

HOW TO SURVIVE ARMAGEDDON

By Paul Penno Jr.

April 6, 2011

God did not break off His communication with planet Earth after the New Testament was written nearly 2,000 years ago. Jesus has not gone off on a vacation trip, leaving us to wallow in despair. Today people are literally making themselves sick with worry, just as the Bible predicted. “Men will faint from terror, appreciative of what is coming on the world.” Luke 21:26, NIV. The book of Revelation shows how unnecessary this anxiety is. It shows us a solid reason for hope, revealing how Heaven’s constant communication with humanity illuminates otherwise dark corridors of history.

Revelation does more. It opens up a cosmic view—the eternal significance of world history, past, current, and future. It is a profound docu-drama that depicts in a few words an understanding of world truth more profound than anything we could gain from a whole shelf of uninspired books.

The climax of Revelation focuses on great troubles that will come upon the earth as we approach the end of time. Every world institution that we have thought secure will prove to be vanity. World powers that we have assumed to be benign will become destructive of true human happiness. “The cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath. Then every island fled away, and the mountains were not found.” Revelation 16:19, 20.

But God’s wrath is not a tit-for-tat retaliation against mankind. God is too big and too wise for that. The future time of trouble is simply the natural result of man insisting on his own way. God has given us freedom of choice, and “all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way.” Isaiah 53:6. Man’s final rebellion is symbolized in Revelation by the battle of Armageddon when the nations “will give their power and authority to the beast. These will make war with the Lamb.” Revelation 17:13, 14. *They* start the war, not He.

Preparing for Armageddon. The final fruition of rejecting God’s grace is the battle of Armageddon. At last all pretense will be laid aside, and man’s hatred of God will come out into the open. See Romans 8:7. But how can mankind’s puny war against God bother Him? He is too big to mind man’s attack, except for the one thing that will arouse His wrath: the wicked take out their hatred against Him by taking it out on His people.

How would you react as a parent if you saw some hoodlums beating up your innocent child, trying to kill him? Every cell in your body would be shot through with adrenalin as you rushed in righteous wrath to the defense of your child. This gives us some insight into God’s final wrath against sin. It is not selfish.

On the cross, Christ freely forgave those who murdered Him. And He has kept silent for millenniums while tyrants and persecutors have tortured and killed His followers by the millions, because there was always the hope that humanity

would learn to do better. He would give the world every chance. But humanity has misinterpreted His mysterious silence.

When the world attempts to crucify the Lord again in the person of His saints, that battle will be the final refusal of His grace, a deliberate attempt to reenact Calvary on a global scale. After this final choice, there remains no hope for reclaiming these rebellious ones. God's wrath will be a withdrawing of His mercy, leaving the world to itself at last. Never before, except in the Flood of Noah's day, has God done that.

Few realize how actively God's Spirit works to restrain evil in the world and to counteract men's murderous designs. Thank God that at least part of the time guards discover the bombs before they explode in airliners and that police are able to catch some of the criminals that exist almost everywhere!

Revelation discloses what goes on behind the scenes. "I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth [the final tornado of unrestrained human hatred], that the wind should not blow on the earth." Revelation 7:1. George F. Will has said that 20 percent of the drivers on the freeway "have alcohol in their systems and upward of 10 percent are seriously impaired by it." And how many are on drugs? Thank God every time you get home safely; those four angels holding the winds helped you. Thank Him also that we haven't had a more serious nuclear disaster and that scheming terrorists have been foiled as often as they have.

Those angels are increasingly having to strain themselves to hold back the hurricane of wild human passion. But God has commanded them to hang on until the gospel of His grace can accomplish its purpose in the world.

But the focal point of the book of Revelation is not the terrible time of trouble that is to come upon the whole world. God has better news for us than that. "Another angel . . . cried with a loud voice to the four angels . . . , saying, 'Do not harm the earth . . . till we have sealed the servants of our God.'" Verses 2, 3.

The focal point of Revelation is the last-day proclamation of a message of grace. God will protect His children in the battle of Armageddon when their enemies attack them. But for now, the Good Shepherd is seeking out every lost sheep He can find, including you. See John 10:16.

