

The Coming Hour of Temptation

by H. A. Ironside

It might be well to compare the testimony given in Matthew's Gospel with the records of both Mark and Luke. In Mark 13:14-27 we have a passage almost parallel to the one in Matthew, a careful reading of which only confirms what we have already seen, namely, that the great tribulation is still in the future, and that it closes with the Son of Man coming in the clouds with power and great glory.

In Luke 21 it is evident that considerable time must elapse between the overthrow of Jerusalem under Titus and this coming of the Son of Man. Jerusalem's destruction is predicted in verses 20-24: "And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people. And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled."

Notice particularly that following the downfall of the Holy City and the desolation of Palestine, Jerusalem's treading down, or subjection to the nations, is to last until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled. This expression, "the times of the Gentiles," is not used anywhere else in Scripture, though a similar term is found in Ezekiel 30:3: "For the day is near, even the day of the Lord is near, a cloudy day; it shall be the time of the heathen." The heathen, of course, are the Gentiles. Ezekiel is referring there to the triumph of Nebuchadnezzar over Israel and the powers to which they turn for help, Egypt and Ethiopia. The times of the Gentiles began with Nebuchadnezzar. They go on until the return of the Son of Man, who will come as the stone that smites the feet of the image of Gentile supremacy, breaking it to pieces and scattering the dust to the four winds of the earth, then becoming

a great mountain and filling the whole world. The actual circumstances immediately preceding this coming are given in Luke 21:25-27: "And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

The signs here referred to are the supernatural events which we have already seen will take place during the great tribulation, while the conditions set forth in verse 26 shows us the effects of these things on the hearts of men. This period of tribulation culminates in the shaking of the powers of heaven and then will be seen the Son of Man descending in a cloud to take His kingdom and reign in righteousness.

A careful consideration of many scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament prophets, would show us that when the Lord thus returns, He will smite apostate Israel and the rebellious Gentile world with judgment. They will be destroyed at His presence. On the other hand, a remnant of Israel will not only be spared from judgment, but will welcome Him as their long-looked-for King Messiah, and in addition to these, a great multitude of Gentiles will be saved from the wrath which will fall upon the worshippers of the Beast, of which we will speak later, and will form the nucleus of our Lord's kingdom on this earth for a thousand years. This is the predicted program for the coming of the Son of Man. [Note: May I refer the inquiring reader to my books on prophetic study, "Lectures on the Book of Daniel" and "Lectures on the Book of Revelation", which may be obtained from the Publishers.]

The term "the coming of the Son of Man" never refers to that particular aspect of the second advent for which the Church as such is taught to look. When our Lord addresses Israel as in the days of His flesh, He uses this expression over and over again. In John's Gospel, chapter 14, our Lord announces an aspect of His return which is not definitely depicted in the Synoptics. He speaks of coming to receive His own to be with Himself. This is the first clear word we have in the New Testament regarding what is commonly called the *Rapture*. This particular aspect is

always distinguished from the coming of the Son of Man as such. With the above facts in mind, let us now turn to Revelation 3:10,11. Here writing to the angel of the church in Philadelphia, our Lord says: "Because thou hast kept the word of My patience, I will also keep thee from the hour of temptation (of trial), which shall come upon all the world (habitable earth), to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown." These letters to the seven churches set forth, as is very well known, "the things which are," that is, the conditions prevailing in the professing Church of God on earth throughout the present dispensation. Always until our Lord returns, churches will be found in the moral and spiritual condition of those depicted here. Many are also familiar with the fact that in a very striking way these seven letters set forth the characteristic features of seven distinct periods of Church history from apostolic days until the end of her testimony in this scene. Therefore the warnings and exhortations and promises in these seven letters are for all the Church of God throughout the dispensation. Addressing those who are shown to be genuine, who have a little strength and have kept Christ's Word and not denied His Name, which is the least that could be said of any true believer, we have this very definite promise that such will be kept from the coming hour of trial, which is to fall upon the entire habitable earth to try the earth-dwellers. The term "habitable earth" is a translation of the Greek word oikoumene, which was used in apostolic days to distinguish that part of the world which was in subjection to the Roman Empire and which is the proper sphere of prophecy, from all the rest of the world whose inhabitants were opprobriously denominated Barbarians. It is on this Roman earth that the vials of divine wrath will be poured out in all their intensity in the days of the great tribulation. Those who will be particularly exposed to these judgments are distinguished as "dwellers on the earth." This expression is used again and again in the Book of Revelation, and a careful consideration of every passage in which it is found will make it plain, I believe, that it refers not simply to people who live upon this globe but to those who have despised the heavenly calling and whose hopes and affections are all centered upon this earth. In other words, they are the same as those spoken of in Philippians 3, who have spumed the heavenly calling and who "mind earthly things."

