

Who comes first,
CHRIST or antichrist?

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DEDICATION:

TO THE WESTERN CHURCH,
STILL SEEKING AN ESCAPE
FROM TRIBULATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Yes, there are apparent contradictions in the Bible. A number of them!

Ever tried to reconcile Divine Sovereignty with human free will? Justice with mercy? A Divine yet human Saviour? Ever struggled with the place of grace vs works in salvation?

And then there is eschatology, the study of the things that shall come in the last times. Are you pre- post- or a-millennial? Will Jesus come 2 more times, or just once? Do we have to go through the coming Tribulation?

I have written of these things before. In fact, this work is closely aligned with my study on the placement of the rapture, a work I entitled, "Caught Up, But When?" I make the same point in this book from a different angle.

Are you looking for Christ? Or are you daily searching the news to see if antichrist is near? Perhaps you are one who sees antichrist in the Papal system known as Romanism, or Catholicism?

Those are usually the options given when those opposed to the message of this book confront it. You are either a Pope-hater, or a conspiracy-monger, or perfect in every way: looking daily for the return of Jesus Christ.

Never hesitant to burst a bubble, especially in not-so-old theology, I quickly jab that fantasy with a fact. This fact is as conclusive to the question of who comes first as Matthew 24 is to the study of the rapture. Once the fact is stated, all theology must be built around it... even the tough verses.

That's what I propose to do in the following pages: Present the incontrovertible fact, given by an inspired apostle, and proceed from there to answer the issues that other verses only seem to suggest.

2. THE FACT

Thank God for the church in ancient Thessalonica. Oh, it was a cruel trick someone played on them, to be sure. But through Paul, they got it all straightened out, and in the process, Paul put down a series of thoughts that forever settled the order of events of the last days.

Fact is, most of the New Testament was written to correct first-century errors. In the wisdom of God, the early church suffered just enough problems to give us, through apostolic corrections, a perfect handbook for living the Christian life and building the Christian church.

What was the error, the trick?

Well, someone, or some group of teachers or prophets, was circulating the notion that the day of the Lord had already come. "You've been left behind," was the sad implication of the heresy. The rapture has come, the true saints are in Heaven, and you second-class guys better get it together before the world ends for real.

Sound familiar?

There is a group among us today selling the idea - quite successfully - that the top-notch believers will be caught up first, followed, seven years later, by the "tribulation saints" who finally woke up, put their lives together, and made it to the final catching up. (Yep, that's two raptures...)

Don't believe it? Go see the movie. Surely the movie would not try to deceive...

The history I just related is from II Thessalonians 2, verse 2. Check it out before we move on. Don't want you thinking I'm

making stuff up, too. This really happened. There was a liar spreading his theories among the Thessalonians and probably others. And these poor believers, new in the faith, wanting to believe anything that seemed to come from God, bit.

Also sound familiar? Sound like all the prophecy theories and "words" from "prophets" circulating among us, some even backing up their words with a supposed [in many cases] visit to Heaven or Hell?

I say "in many cases" because I do not want to come against anything genuine. But write it down: if the teaching doesn't agree with what the Spirit has already given, it is anathema and must be shunned and ignored and rebuked.

These evil men, and we will call them men for now, though we don't want to leave out the women when it comes to spreading false doctrine. It can come through a child. These evil men, I say, took one more step, showing their corrupt nature: they signed Paul's name to their letters.

Today, sometimes, it is even worse. How many people are saying "The Lord told me..." when the Lord didn't tell them? Better to say, "I had this thought come to me while I was praying. Do you think it is the Lord?" Better that, than to bind your audience to make a decision about you immediately. Either you are very false or very true, when you say "The Lord told me." If I have to make a decision right now, well...

So why did Paul bring up the subject of these particular false teachers? Well, he had brought up the subject, "The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him," in verse 1.

