

SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

Dreaming of the Second Coming

The advent of the third millennium has been heralded by a steady stream of books alerting us to prophetic signs pointing to the Lord's soon return. Peter and Patti Lalonde's *The Edge of Time—The Final Countdown Has Begun* (hereafter referred to as *Edge of Time*) opens with a proclamation:

We are standing at the edge of a dramatic moment in history, watching life-changing events take place in the world around us every day...We are living in a time filled with great expectancy and anticipation...For Bible-believing Christians, however, it is the anticipation of watching, from front-row seats, a drama unfold that will culminate in the return of Jesus Christ to this planet to establish His millennial kingdom on earth. (9-10)

Apocalypse Code, authored by Hal Lindsey, promises believers, "As for us, one moment we will be going about our life here on earth, and the next moment we will be hurtled into the presence of Jesus" (300). As a final example, Peter and Paul Lalonde explain the motive for their book *2000 A.D. Are You Ready?*: "We want to give you a sense of excitement, expectancy, and an understanding of the times in which we live" (ix); and "Most of the interest [in Bible prophecy] comes from one fact that by and large overwhelms every other reason: We are approaching the year 2000" (184). Understandably, the apparent fulfillment of certain biblical prophecies as well as the closing of a millennium have generated much interest in the Lord's second advent.

I wish to make it clear from the outset that the purpose of this article is not to dispute or diminish the need for believers to anticipate the Lord's second coming. A longing and watchful expectation for the Lord's return and for the establishment of His kingdom on the earth is not only spiritually healthy—it is a direct command from the Lord. The New Testament has many sobering exhortations to watchfulness. Matthew 24:42 charges, "Watch,

therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord comes," and again, "Watch therefore, for you do not know the day nor the hour" (25:13). The final chapters of the New Testament likewise admonish us to "become watchful and establish the things which remain" (Rev. 3:2) and remind us that "blessed is he who watches and keeps his garments" (16:15). Without question, every believer should anticipate the Lord's return and lovingly yearn for that day.

The issue here is not *whether* we should be diligently watchful—we surely should be. Neither does this article intend to argue either for or against the prophetic fulfillment and indications of the Lord's imminent return, for we believers should anticipate His coming throughout our lives whether we see such outward signs or not. The question here is *how* we should be in our inward condition and attitude as we live our lives waiting for His coming. To their credit, the authors cited above have warned

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against the obvious and dangerous extreme of dropping all human responsibility and retreating to the mountains as the year 2000 approaches. They have also warned against the antithetical and equally dangerous extreme of living lethargically, with no sense of urgency or readiness for His second coming. The commendable purpose of their books is to awaken the slumbering believers and inspire them to anticipate the Lord's return by drawing their attention to the prophetic signs. There remains, however, a third possible deviation in one's inward condition and outward behavior, one which I have not seen addressed by any of the recent books. This is the extreme which, while maintaining a normal manner of life objectively, subjectively dreams of this event as a rescue from today's difficulties, and thereby causes one to be defrauded of the genuine ex-

perience of Christ in one's present sufferings as well as menial routines.

It is very possible, when faced with seemingly unending

difficulties and tedium, to look away to the Lord's coming for our rescue and relief rather than experience the present Christ in the environment He has sovereignly arranged for us, the very environment prescribed to prepare us for His coming. Romans 8:28 points out clearly that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." God has purposefully arranged, or at the least *allowed*, all persons, matters, and things in our environment. The "good" for which our environment is working is found in the next verse: "To be conformed to the image of His Son" (v. 29). This "good" is not some vacuous optimism that somehow everything will eventually turn out well, that some unforeseen boon will come of a tragedy, or that there must be a silver lining within each dark cloud. The "good" that God intends for us, through the arrangements of all matters in our lives, is our conformation to the image of Christ, that is, both the lifelong change of our inward essence and nature through transformation (Rom. 12:2) as well as the instantaneous change of our outward form to match the glorified Christ at the moment of our glorification (1 John 3:2).

While the authors mentioned above admirably attempt to awaken vigilance in the believers, they err in failing to clearly define a genuinely biblical vigilant living. Dave Hunt's book *How Close Are We?* claims that "the expectation of Christ's imminent return is the major motivation for godly living....To awaken each morning with the joyful anticipation that this could be the day when Christ will catch away His own from earth to heaven transforms our daily lives as nothing else could" (317-318). Without question, the believer's expectation of the Lord's return helps to foster a healthy and proper attitude toward his daily life. However, the view that being caught away to heaven is the major motivation of Christian living does not accurately reflect the emphasis of Scripture, which stresses the more predominant goal of our conformity to Christ and transformation into His image aided by the day-to-day trials of this present life (2 Cor. 4:7, 15-18).

