter 66, verses 18 and 19). They will also begin to realize that the relationship with Israel God had intended from the beginning will, in the end, be realized (Ezekiel, Chapter 39, verses 22 through 29).

Often in prophecy, the events in the visions of the prophet seem to be sequential, with no times or events between. Some have suggested this is a phenomenon similar to looking up at a near mountain peak and seeing the mountains beyond, without seeing the valley between. That may be the case here. The visions of the Gog/Magog attack and of God's intervention, and the vision of Israel's restoration to its proper relationship with God, when taken as a whole, appear directly connected when the prophecy is read alone.

But to read the vision by itself may be to read it out of context with the whole of the End Times prophecies. If the attack occurs at the beginning of the Seven Year Tribulation (when Israel has made its treaty with the antichrist and believes falsely that it is living in peace and safety) then there must be the times of trouble of those seven years yet to unfold before the final restoration of the nation which, according to prophecy, will occur after the end of the Tribulation period.

Scripture also suggests that the antichrist will play a part in the Gog/Magog war. This seems logical in that, at the time of the Gog/Magog attack, he has a treaty with Israel and his confederation and power base surrounds Israel. To attack Israel, the Gog/Magog coalition

(which surrounds the antichrist's confederacy) must attack the antichrist. If this logic holds, then the antichrist must react. This may be the meaning of a prophecy about the antichrist recorded in the Book of Daniel.

In Daniel, Chapter 11, verses 40 through 44, the prophet records a vision of a war that the antichrist wages against his enemies. In this vision, he is attacked by Egypt (from the south) and by enemies to the north. The antichrist counterattacks to the south, defeating Egypt, Libya and Sudan (ancient Nubia). But before he can engage his enemies attacking from the north, he receives 'reports from the east and the north' that 'will alarm him' (verse 44). This news could be that the northern and eastern armies of the Gog/Magog coalition have already been destroyed. The prophecy ends with a suggestion that he will invade Israel, but there 'he will come to his end' (verse 45).

Again, here we may have a prophecy of events that are contracted, without a record of times and events between the news of the defeat of Israel's (and the antichrist's) enemies, the antichrist's invasion of Israel, and his ultimate destruction. Israel will think it is living in peace at the beginning of the Tribulation, having secured a treaty with the surrounding nations. But the antichrist will not break this treaty and invade Israel until three and a half years later, in the middle of the Tribulation, and he will not be destroyed until three and a half years after he breaks the treaty, at the end of the Tribulation.

I think the antichrist will claim, and most of the world (including most Israelis) will believe, that he is responsible for this miraculous victory. With the surrounding Gog/Magog coalition defeated and weakened, he will be the undisputed power in the Middle East and beyond. Most of the world will submit to his dominion out of fear and admiration for his (supposed) unequalled military strength and prowess. Yet how can this be? Is there a basis for this interpretation in scripture?

Much of End Times prophecy warns of false messiahs who will deceive many into thinking 'this is the one who will save humanity'. Jesus warned his first followers that these deceivers will appear in the End Times and fool many (Matthew, Chapter 24, verses 23 through 28; Mark, Chapter 13, verses 21 through 23). Later prophets also warned of this (II Thessalonians, Chapter 2, verses 1 through 12; Revelation, Chapter 19, verse 20).

A study of Christian, Jewish and Muslim End Times beliefs suggests how this could happen. Each of these faiths has different concepts of the End Times. There are also different beliefs about who and what the messiah will be, and what the messiah, or deliverer of mankind, will do, even within these faiths. It is no stretch of the imagination, or of interpretation, to suggest that the antichrist will indeed fool those who do not have correct understanding in these matters.

The warning is clear, and it is repeated throughout the Bible, that we must be vigilant and avail ourselves to correct understanding, or we allow ourselves to be deceived (2 Thessalonians, Chapter 2, verses 1 through 12). Unfortunately too few bother themselves, or even care, to take the time or make the effort to learn the truth, but are satisfied to be fed lies by liars and imposters. This has been the case throughout history, even among the ancestors of the Jewish people who

refused to recognize their Messiah in Jesus Christ and instead followed after false messiahs until the Romans destroyed their nation and scattered them as a people.

And how many messiahs-of-the day plagued the last century alone? Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot and their like come to mind. The end result of this folly has always been the same and remains the same up to the present – confusion and destruction. It can only get worse as the End Times approach.

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