Interesting way to put it, don't you think? The coming first, the gathering second. Usually the "gathering" is how we refer to the rapture. The teachers of our day want the (secret) rapture to be first, and the second "coming" later. Doesn't work here.

That's because the coming and the rapture are all the same event. He comes from Heaven, He gathers us to Himself. And that is what II Thessalonians 2 is about. The one event of His coming and His "catching away." One.

But Paul goes on to say that they were *shaken* about this whole subject. The aforementioned letters, plus some goings-on in church had bothered them. Yes, Paul mentions a "spirit" that had spoken in the assembly. You know, "Thus saith the Lord, the rapture is past. Repent before it is too late!"

Now what do you do? You've got this letter signed by the holiest man you ever met, and yet another holy man or woman stands up in church and confirms the awful truth: the good Christians are already in Heaven!

I'll tell you what you do! You panic. You tremble. You stay awake nights.

You saw Paul's miracles. You know he speaks the truth. And the letter is undeniably his.

Well, until Paul denies it, it is. And he emphatically denies it!

Verse 3 contains **the fact**. For the Thessalonians, a comforting fact. For Christians today, trying at any cost to escape the idea of an inescapable period of horror on Earth, not so comforting, maybe...

The fact is clouded a bit by Paul's style, or the Greek language, or both. In English there are actually some words missing. But nearly every translation of the Bible supplies those words because of the construction of the Greek grammar. There's another clue in the verse that even sweeps away the need for such an explanation.

Here are the words Paul uses, after a clear command (that oh! I wish God's people could hear), "Don't be deceived!" Not by anyone, not in any way!

The fact:

*"That Day will not come unless the **apostasy** comes **first**, and the **man of lawlessness** is revealed, the son of destruction..."*

Those first few words are not in the Greek, and thus are italicized. The day of His coming has been the subject all along, and so that day is the subject here. Thus did the translators allow for the English to read in this obvious manner.

But the word "first" is all we need to see here. Want to know what's coming in the end times?

First, says Paul, **apostasy**, a great falling away. That is the opposite of revival, by the way. Now, revival can come whenever God's people pray and desire it, but the general feeling of the church that worldwide revival will usher in the end of all things is foreign to Scripture.

Second, the man of lawlessness. Man of sin. **Antichrist**.

Then comes the day of the Lord's return, and not until.

That is cold, hard, fact. Let no one tamper with it. It is the "Rosetta Stone" of this whole hieroglyphic-like quest into the subject of who comes first. On this fact we can build all other facts, and we must.

By the way, here was an opportunity for Paul to discuss the order that we hear so often today, about a secret coming, first, then the apostasy, antichrist, and second coming. But it's not there. The Scripture is silent. Let God's teachers and people be likewise silent in the face of this clarity.

But why is this all so important, anyway?

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FACT

I can think of several ways to explain the importance of knowing who comes first.

A. The integrity of God's Word.

Either we can depend on apostolic statements or we cannot. While everyone grants up front that some statements of these men are clouded and difficult, we know that many others are not.

This is one of the unclouded ones: The coming of Christ will *not come* until a general falling away that sets the stage for the semi-final world ruler, the antichrist.

It's in there. Let's just believe it.

B. The Thessalonian Syndrome.

In a word, that syndrome is *panic*. Many Christians will be entering blindly into the antichrist era, and finally realize several months or years in, that Jesus has not come. What if there are false teachers then as in Paul's day who explain to you what was explained to them: You didn't make it! Jesus already came. You missed the big event of all times. Next time He'll come in judgment!

What if that is you? Won't you be asking a lot of questions in fear and anxiety, and won't it be comforting to know that it was not true at all, that Jesus never promised a "secret" coming? The book of II Thessalonians will be a treasure to you then!

C. The restricted pastor

Pastors are being told by their higher-ups not to mention the Post-Tribulation rapture! They must think this teaching is important, though in a negative sense.