Now this promise expressly declares that real believers of this dispensation, that is, the true Church, will be kept from this coming hour of trial. They have not been kept from the frequent trials and tribulations to which Christians throughout the past centuries have been exposed, but they will be kept from this particular hour. It is very evident that the Spirit of God in so speaking was using a term which Christians generally were expected to understand. If any ask, "What is the hour of temptation or trial which is coming upon the whole habitable earth, from which we shall be kept?" the answer naturally would be, that hour of trial so frequently spoken of elsewhere in Scripture. We have seen something of what the Old Testament and also the four Gospels have to say concerning it. Is it referred to in the Epistles, and if so, in what way?

First Thessalonians is the earliest of Paul's letters which the Spirit of God has preserved for the edification of the Church. In this letter the Second Coming of Christ is presented as the imminent hope of the saints. No one can read the latter part of chapter 4 thoughtfully, without seeing that the Spirit of God intended the Church to live in the daily expectation of our Lord's return. Now no one could possibly live in the daily expectation of the coming of the Son of Man as set forth in the Synoptic Gospels, unless he knew that he was in the very closing days of the great tribulation. Consequently the hope of the Lord's return set forth in Thessalonians must of necessity be a different thing to the expectation of His coming to set up His kingdom, and a careful consideration of the passage referred to only serves to make this clearer. It is the Lord's coming *for His saints* whereas the other is His coming *with them*.

Now in chapter 1 in this epistle, Paul speaks of the conversion of the Thessalonians, and the testimony they were giving to the world outside, and says: "For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come" (1:9,10). The last clause, it is generally conceded, does not exactly represent what the apostle wrote. The [American Standard Version] translates it, "Even Jesus who delivereth us from the wrath to come." J. N. Darby renders it, "Jesus, our Deliverer from the coming wrath." Dr. Young is very explicit. He translates it,

"Jesus who is rescuing us from the anger that is coming." The point is, it is not simply that we are looking for our Lord as the One who has delivered us from eternal wrath, but we look for Him as the One who is coming to snatch us away from the wrath that is soon to fall upon this earth. This exactly accords with the promise in Revelation 3:10. And it is in this way that the Church will be kept from that hour of trial. Before the judgments fall the Lord Jesus will descend from Heaven with a shout, the dead in Christ will be raised, and the living saints changed, and we shall be snatched away, caught up to be with Him before the indignation is poured out upon this guilty scene.

Turn now to 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2. As we read it carefully, let us bear in mind what has already been before us, and then in order to get the viewpoint both of the apostle himself, and of those to whom he was writing at that particular time, it will be well to consider certain facts which may be clearly deduced from a careful study of the entire letter. It is evident that the coming of the Lord had a large place in the hearts and minds of these particular saints, and some among them had become unbalanced upon the subject, and were teaching that they were already entering into the time of great tribulation. They believed that the day of the Lord was practically upon them. They were endeavoring to substantiate this teaching in all probability by the use of a forged letter purporting to come from the Apostle Paul, and the advocates of this system declared that the Spirit had revealed these things to them. Therefore the saints were becoming unsettled, losing the blessedness of the hope of the Lord's return for His own; they feared they were already entering the great tribulation, and that the next thing would be the coming of the Son of Man.

