

## WATCH YE THEREFORE

Nearly thirty years ago, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins published a novel titled, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*, a fictional account of Dispensationalist theology, in which God destroys the world after the faithful have been 'raptured,' which is to say, caught up to heaven. To date, more than nine million copies of the book have been sold. The authors have written no fewer than fifteen sequels, and five motion pictures have been based on the books. A little over two weeks ago, Jenkins told the *Christian Post*:

Nobody knows the day or the hour, not even the Son of Man. He (Jesus) didn't know, so it's sort of folly for us to try to predict the day or the hour. But also, I think all the prophecies have been fulfilled that need to be before the rapture, so it could be today. Now that should be an urgent call for us to keep making sure that people aren't left behind and telling them the truth. ([Christian Post, November 17th, 2023](#))

Sadly, some Evangelicals believe that the end is near, and they are gripped by the fear that they will be left behind. Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the Church year in Western Christianity. Concerning the season of Advent, *A Dictionary of the Episcopal Church* states, "The season is a time of preparation and expectation for the coming celebration of our Lord's nativity, and for the final coming of Christ 'in power and glory.'"

After God created the first man, Adam, He put Adam's faith to the test. He told him not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and He warned him that, if he should eat of it, then he would die. Adam rebelled against God's command, and ate of the tree. Because God is righteous, He punished Adam with death. Not only did Adam die, as God had warned him he would, but mankind died. So, everyone comes into the world "dead in trespasses and sins." (Ephesians 2:1) Everyone comes into the world with a sinful nature, and under the wrath of God. The Scriptures say, "Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Genesis 6:5) Several generations after Adam's rebellion, God destroyed the world with a great flood, saving only righteous Noah and his household. God destroyed the world because of man's sin, but the sinful nature of man did not change. But, God, being merciful and gracious, would never again destroy the world. He said, "I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done." (Genesis 8:21) God made a covenant with Noah, and with all mankind, that He would never again destroy the world. He said, "And I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth." (Genesis 9:11) If God would not destroy the world, then He would have to save it.

Not long after the death of Noah, God made a covenant with Abraham in which he promised to save the world. He said to Abraham, "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. (Genesis 12:1-3) If Abraham would leave his father's people and his father's land, then God would give him a new people, and a new land. Later God said to Abraham, "in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." (Genesis 18:8) Through Abraham, God would bless the whole world. Every nation of the world would become the people of God.

The first nation God blessed in this way was the nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham. At Mount Sinai, after the Exodus, God made a covenant with the Israelites in which He promised to be their God so long as they obeyed His commands. He said to them, “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine.” (Exodus 19:5) The people answered, “All that the LORD hath spoken we will do.” (Exodus 19:8) So, the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai with thunder and lightning and fire and smoke, and the people trembled with fear. Yet, Moses gave them comfort, saying, “Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not.” (Exodus 20:20) The Lord did appear to His people in such a faithful manner because He meant to destroy them, but rather to instill in His people a proper fear that He would destroy them if they sinned against Him. Then the Lord gave to His people His law, the Ten Commandments. (Exodus 20:1–17) Israel agreed to the terms of God’s covenant, but they soon after violated the terms. God, because He is righteous, did not completely destroy Israel for their sins. He punished the wicked, but preserved the righteous. God said to Moses:

The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6–7)

God’s character is both merciful and severe: He is merciful to them that repent, and severe to them that do not.

When Israel finally reached the border of the promised land, Moses reviewed for the Israelites their history. He reminded them of God’s faithfulness, and of their unfaithfulness. He reminded them of the good that God did to them, and the evil that they did to God. Then Moses exhorted the people to obey God’s law. He said:

Now these are the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, which the LORD your God commanded to teach you, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go to possess it: That thou mightest fear the LORD thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee, thou, and thy son, and thy son's son, all the days of thy life; and that thy days may be prolonged. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it; that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily, as the LORD God of thy fathers hath promised thee, in the land that floweth with milk and honey. (Deuteronomy 6:1–3)

God gave Israel His law, and He expected them to keep it, as they had vowed to do. They were to keep God’s law because they feared Him, Him who is holy and righteous, and who will not tolerate sin. They were to keep it also because it is beneficial for them. Moses gave Israel a choice. He said:

Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day: And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which ye have not known. (Deuteronomy 11:26–28)

Then Moses said, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4, 5) Israel were not to keep

God's law merely because of fear of punishment. Neither were they to keep it merely because it was beneficial for them. They were to keep it from the heart, because of love for God. God was not Israel's slave, that He had to do as they asked Him. Neither were Israel God's slaves, who should serve Him out of servile fear. The covenantal relation was one of mutual love and service. God loved His people, and so served them by doing what was best for them. His people were to love Him, and so they were to serve Him by obeying His commands. God always kept covenant with His people, but His people did not always keep covenant with Him. God always lived His people, and did what was good for them, but His people did not always love Him, and so they did not always obey Him.