No, really. The by-laws of a major evangelical group that I know of officially frowns on any of its pastors talking about the possibility of anything or anyone showing up on the scene before Jesus does.

Their reasoning:

1. The coming of Jesus, they say, is imminent. They have defined that word, and their definition demands that nothing can come before this imminency is fulfilled.

2. Teaching about a Tribulation brings confusion to the saints, not to mention division.

3. Teaching about some event coming before Jesus lulls people's minds into complacency.

I get a little uneasy when I read things like this. Imminency I think I understand, and we'll talk about it later. But the fact that a doctrine would confuse is now grounds for it to be excluded? Could it be confusing because this denomination has reached a wrong conclusion to begin with?

As in, "Don't confuse me with the facts"?

And then the final salvo, that people like myself and the host of believers through Biblical and church history who simply believed the clear word about a second - and not a third - coming, these people are lulling the rest of the church to sleep by suggesting that a worldwide catastrophe and the most evil man of all time will come before Jesus appears?

Where did that come from?

It is true that wicked servants will play and sleep and stall until the last minute, then serve Jesus on the day before they think He arrives. Are they suggesting that those who do not believe in imminency are wicked servants?

What shall be said of the pastor who believes that a pre-tribulation rapture is wrong, yet wants to stay in that denomination as a pastor? Perhaps he has no strong feelings about it, and lets it go. Perhaps he truly wants to talk about it, but decides to obey, either for obedience's sake or for a lesser motive.

If he knowingly misleads the people of God in the name of obedience, what is to be said of him?

This doctrine must be very "important" to be under the censure of otherwise godly men. We need to get it right.

D. The Last Days

Everyone keeps telling us we are in the Last Days. Well, according to Joel and Peter, we've been there since Pentecost. Agreed. John would say we've been in the last *hour* since the first century!

But suppose we really are in the last of the last days. Isn't it time the church have a major discussion about this, correct the popular new doctrines of the last 100 years, restore the church to its serious looking for of Christ and those events just before His coming, in line with Scripture, and not with Tim LaHays?

E. It's All Important

Why make a big deal of this particular teaching? Because it is a particular teaching. I think it's a truism that many folks who don't want to talk about Biblical doctrines of "lesser" importance, will often fill their days and their free time gaining knowledge about the news and the world of sports and automobiles and houses.

I've always contended that the least important teaching of Scripture (and this is far from the least!) is far superior to any ball game that was ever played, any series of sports statistics that was ever compiled.

Why shouldn't we want to get it all right, since God took 1600 years to bring us this wonderful book we [used to] carry around?

But granted, this teaching is not a slam dunk because of one verse. This verse is the foundation, but what is to be built upon it?

4. THE "WATCH" PASSAGES

Matthew 24 is key to our understanding of who comes when. Remember the questions of the disciples? "When will you come?" "When will the world end?"

Jesus goes into a long description, *not of signs of the end*, but signs that are not the end, so they will not be confused. Then comes a couple of clear signals.

a. The Gospel will be preached in all the world. And even more specific:

b. The abomination of desolation, described by Daniel and Paul, will occur in Jerusalem.

People living in the region will flee. Pandemonium everywhere. For three and a half long years, unprecedented trouble on earth.

Immediately after the tribulation, He comes.

Now, after all I have said, have you figured out the exact day and hour? No! And neither had the disciples. And neither will the people living in that time, per Jesus' words in verse 36:

"Of that day and hour no one knows."

You see how He goes from clear sign to general time in just a few verses?

Hidden in the talk of great tribulation and an abomination that desolates, is the teaching of the antichrist. Jesus says here in so many words, "Antichrist must come first. Then Me."

After all of this horrendous trouble, the words of Jesus, addressed to those remaining believers - and they do remain! - is the solemn command, "Watch!"

Our Father knew that scanning the skies for at least 2,000 years would be fruitless. But in that day, Watch! When you get that far in history, any day, Jesus will come. Be ready when He comes.