There is another danger implicit here—the danger of becoming so eager to be caught away from earth that we find ourselves approaching our daily life in much the same way as unbelievers do, albeit perhaps more godly in our behavior. Non-Christians dream of a change in circumstance, a shift in luck, or a reward for their labors to bring them happiness and a sense of meaning. Lacking any realization

of divine purpose for their lives and circumstances, they despise the sufferings and the triteness that seemingly pervade much of human life. It is likewise possible for the believer to be found harboring the same inward dissatisfaction, differing only in that he longs not for a change of luck but instead for the Lord's return to rescue him to a better life and thus free him from earthly trials and banality. *Edge of Time*, for example, chastises unbelievers for "not waiting for the return of Jesus to save them" (18). But should the believer conversely spend his life waiting for the Lord's return to save him? The Christian life portrayed in the New Testament is one full of reward and salvation in the direst of circumstances. While imprisoned, Paul was not found merely waiting for the ultimate salvation of Christ's return. Rather, he declared, "For I know that for me *this* [his imprisonment] will turn out to salvation through your petition and the bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:19). Paul did not depreciate his suffering; instead, his expectation was that he would be enriched with the Spirit through it. The next verse is even clearer: "According to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I will be put to shame, but with all boldness, as always, *even now* Christ will be magnified in my body, whether through life or through death" (v. 20, emphasis added). Through the all-inclusive, life-giving Spirit experienced in the midst of his trials, Paul expected that his present living would magnify Christ, that is, enlarge Him in the view of others. To magnify Christ in all kinds of environments, particularly in troubles, is to experience Him in the topmost way. What tragic irony to miss the precious present Christ while cultivating a seemingly more "spiritual" longing to be caught away from these essential experiences of Him! It is far better to proclaim with Paul, "To me, to live is Christ" (v. 21) while we are waiting for His coming.

Edge of Time also tells us that "our focus should not be on the problems of, or the good times in, this world. Our focus should instead be on the coming of the Lord" (14). It is absolutely true that our focus should not be on our problems, but what Scripture does focus us on is the Christ to be gained in this age in our problems. Paul says, "I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse that I may gain Christ and be found in Him" (Phil. 3:8-9). To Paul, Christ

is not only the coming Christ but also the present Christ, the Christ who is now, and the Christ who can be incrementally gained through ongoing tests and trials. *Apocalypse Code*, on the other hand, directs us to

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follow the “twelfth commandment: ‘Thou shalt not sweat it!’” (287), because “no matter how bad things get—or seem to get—there is never any need to lose heart or be discouraged....What’s the worst thing that can happen to us in this life? We die—physically” (291). This philosophy falls quite short of the consistent New Testament view that beyond merely enduring life’s trials while trying not to worry, the believers should realize that these consuming trials are actually designed to work out for us “an eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17) through the day-by-day renewing of the inner man (v. 16). The enlightened Christian is aware that *all* environments, whether blissful or banal, thrilling or troubling, serve to constitute him further with the element of God. Thus, the Christian’s goal in this life far surpasses simply “not sweating it.” Our goal is to meet the Lord having known Him as thoroughly as possible on this earth—by taking advantage of each sovereignly arranged earthly trial to prepare us to meet Him.

Not only do we gain Christ in our sufferings, but the loving believer finds that Christ can be experienced in daily routines, irksome chores, and sundry human responsibilities. Since Christ is present, we need not long to be rescued from the boredom of this age, for nothing is mundane when Christ is experientially involved. In fact, the Lord’s return should not come as a surprise to the Christian who lives Christ in the details of ordinary human life. That believer will not be shocked to suddenly discover himself in the Lord’s presence—he is already there, for he has been living there day by day. The Lord’s *parousia* (coming) simply raises to a new level that intimacy with Christ that he has already known on earth.

If we miss the golden opportunities that life’s pilgrimage affords, there are two lamentable results. First, we stunt the growth of the divine life obtained through regeneration and thus remain the same for years, still emitting the same soulish, natural flavor. Many genuine children of God live in darkness, seeing not the hand of their Father in their environment but only opposing persons and overwhelming problems. But the believer who sees God’s arrangement for him blames neither human hands, family members, nor fellow Christians for his troubles. He has relinquished his fretfulness, discontent, and boredom for a richer experience of the Lord. Sadly, some believers are convinced that in order to obtain God’s presence, their environment must be free from such difficulties and distractions as the “clatter of dishes.” To them, the further they are able to remove themselves from this earth and its inhabitants, the more they will sense God. But in fact their distance from God is due not to the “dishes,” nor to the interference of other people, but to their failure to find and gain Christ and accept their present environment as the God-ordained arrangement for them to do so.

The second lamentable result of missing the experience of Christ in today’s environment is that we will doubtless regret it in the next age. In that glorious day, there will be no more suffering, misunderstanding, tears, loneliness, poverty, persecution, or physical pain. We will find no more chances to suffer for Him. There will be no more opportunities for sacrifice. We will no longer experience the Lord’s comfort in distress, for there will be no distress. We will not know what it is to trust Him in trials, for there will be no more trials. The window of opportunity for such blessed experiences remains open only in this short lifetime. If we miss these by dreaming of His return, we will surely regret the many squandered opportunities to know the perfect Christ in an imperfect world. On the other hand, if we now appropriate every environmental dealing and arrangement as divinely appointed opportunities to know, gain, live, and magnify Christ, we will regret no lost opportunities later. To the children of God, there are no accidents that their wise and loving Father has not allowed; there are no mistakes that have not been permitted; and there are no persons in our lives that have not been divinely assigned. May the Lord open our eyes to see that He has not wasted one arrangement in our lives, and that by laying hold of Him in all these experiences we can enter into sweet oneness with Christ in this age, thus ushering us into a fuller oneness with Him at His coming.

I long to behold, Lord, Thy countenance soon,
 What rapture with Thee, Lord, to meet.
 But neither seek I all these trials to avoid;
 Such times, Lord, are too rare and sweet.
 Have mercy on me, fill me with Thy great love,
 For Thee, Lord, to live at all cost;
 Lest Thy servant, hoping for that blessed day,
 That day, regret chances were lost,
 That day, regret chances were lost. (*Hymns* 1068)

by Gary Evans

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