In the days of the divided monarchy of Israel, the people, led by their rulers, regularly rebelled against God. God regularly sent them prophets to call His people to repent of their sins, and to warn them that God would punish them if they would not. To the southern kingdom of Judah, God sent Isaiah the prophet to prophesy, and Isaiah prophesied to them both judgment and mercy. God would send the army of Assyria to conquer the northern kingdom of Israel, and take the people into captivity, He would send the army of Babylon to conquer the people of the southern kingdom of Judah, and take them into captivity. God would use the wicked heathen nations to punish His own nation, then He would punish the heathen nations for their wickedly attacking His people. God in His justice would judge Israel and Judah for their rebellion, and He would judge the heathen nations for their sins. Yet, God in His mercy would restore His people. When in captivity in Babylon, God's people would finally repent, and appeal to God for justice against God's enemies and theirs. They would pray:

I will mention the lovingkindnesses of the LORD, and the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD hath bestowed on us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which he hath bestowed on them according to his mercies, and according to the multitude of his lovingkindnesses." (Isaiah 63:7)

The people confessed that God was always faithful to them, always good, always merciful, and was, therefore, worthy of their praise.

Then they would pray:

Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence, As when the melting fire burneth, the fire causeth the waters to boil, to make thy name known to thine adversaries, that the nations may tremble at thy presence! (Isaiah 64:1, 2)

God, it seemed to them, was sealed up in heaven, and unconcerned with their plight. They pleaded with God to tear open the heavens, and descend to earth and in His fiery wrath melt the mountains and boil the sea. God had at Mount Sinai revealed His frightful power and His wrath against sin. Here His people plead that He would reveal Himself to their adversaries, so that they would tremble in fear.

Then they would say:

When thou didst terrible things which we looked not for, thou camest down, the mountains flowed down at thy presence. For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him. Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that

remember thee in thy ways: behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved. (Isaiah 64:3–5)

God gives good things to them that in faith wait on Him. When Israel were in bondage in Egypt they cried out in their distress, and they despaired of being delivered. They could not imagine the spectacular manner in which God would deliver them, and the great blessing He would bestow upon them. Since the beginning of time, no one has been able to imagine the good things that God has in store for His people at the end of time. Those who rejoice in working righteousness, who keep in mind the nature and character of God, God meets with blessing and peace. God was angry with Israel because of their sins; yet, it is God's nature always to show mercy to them that repent, and to save them.

The people further prayed:

But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities. But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand. Be not wroth very sore, O LORD, neither remember iniquity for ever: behold, see, we beseech thee, we are all thy people. (Isaiah 64:6–9)

The people confessed that they were defiled by sin, like the leper defiled by disease, and they were not fit to be in God's court. Even their best efforts at doing right and pleasing God were infected with sin. They were carried away from God like a leaf in the wind. The people sinned against God, yet no one called upon God for mercy; no one took hold of God by faith. Because the people turned away from Him, He turned away from them, as it were, hiding His face from them, and would consume them with fire. God is the Father of His people. As the potter creates something out of clay, so God created His people. Why then should He destroy what He created? The people begged God not to be angry with them, and to forget their sins, because they are His people, and He is their God. They and God had a covenant with each other. God did deliver the Israelites from their captivity in Babylon, and they were restored to their ancestral homeland where they rebuilt the city of Jerusalem, and the temple there, which the Babylonians had destroyed.

The Jews, after their restoration, did well for a time, but sadly returned to the wicked ways of their forefather. They looked for the Christ to come, but, when He did finally appear, the rulers of Israel, with few exceptions, rejected Him, and the people followed them in their rejection. Israel learned nothing from the example of their forefathers. So, Jesus said that, once again, Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed, and it would happen, not to some later generation, but to the generation that rejected Him. He said, "Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done." (Mark 13:30) This would be a sure sign that Jesus had ascended to God in heaven, and had received dominion over the earth, just as Daniel the prophet had prophesied. (Daniel 7:13, 14) Jesus told His disciples:

But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father. Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is. For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the

morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch. (Mark 13:32–37)

No one at that time, not even Jesus, knew precisely when this Great Tribulation would take place; they only knew that it would take place within the lifetime of that generation that rejected Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus told His disciples to look for the signs, and to be prepared to flee to save their lives. More importantly, He told them not to be morally asleep, morally indolent, but rather awake, active. Otherwise they, too, would suffer the divine displeasure.

Of course, it happened just as Jesus said. Around forty years after His death, the Roman army laid siege to the city of Jerusalem, destroying it, and the temple. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, a contemporary of the event, over one million people died, and nearly one-hundred thousand enslaved. Thus ended the era of Jewish national exclusivity, and began the era of international inclusivity. Since then, Christ has been by His Spirit, through His body the Church, blessing the nations with the good news of His global reign. After the Great Flood, God promised never again to destroy the world, and He will keep His promise. Yet, Christ will one day return to judge all mankind. He himself said, “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.” (John 5:28, 29)

Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; That in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:4–9)

Paul was always grateful to God because Christ gave God’s grace to the Corinthians, as He gives to every Christian. By this grace the Christian is enriched is all that he knows about Christ, and in all that he says about Him, even as they heard the apostles testimony concerning Christ. Christians lack no spiritual gift from God, and they should use their gifts as they faithfully wait for the return of Christ to judge the world. The faithful Christians should not fear the return of Christ because God has called Him into fellowship with Christ, and Christ will confirm His people to the end of their lives so that they will stand before Christ blameless when He judges the world.

Let us learn from the errors of ancient Israel. Let us not fear that God will destroy the world. Let us hope for the return of Jesus Christ to judge the world in righteousness.

Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy; to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.