That doctrine of "any day", theologically known as "imminence" has been transferred to us in this pre-tribulation time. Perhaps wrongly. But let's examine some more "watch" passages.

I find the next occurrence in Matthew's next chapter, 25. It follows a parable about ten virgins. There is a sense in which this can be applied to any age, any believer, but you will note that chapter 25 begins with the word, "*Then.*"

Then? *When?* In this time period of which we speak. Satan in the form of his antichrist, wreaking havoc. The Jerusalem temple inhabited by a man of sin. Unspeakable horrors everywhere. Then!

And yet, in some corners of the earth in that day, normal life is trying to surface. As we remember after 9-11, the call back to normalcy was immediate. People will live. They will survive. They keep trying to believe that all is and will be well.

Remember the stories of the period of the Holocaust? In the midst of the horror, there was a "normal life" going on.

For those Christians, reminded now of their duty to stay full of the Holy Ghost, the command again, to "watch!" You just don't know exactly when He is coming. You've endured this long. The temptation is great to join the "normal" folks who have sold out to antichrist and can eat and drink and buy and sell. Don't yield. Wait. He's really coming. Any day.

As I say, the applications for all time, all believers, are clear and real. But the specificity of this word, "*Then*" cannot be ignored either.

Once Antichrist has come, Christ is due any moment.

Yes, John in his day said there are many antichrists. Through history, many saw emperors and Popes in that role. The whole world system can be viewed as antichrist also. There are "many antichrists," says John.

But one day there will be a man. One man. Filled with Satan. Raised from the dead. Sitting in the Temple. Attempting to rule a planet. When you see that, Watch!

Jesus in verse 33 says that when we see *all* these things, and that includes antichrist, tribulation, all of it, then you know Jesus is at the very door.

Not until then.

So how must I watch? I must be ready to go to Jesus any minute of any day, through death.

Mark's Gospel records the words of Jesus that include everyone of all time:

"What I say to you (disciples) I say to all: Watch!" These words are spoken in the same context as Matthew 24. Now, Jesus has already said in Matthew that there are signs of His coming. Then he tells everyone of every generation to watch.

The Father, speaking through Jesus, knows that Jesus' coming is not imminent in every generation, but only one. Yet he has us all watching.

Watching for the coming of the Son of Man *into our lives, into our world*. Watching lest, like His sleepy disciples, we miss the main events of our lives. Watching, which is always

accompanied by praying, so that our lives not be snatched away by the Enemy of our souls. Watching is a lifestyle.

But only the last generation will be watching the eastern sky for the revelation of the Son of God.

Luke (21:36) adds yet another comment of Jesus, again in this same discourse. Preceded by "watch" is the notion that if we watch and pray, we will be among those who escape the things that are about to happen.

The tribulation is past in this verse. The Gospel has been preached in all the world. Antichrist has come and failed. Only one thing remains, the coming, with judgment, of the Judge Jesus.

Those who are praying and watching at that hour will be caught up together to meet the Lord and the rest of the church already assembled and with Him.

This passage is not about escaping trouble, but escaping the wrath of God, for which we were not appointed.

Jesus is not alone in His efforts to create a people who watch. Paul tells his disciples in I Corinthians 16:13, I Thessalonians 5:6, and II Timothy 4:5 to do the same. Peter follows suit in I Peter 4:7.

Jesus, via the apostle John, has a final word about watching in Revelation 3:3. It is to the "dead" church at Sardis. If you do not stay awake, He says, I will come to you as a thief, that is, in the same way that I will be coming to the world. You will be shocked when you see just how many people in your congregation are not in the Lamb's Book of Life, how many whose names I will not confess before My Father.

Watching is our very life. We look for Jesus to be in our midst all the time. This is not about eschatology only, it is about the Spirit-filled life. There are watchers in every generation of church history, and non-watchers. There are people who are alert, and people who are asleep.