Notice carefully verses 1, 2: "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto Him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand." The [American Standard Version] reads, "As that the day of the Lord is just at hand." The best manuscript authority authenticates this. The day of Christ is not the same thing as the day of the Lord. The day of Christ refers to the time when believers will stand in their glorified bodies at Christ's judgment-seat; but the day of the Lord is the time when His judgments will be poured out on the earth, and He

will descend and take the kingdom. But the apostle reminds these believers of what he had already written in his previous epistle. They were not to look for the day of the Lord but for the return of our Saviour to deliver them from the coming wrath. So He pleads with them in view of these very facts, that, "by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and by our gathering together unto Him," not to be troubled or distressed, no matter what assertions others might make in regard to the day of trouble being already upon them. The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together unto Him must take place before that time of distress could begin. This is exactly what we insist upon today, we who do not believe that the Church will go through the great tribulation. Our daily expectation is the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together unto Him. This must precede the judgments. The day of the Lord cannot begin until after it takes place.

Let me use an illustration for which I am indebted to another, though I cannot now recall to whom. Suppose that a great city is in rebellion against its rightful sovereign, but there are in that city certain loyalists who grieve over the defection of the rest, and are faithful to their king. Word comes that the offended monarch and his great army are on the way to the city to subdue or destroy it. Naturally the loyal citizens are anxious and troubled. They do not want to be exposed to the fire of the royal army, and they manage to get word out to the king declaring their loyalty and asking his consideration. Word comes back that his standard will be planted on a certain mountain outside the city before the bombardment begins. When that standard is seen on the mountain, all the loyalists are instructed to leave the city under protection of the king, who will make special arrangements to guard them from destruction. By-and-by the van of the army appears. Soon more and more troops arrive and surround the doomed city. Great guns are being placed at advantageous points on the outlying hills and all preparations for the shelling of the city are being made. Rumors of all sorts are being circulated. The bombing is to begin tonight, or tomorrow, or the next day. The loyalists are becoming nervous and anxious, but in some way a message reaches them from without, saying, "I beseech you by the coming of the king, the lifting up of the standard on the mountain, and your gathering together unto him, be not troubled because of what you see in the way of preparation," and he goes

on to assure them that not one shell will fall upon the city until they are safely gathered to him without. And so their hearts are quieted.

One day the standard is uplifted. A regiment of cavalry comes careering over the plain, and at the same moment the loyalists acting by preconcerted arrangement, leave the city and are immediately protected by the royal horsemen. Soon they gather about the king, prostrating themselves at his feet and attesting their faithfulness. Then the attack on the city begins.

Like all human illustrations, I realize this one does not fully picture the conditions that are to prevail at the Lord's return, but it may at least help to make clear what the apostle means in these opening verses, and it will prepare us to understand what follows. "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come except there come a falling away [the apostasy] first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition." The "day" of course is the day of trial and distress that we have been occupied with, but it will not come until the apostasy is fully manifest. Complete apostasy there cannot be so long as the Church of God is in this world. No matter how much there may be in the way of unfaithfulness to Christ and His truth, our Lord has declared, "Upon this rock will I build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." So long as the Church is in the world, it is being led in His triumph. Individual apostates there may be, but complete apostasy there cannot be. But when the Church has been caught up to be with Christ, then the apostasy in all its fulness will arrive, and out of that condition of things the son of perdition will arise, "who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God" (ver. 4). This is the sinister character whose awful features are dimly seen in both Testaments as one of the dominant actors in the last days. While not for one moment condoning the abominations of the Papacy, it is not logically possible to link this personage with that system as a whole, nor with any individual Pope of the past or present. The Popes at their worst have all professed to act as vicars of Christ. They have not exalted themselves above all that is called God or that is worshipped. But the man of sin will be an absolutely self deified atheist. He will recognize no God but himself. His rise to power is evidently linked with the

abomination of desolation standing in the holy place, spoken of by Daniel and referred to by our Lord, as the true starting-point of the great tribulation.