A message that demonstrates God's love. This fantastic work of grace is accomplished by a message of good news. It is called "the everlasting gospel," so it isn't a new invention, but it is given in a modern setting appropriate to our last-day needs and in language people today can understand. It is presented as a message given by three angels flying in the heavens.

"I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—saying with a loud voice, 'Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made

heaven and earth, the sea and spring of water.”
Revelation 14:6, 7.

The picture, although in symbols, is clear. The angel symbolizes a message from God. We see here a worldwide proclamation of pure, unadulterated gospel truth. When we read in Revelation 14:6-9 of three angels “flying in the midst of heaven” (verse 6), we shouldn’t expect someday to see literal angels flying above the treetops. They symbolize a worldwide proclamation of God’s everlasting gospel in the last days. Revelation pictures *angels* proclaiming the good news, but it may come to you through the words of a living preacher, by a radio or TV sermon, in a tract that someone hands you, or even through the pages of a magazine! However it comes, don’t neglect to listen!

The message is “the everlasting gospel,” so it is a rediscovery of Bible truths long lost sight of. It recovers the solution to all of mankind’s deepest psychological and spiritual needs—the conquest of inner insecurity. Thus it embodies deliverance from anything that enslaves or distorts the soul.

This announcement of grace is called “the everlasting gospel” (verse 6), so it is not a new message. But it must contain a further development of truth for these last days, since it comes as a special message to mankind at that time.

Although sin has abounded as never before in world history, we find in the messages of these three angels that grace has also “abounded much more, so that as sin hath reigned in death, even so grace might reign . . . to eternal life.” Romans 5:20,

21. Alienation from God, the Bible indicates, is the root of all mankind’s psychological and spiritual ills.

Likewise, this last-day gospel contains all the spiritual vitamins and nutrients that the human soul needs to be healed from sin. It’s *good news* because it features what God has done and is doing for us. It melts stony hearts and changes rebellious ones; it produces a magnificent motivation based on appreciation of Christ’s love revealed at the cross.

The first angel’s message achieves a phenomenal worldwide impact. Every “nation, tribe, tongue, and people” hear it. That was a courageous prediction to make some 2,000 years ago.

The message proclaims the importance of remembering God’s creative activity. “Worship Him who made heaven and earth.” Verse 7. Our world has gotten itself into such a tragic state because of a series of false values initiated by abandoning God’s original seventh-day Sabbath—a day designed to commemorate the creation of our world in six days by a personal Creator. Evolution, the idea that the world came about through random natural events, banishes God both as Creator and as Redeemer. It idolizes humanity. And theistic evolution—the attempt to combine God and evolutionary processes—is of no practical help. Nineteenth-century Germany was the home of biblical higher criticism, in which philosophers, theologians, and scientists tried to marry Christianity and evolution. Their influence did little to stem the rising tide of Nazism.

The Nazi horror demonstrates the depravity to which human nature can sink when an intelligent, highly cultured nation accepts a philosophy of survival of the fittest through natural selection. Both Nazism and Marxism are permeated with the idea that the biblical account of Creation by a personal God is untrue.

The Bible declares that God made the seventh-day Sabbath for a reason far greater than mere physical rest. If social fellowship and rest were the main benefits of the Sabbath, any day would be as good as another. But God designed the seventh day to be an essential “vitamin” in our spiritual diet that would preserve meaningful fellowship with Him as Creator and Redeemer.

“In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it” (Exodus 20:11, KJV). Later, He summed up His purpose in the Sabbath: “I made the keeping of the Sabbath a sign of the agreement between us, to remind them that I, the Lord, make them holy” (Ezekiel 20:12, TEV). The Sabbath cannot be restricted to the Jewish people alone. It came with the creation of the world; it preceded Israel.

The weekly cycle points to the Sabbath and Creation. No philosopher or historian has ever been able to plausibly explain the origin of the seven-day week except that it stems directly from the original week of Creation. The Arabs, Chinese, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, even the Saxons, all have followed a week of seven days. This cycle has

never been lost from Creation to the present. God gave the seventh-day Sabbath to the entire world to help us keep in mind His creative and redemptive power in our lives. If the world had not lost sight of the Sabbath and what it stands for, the evils of Nazism, Marxism, materialism, and racism could never have taken root. Sabbath by Sabbath, the world has needed to be reminded: “Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing” (Isaiah 40:26).