These watchers are not fearful of the Lord's sudden snatching. That is not why they watch. They simply love Jesus. They are in prayer, in the Word, in fellowship, serving.

They watch their mouth and the words that come out of it. They watch their weight. They watch their attitude. They watch their friend list.

What Jesus said in the first century He says to us today. Watch. Stay awake. Stay alert.

And none of the above has anything to do with whether antichrist or Christ comes first. If Jesus is not coming for 1000 years, and I can prove it, I am still to watch, not the sky, but my life.

But in that last generation, an added quality is placed on the command. For then, the physical coming of the Lord draws near, and any day our long watch will end.

5. WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

There is a shade of difference between watching and looking in the New Testament. As we have seen, watching has to do with the heart, and the discipline of keeping that heart fixed on Jesus Christ. It has end time significance, but it is not only end time in its scope.

"Looking" gets a little more specific. When we do look to the future and we do "see" in our mind's eye that something or someone is coming, exactly what is it we are looking for?

The critics of post-trib complain that people who believe in Matthew and Paul's order of events are not looking for Christ, but looking for antichrist; the Bible, they imply, demands that we look for Christ!

So let's take a look at looking.

Jesus says to "Look up" at a certain point in history. We talked about that verse above, Luke 21:28. When should we physically look up? We should look up when we see "these things" begin to take place. What things? The things He talked about in the Olivet Discourse: The unprecedented Tribulation, the signs in the sun, moon, and stars, the actual coming of Jesus to earth.

Definitely we'll be looking for Jesus at that moment. No one contests that!

But what about before that final moment?

Paul, Peter, and the writer of Hebrews give us clues. Let's look at Peter first.

II Peter 3:10-14. He starts by saying the day of the Lord will come as a thief. We'll talk about the "thief" context in Paul's writings. But significant here is that Peter is clearly talking about Jesus' coming to earth, and the destruction that will accompany that return. No one sees a pre-tribulation rapture in this particular passage.

Placed alongside of the account of Jesus in Matthew 24, we conclude that this coming follows the reign of antichrist. Again, antichrist has already come when Peter's "coming" is cited. When he speaks of the "day of God" he is talking about the return.

But in verse 12, he simply says that we should be "looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God..."

Do you get the point I am making? Though antichrist will come first, and great trouble and destruction, and Peter would not deny that, Peter is looking for Jesus.

Following is a great revelation for some, but let me try it out: *It is possible to be looking for two things at the same time!*

Peter is here looking for a series of catastrophic events to occur at one point in the last days. But it doesn't take away his focus. Nor does it diminish his zeal, or "lull" him to sleep to know that Jesus comes at the end of a series of events!

On the contrary, note his words: what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness!

Judgment is coming! Trouble is coming! Wrapped up in all of this is the work of the antichrist! Get holy, people of God!

Seems to me that the persons who preach that we escape all these difficulties are the ones being lulled to lala land.

What did Peter "look for" and what did he tell his people to "look for"? Verse 14: "Therefore beloved, since you look for *these things*, be diligent..."

The writer of Hebrews in 9:28 states that Jesus died for our sins the first time He was here, and that He will appear a second time to those who are eagerly looking for Him.

Second time. I see no third time mentioned. Those who have concocted the pre-tribulation doctrine say they speak of two phases of the second coming, not a third coming. Dubious way of handling Scripture, in my opinion.

We are told by them that the people called the church will be eagerly awaiting for Jesus at the "rapture", but what of those so-called (by the creators of the doctrine) "Tribulation" saints, the ones who do get it together during that seven years? Will they not be eagerly looking for Him? Will they be saved? Are they not church if they are saints? Many unanswerable questions.

I like the simplicity of the math here: He came *once*. We are looking for Him to come *twice*. For these multiplied centuries, this Hebrews writer, and the historic church, called this second coming, well, *the second coming*. And it's *after* antichrist, who comes first.