In verses 6 to 10 we are told of One who hinders this full manifestation of evil until the set time appointed of God. "And now ye know what withholdeth [hindereth] that he might be revealed in his [own] time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only He who now letteth [hindereth] will let [hinder], until He be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked [one] be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the Spirit of His mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of His coming: even he, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved."

There has been a great deal of controversy about this passage. Some claim that the hinderer is Satan who has his place in the heavens until after the rapture of the Church, and then he shall be taken out of the way. Others insist that this hinderer is orderly government, and so long as orderly government prevails these things cannot take place. Some of the early fathers thought the hinderer was the Roman Empire, and that Paul dared not put upon paper just what was in his mind lest he expose the Christians to the charge of plotting the downfall of the existing government. They supposed that verse 6 referred to some private information which he had given to the Thessalonians when he was with them, which had to do with this subject. But let us remember that this letter, like every other epistle in the New Testament, was written not for the local believers only to whom it was addressed, but for all Christians during the entire dispensation. Therefore verse 6 is addressed to believers everywhere, who ought to be capable of understanding it, if they are at all familiar with their Bibles. "Ye know what hindereth that he (that is, the man of sin) might be revealed in his (own) time." No matter who the Christian is who holds this letter in his hand as he reads these words, he should be able to answer, if he is acquainted with the Word, "Yes, I do know who it is that hindereth the full manifestation of iniquity. There is only one answer possible and that is, of course, the Holy Spirit." What Christian is there who would think of any other hindering power in such a connection? In both Testaments this is the very

province and work of the Spirit of God. He causeth the wrath of man to praise Him and the remainder of wrath He doth restrain (Ps. 76:10). "When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him" (Isa. 59:19). He is working in the Church at the present time convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Moreover, His presence in the Church continues as long as that Church is here, for our Lord promises, "When He is come He shall abide with you forever." How then will He ever be taken out of the way? Only by the fulfilment of 1 Thessalonians 4, the return of the Lord and our being caught up to meet Him in the air. This is the tremendous event which will clear the way for that time of trouble from which the Church of God is to be kept.

There is one other passage that deals with the rapture, and that is 1 Corinthians 15:50-58: "Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

There are two aspects of the coming kingdom, a heavenly and an earthly. Both together are called "The kingdom of Heaven," but the saints of this and past ages will not live here on the earth during the kingdom age, but their home-city will be the New Jerusalem above. This is called the kingdom of the Father. "Then shall the righteous shine forth," says our Lord, "in the kingdom of your Father." The earthly saints will live here in this world in natural bodies. This is spoken of as the kingdom of the Son of Man. The apostle is referring to the heavenly kingdom when he says, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God;

neither doth corruption inherit incorruption." All who have part in the heavenly side of the kingdom will have glorified bodies in that day. The manner in which this will be brought about is given us in the verses that follow. "We shall not all sleep" (that is, we shall not all die), "but we shall all be changed," or transformed. This will take place in one moment in the briefest possible period of time at the last trump, that is, the trumpet that closes up the present dispensation, at the sounding of which the dead will be raised incorruptible and the living changed. This is in exact accord with what we have already seen in 1 Thessalonians 4. Some have endeavored to link the last trump of verse 52 with the seventh trumpet of the Book of Revelation. But it should be remembered that the Book of Revelation was not in existence when the apostle wrote his letters, nor did it come into existence until many years afterwards. Therefore, he could not possibly be referring to anything in that book. Furthermore, it is perfectly clear that this last trump is the same as the trump of God in 1 Thessalonians 4, which is an altogether different thing to the trumpet of an angel. It has been pointed out by others that the term seems to be a military one, and refers to a signal used in the Roman Army to set the legions in motion. At the first trump tents were struck, at the second trump they fell into line, at the last trump they marched away. We are waiting for the last trump when we will not march nor fly, but be caught up to be with the Lord in the air, and so we shall be kept from the hour of temptation which is coming on all the earth.

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