The scandal is that these horrors have developed in professedly Christian societies. Many Muslims, for example, assume that there is something sinister in Christianity itself that spawns such godlessness. But, according to the Bible, it isn't Christianity that is responsible, but a falling away from God that professes to be Christian but is, in fact, a counterfeit. It is impossible to understand the significance of the debate regarding a day of worship without understanding what God has disclosed about this counterfeit to real Christianity.

The angel's call to “fear God and give glory to Him” (verse 7) is not a call to crawl on our stomachs like a cowering slave before a tyrannical master. To “fear” God means to “reverence” Him, to have a humble appreciation of His true character of love and righteousness. God does not want us to shake with terror before Him, but to shiver with the delightful thrill of appreciating His glorious character

of love that led the Son of God to die for us on a cross.

Nor is God a selfish potentate who revels in the flattery of fawning admirers. To “give glory to Him” means to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in demonstrating His love to the world, to pass on the sweet message, “Be reconciled to God.” 2 Corinthians 5:20. God’s greatest joy is seeing alienated, unhappy, lost people find the sunshine of a healing reconciliation with Him. This is His glory—saving lost people. And we can give Him glory by cooperating with Him in the work of reconciliation.

God does not want anyone to serve Him in terror of being condemned in the judgment. The “hour of His judgment” that the first angel announces is not the hour when He condemns the world, for “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” John 3:17. If anyone is condemned at last, it won’t be the Father who condemns him, for Jesus said, “The Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son.” John 5:22. And furthermore, Jesus says that neither will He condemn us. “If anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.” John 12:47.

Those who finally reject God’s grace will hear no scathing denunciation from either the Father or the Son. They will hear only silence from God and the voice of their own accusing conscience. “He who rejects Me, and does not receive my words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.” Verse 48. To hear

God’s silence while the conscience roars in one’s ears will be agony unspeakable. The only ones whom Christ will judge will be those whom He vindicates. “I will confess his name,” Jesus says, “before My Father.” Revelation 3:5.

So the first angel’s call to believe God’s “everlasting gospel” in the context of “the hour of His judgment” is really a message assuring us of vindication in the judgment in the judgment because God has accepted us, forgiven our sins, and cleansed our hearts.

The great second advent movement. This first angel, together with the two that follow, proclaims an arresting message that gathers up all the revealed truth that God has been communicating for thousands of years and demands at last a complete response. No one can sit on the fence after hearing and understanding this last-day message in its fullness. Everyone who hears will have to choose to believe and reject. Everyone will line up on one side or the other for the final battle of Armageddon.

Has the world heard this message? Yes, at least partially. As the Dark Ages came to a close, a sudden awakening took place among earnest followers of Jesus in many lands. It was like birds awakening at dawn—one moment there is nothing but the darkness, and a few moments later the forest is alive with music.

A renewal of apostolic devotion. These special messages first began to be understood when a multitude of earnest Christians from various denominations awakened from spiritual slumber

during the great second advent movement of the 1830s and 40s. These Christians believed that when the prophet Daniel spoke of a cleansing of the sanctuary to take place at the close of 2,300 days (or years), he meant the literal return of Jesus, who would cleanse this earth by fire. A century before radio or television, these zealous believers in the Bible succeeded in making more of an impact on their world's consciousness than we Christians today are making on ours.

The thing that produced this impact was a rare and happy coming together of two streams of previously unappreciated Scripture truth: (1) the discovery that Bible prophecy pinpoints the events of the last days, and (2) a fervent appreciation of the gospel as the means of realizing practical godliness in the life. This combination produced a river of truth and a spiritual motivation that proved irresistible to hearts that loved the gospel. Members of many denominations recognized in the preaching of this message the voice of the True Shepherd and gladly responded. It seemed to thousands that the time had come to get ready for Jesus' return.