The two passages where Paul says we are looking for Jesus must be called "neutral" on the subject. In the light of the passages I have just quoted, they do not change the order of events. But I am sure that those who believe Jesus comes to rescue us from the Tribulation, will see in these verses

something different. But as I say, nothing definitive is said here about the subject at hand.

Here are his words:

Philippians 3:20. "For our citizenship is in Heaven, from which also we eagerly await (look for) a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ."

Titus 2:13. "[we are] looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus."

Looking for Jesus. Looking for our blessed hope. Does that mean that nothing else will come first, that we can expect nothing to lead up to the event? We've already seen in Peter that we can indeed expect other things. Let's look closer at the last season of time.

6. WHAT MUST COME BEFORE CHRIST?

From this point on, I am assuming that Paul spoke the truth when he gave the fact of II Thessalonians 2. And that Peter also spoke the truth when he told his people to look for Jesus, though many things were coming first.

Assuming there is no secret rapture, since that rapture is even a secret to Scripture, we must brace ourselves to be looking for other things first.

Imagine for a moment that you are a retiree to be, and you are in your final year. Oh what a difficult year that is. Every day strains by on leaden feet. And there is paperwork. There are arrangements to make. Costs to count. A certain amount of apprehension.

But all this is overshadowed and pushed out of the way by the great moment-to-be. One day you will walk out of that office, that factory, that building of whatever shape or fashion, and you will leave it all behind. You will be free!

See how that works? You are looking for the retirement. That is your hope. But you know just as certainly that other things must come first. You can deal with both truths at the same time.

Or you are a runner. You see the goal line, and it draws you on. But there is sweat and pain and courage that you must inhabit until you cross that line. Your eye is fixed on the goal, your body is still in the turmoil of the race.

These are not the best examples, but they give us a flavor of the Scriptural idea of watching and looking. Part of our watching has led us to the Scriptures, to dig deeper than

before, and we have found the passages I have been sharing that indicate things must come first.

Does this take our eyes off Jesus? Does this lull us to sleep? No the race continues. The last year of the job still calls us to report to duty every day. But we know that soon it will be all over. If the events mentioned in the texts do not happen in our lifetime we know that at the very least death will summon us to the place where we shall behold Him. Our eyes are on Jesus the whole time. the ultimate watching is the watching of his face.

Folks, we can walk and chew gum at the same time. We can behold two mountains, one higher and one lesser, at the same time. We can count to 5 on our way to counting to 10!

Jesus will return!

But the book of Revelation is clear that a whole host of events come first. Why, the entire book of Revelation comes before Jesus does!

Chapters 1-3 come before Jesus does. That is, all of church history. Those seven chapters do not represent seven church ages, by the way. How do I know? The Bible doesn't tell me so, that's how! The Bible simply tells me the condition of seven churches, and as I view church history and look at the condition of the churches today, lo and behold! those seven churches match every imaginable church situation: worldliness, deadness, false teachers, persecution, overcoming...

Chapter 4 is not the rapture, dear sheep of God. I refer to you as sheep now, because just as the sheep who is writing these words to you, I know that you are led astray pretty easily. Someone stands before you and tells you that because John is caught up in chapter 4, therefore the church is caught up too.

Oh, brilliant!

And that same person will then tell you that the church is not found in the Book of revelation after that. What he should have said is that the word "church" is not there, but oh! the church is all over that book.

I cover this ground in *Caught Up But When* but here let me just say how Annoying, with a capital "A", it is to see otherwise solid Bible teachers pass on this poison to God's people.

One thing we do see in chapters 4 and following is a certain time frame, which can be translated simply as three and one half years. This is the Tribulation period foretold by Daniel and others. World chaos and upheaval. Death. Famine. Wars like never before.

All of this before Jesus. Well, look at Matthew 24! When Jesus was asked when he would come He too began listing things that would happen, then stopped and said, "but all these things are merely the beginning of sorrows."

These are not the signs of His coming. Even though some well-meaning scholar wrote that title on the top of Matthew 24 in my Bible, and he probably wrote a book by that name too.

No, the signs of His coming are the preaching of the Gospel in the whole world (has that happened?) and the abomination of desolation (has that happened?).

The Book of Revelation talks of the rise and fall of Babylon before His coming. Has that happened?

It talks of a beast rising from the sea. It talks of a resurrected ruler becoming King over all the earth. It talks of a false prophet at his side. It talks of 2 Elijah-like prophets who

will miraculously come from Heaven, be killed, resurrected and brought back to Heaven. Has any of that happened?

Finally it talks of the heavens being opened, and the rider on the white horse, and the armies around Him - newly raptured- and the supper of flesh given to the animals of the earth as a major slaughter takes place.

That is the coming of Jesus, the only one predicted in Scripture, and it is nearly at the end of the Book.

Folks, let's not be deceived. Now, all of these things can happen in a relatively short time, but it does not appear that any of them have happened yet! Keep your eyes on Jesus, the One who most definitely will come! But let's read the Manual. Let's not get caught up in end-time deception portrayed in movie and song. God's Word cannot change!

7. ELIJAH IS COMING FIRST

Oh my. Dare we muddy the water even more? Or perhaps this will serve to prove what I have taken the time to share with you: many events precede the actual physical return of Jesus.

Elijah is coming again, too.

Let's carefully examine the Biblical record. It was a question on the mind of the disciples that starts this study. See Matthew 17: 11-12 and/or Mark 9:12-13.

Matthew and Mark tell identical episodes, with one significant difference. The Greek in Mark supplies a word that Jesus said, *proton*, that Matthew does not mention. It is the Greek word for "first." Just so you know. It's in there. Nearly every translation uses that word in the Mark account. Jesus says that Elijah comes first.

The setting. Jesus and his closest men have just witnessed the transforming power of God on His Son. Also witnessing the event were the Prophets Moses and Elijah.

Seeing all this dazzling manifestation, questions came. This one in particular. Master, we've been taught that Elijah will come first. But here you are, and Elijah has not come. So are you the Messiah foretold in Scripture?

I have added my explanation of their question to the actual words. They wanted to be sure. Their lives were on the line.

Jesus' assurance is two-fold. Yes, He says, Elijah will come first. And he has already come, at least in one sense.

Urgent that we see both portions of Jesus' answer, or the passage gets lost in hopeless confusion. There are two comings

of Elijah spelled out by Jesus. One of them had manifested, after a sort, in the person of John the Baptist.

It is Luke who supplies the information, via an angel (1:17), that John will come in the spirit and power of Elijah, to do what Malachi said he would do, (Malachi 4:6), turn the hearts of the people toward God so as to prepare the way for Jesus' teaching ministry in Galilee and surroundings.

So we know that in Jesus' mind, "Elijah" had already come. The people had been prepared. When it was time for him to move on, in John the Baptist that is, he quietly exited the stage, and Jesus took His place.

But wait. Before we let him walk out, hear his words to the seekers at the beginning of his powerful ministry. They wanted to know who he was, and they rattled off a list of possibilities to him for affirmation or denial. One candidate on their list was Elijah! Are you Elijah? they said.

Denial. Clear denial. He knew he was John, a man called to prepare the way for this first coming of Jesus, a voice for sure, even a fulfillment of a prophecy, but not Elijah!

Contradiction here? Not at all. He was like Elijah, in many respects. He fulfilled the coming of Elijah in a spiritual way. But we all know that he was not the man Elijah.

Yet that Elijah still lives and needs to be dealt with. if we stop here, we don't get the fullness of what Jesus was saying.

Jesus said first, remember, "*Elijah does come first* and restore all things." Some versions, doing some interpreting, read "will come first." Meaning there is still a coming out there.

That further explanation dovetails with other things we know about Old Testament prophecy and the Book of Revelation. And Elijah, who waits in Heaven as I write.