No sacrifice seemed too difficult. A phenomenal devotion fueled the movement. Believers sold their material possessions and used the funds to preach the glad tidings that Jesus was coming soon. It was no craven fear that motivated them. The thought of His coming was precious, and the movement seemed a repetition of the devotion displayed by the first-century Christians.

Yet strangely, many of the leaders of the established churches reacted negatively to the

gracious message. Did the work of the Holy Spirit penetrate too deeply in producing revival and reformation? Was a complete heart devotion to Christ too radical for the popular churches to accept? Apparently so, for pastors, bishops, and church boards began disfellowshipping earnest church members whose only fault was that they had accepted this call to revival which they believed had sounded from heaven. These "Adventists," as they became known, soon found themselves thrust out of their own beloved church homes.

They were wrong, of course, in their head-knowledge. The end of the 2,300-day prophecy did not mean the literal return of Jesus as they supposed. The Lord did not appear in 1844 as they had come to expect. Naturally, they were bitterly disappointed.

They had not studied their Bibles deeply enough to discover that the sanctuary to be cleansed was not this earth, and therefore the predicted event could not be the return of their Lord. They had relied on the popular view that the sanctuary meant this earth and that its cleansing must be accomplished by the fires of the last day. They learned the hard way not to trust any tradition, but to validate every belief by solid evidence from the Bible.

Later, they would discover in Scripture a chain of truth largely unexplored—the Bible brings to view a sanctuary in heaven where Christ serves as our great High Priest to fulfill the annual Day of Atonement imagery. The close of Daniel's 2,300-day prophecy heralded the commencement of this

event—the cosmic Day of Atonement, Day of Judgment—not His return to earth.

But even if they were wrong in head-knowledge, their heart experience was right. Their unrestricted devotion to Christ was a modern demonstration of the same devotion that compelled Mary Magdalene to sacrifice everything for expensive perfume to anoint Christ. But true to form, just as the disciples scorned her heart-devotion, so the religious leaders of the popular churches in 1844 scorned the heart-devotion inspired by the first angel's message.

A reenactment of the Bethlehem story. Seldom have we humans readily discerned God's mysterious movings on earth. Where was the Son of God born when "the fullness of the time had come" for the long awaited Messiah? Galatians 4:4. In the last place the great men of earth would think to look—in a barn with cows, chickens, and goats. And what was the hour of His greatest glory? The precise opposite of what "the rulers of this age" would expect. The hour of His greatest glory was the hour of His humiliation as He died on the Cross. It almost seems that God has an outsized sense of humor; we have to watch out, or He will take us by surprise.

So it was in the advent movement. The world and the churches dismissed this loving devotion to Jesus as mere fanaticism. "Christ coming soon? The world coming to an end in our time? No way! The world is getting better and better, and we are wise enough and good enough to create a thousand years of peace and prosperity on earth."

So said the religious leaders of the 1840s as they trampled underfoot a call for repentance.

But they were wrong! Their dream of a thousand years of peace on earth has turned into a near nightmare of terror.

Adventists in 1844, those who came out of all the churches of that day to unite on their love for Jesus and their expectation of His soon coming, gave birth, in turn, to Seventh-day Adventists. This group was born in an experience of total heart response to Christ. If "love [*agape*] is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10), then the 1844 Adventists were the forerunners of those today whom Revelation 14:12 identifies as the fruitage of the three angels' messages: "Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."

The great disappointment of 1844 when Christ did not come as expected, was an open test of the depth of that "faith working through love [*agape*]." Galatians 5:6. Opponents of the movement, then and now, ridiculed the love and faith which made the disappointment so painful. Those who love this present world heave a sigh of relief when they think Christ is not coming soon. But genuine love is always disappointed when the loved one does not appear. Although the Advent believers were factually incorrect in their expectation, the reality of their love was shown in the nature of their disappointment and its intensity. The time had come for the world to see a demonstration of that kind of love for Christ on the part of His followers.

The disciples were similarly disappointed when their Lord was crucified. Like the Adventists in 1844, the disciples had not studied deeply enough in the Bible available to them. They had superficially accepted the contemporary Jewish tradition of a Messiah who would become a temporal prince and reign in materialistic glory. But the depth of their agonizing disappointment at the cross demonstrated the depth of their sincere love and devotion to the Lord.