Malachi saw the coming of this great prophet before the "great and terrible day of the Lord." Well, it was a great day when Jesus came, but none could characterize it as "terrible." That is, it was not earth-shattering, accompanied by judgment and the very wrath of God, as the final day will be.

Yes, such a day is coming. The prophets are clear on that point. But Jesus' first advent did not trigger the judgment. Yes, there was a sense that an Elijah figure had come, and we must listen to the way the Son of God interprets this verse.

But if Jesus is coming again, and He is, and on that day there will be judgment, and there will be, it seems proper also to say that Elijah, this time the actual man Elijah, will return before Him, to restore His own people to where they ought to be.

So far I appeal to logic, not clear revelation. But there is clear revelation too!

I was fascinated as I did the research for this treatise to run across the fact that the two doors to the inner sanctuary of the Temple were made of pure olive wood (I Kings 6:31-32). To get to the Holy of Holies, you passed by two olive trees.

What is so fascinating about that?

To answer that question I take you first to Zechariah 4. The prophet is having a vision of a portion of the Temple, it seems, and he is shown a golden lamp-stand accompanied by two olive

trees. When he asks about the olive trees he is told that they are two "anointed ones" standing by the Lord.

And there it ends in Zechariah. You see two trees, which are called two beings, and that is all you know.

Until.

Until another prophet comes to the fore, a man we also call an apostle, the great Revelator John.

Revelation 11. Yet another Temple scene. Three and one half years are measured out for earth's inhabitants, the times of the Gentiles, nations that will trample the Holy City. But concurrent with them, two witnesses, called also by John the two "olive trees" that stand before the Lord, a clear reference to the prophecy of Zechariah.

Lest anyone try to "spiritualize" or generalize the text, we are made sure that these two beings are not angels, nor are they groups of men or organizations. *Two men.*

They prophesy for three and one half years, while antichrist is waging his campaign against all things holy.

They are at first unstoppable. They have supernatural protection flowing from within them outward to anyone who tries to harm them. Shades of Elijah already. Read the stories of the men he consumed by fire.

They can keep rain from falling. As did Elijah.

Then they will be killed by a power far greater than Ahab and Jezebel, and with no ravens and angels to deliver them.

Their dead bodies will simply be left in the streets of Jerusalem.

They will be viewed on worldwide media, and each view will trigger jubilation and parties. Finally the message of righteousness is finished.

But in 3 plus days they are resurrected like their Lord and called up to Heaven. While the world watches.

If we say correctly that these witnesses are men, then which men? Zechariah saw them. They were living then, but in heavenly realms. They had lived before, but had not died. It is appointed unto man to die, though, and so they must come to earth to keep that appointment.

Certainly Elijah must be one of them. Carried up into the heavens while Elisha watches, he never dies. Enoch also is a candidate, though some want to put Moses in the second spot.

But for sure, Elijah comes first.

8. CONCLUSION

So stand with me on the low plains of Earth and look up to yonder hills, from whence comes our Help, our Lord, our returning King. Can you see the distant hill, the hill of His return?

Can you also see a lesser hill in the foreground of your vision, a man pretending to be that Savior and that King? No need to focus on it. No need to be discouraged by it. Definitely no desire to sleep through it. Our salvation is, then, nearer than any time in history.

It is really acceptable to see both hills at the same time, as did Peter and Paul. Jesus saw them too and spoke of them in Matthew 24.

Antichrist truly comes first, concurrent with Elijah the prophet and his companion. There is no reason to slacken our zeal because of this. God's true people have been zealous for the Lord of hosts for thousands of years, knowing He might not come for a thousand more.

Zeal is based on the daily abiding with Jesus in the Secret Place. It has nothing to do with the calendar. Be encouraged with this knowledge when the skies begin to cloud and the world changes into a dark and evil place. Our hope is in Him, wherever we are in history.