

THE PREPARATION FOR CHRIST'S COMING

By Paul Penno Jr.
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On the morning of September 11th, 2001, many people in the United States were saying "Peace and Safety! Nothing bad can happen to us! We're the most powerful nation on earth! Our military and our intelligence can handle anything!" And then, under clear blue skies, when we were least expecting it, the terrorists attacked. And before we knew what was going on, the twin towers came down. And the Pentagon was on fire.

It wasn't this way long ago but now almost all Christian churches say they believe in the second coming of Christ, and many believe it is near. Almost all Christian churches are now talking about the second coming of Christ, and the possibility of the imminent end of the world is widely talked about. Yes, it does make good sense to talk about preparing for such an event!

Even the supermarket tabloids scream at you about it. The people living in the mid-West are urged to prepare for tornadoes and most of them decided that made good sense.

But there is one big question that still divides many Christians: do we need a special preparation to be ready for Christ's soon coming? Many say, No; just live a good Christian life day by day so you can be ready if you have to die suddenly—keep your debts paid up, keep your sins confessed every day, keep going to church, and trust the Lord.

That's all that's necessary. If Jesus were to come today, you'd be ready; it's all the same as dying; if you're "ready" and you die in a plane crash, you're OK.

There are many pastors and theologians who tell us that there is no special preparation—just live a good life and do the best you can and you'll be ready either to die or to meet Jesus and be translated when He comes. Can't we apply good sense to preparing for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ?

But a great big question comes up: when Jesus returns, He will come in person, with the glory of the Father. And Hebrews 12:29 says that "our God is a consuming fire." If anyone has sin buried in his/her heart, even sin that he is not aware of, to meet God face to face would be sudden death—which is precisely what happens to the wicked when Jesus returns according to 2 Thess. 1:8, 9: Those "who know not God and that obey not the gospel" will "be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power, when He shall come." He will come with "flaming fire." Jesus says that only "the pure in heart" will be able to "see God" without perishing (Mt. 5:8). Isaiah asks, "Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that . . . stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil . . ." (Isa. 33:14-16; what about the TV we watch so often?). The

context of these questions is “the sinners in Zion,” that is, the church members themselves.

Yes, there is a special preparation needed in order to meet Jesus when He returns, and to be happy in His presence! That special preparation is not a fear-induced frenzy of good works, but a clearer understanding of the gospel of His grace. By grace are we saved, and by grace will God’s people experience translation—through faith.

“What is the difference between getting ready to die and getting ready for the second coming of Christ?” Some would answer, “None!” but commonsense dictates that there HAS to be a difference because the latter are a special group who gain the victory over the “beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name, [and] stand on the sea of glass” and therefore go through the seven last plagues (Rev. 15:1-3). They sing “a new song before the throne, and . . . no man could learn that song” but that special group who are (at last) the “firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb. . . . They are without fault before the throne of God” (14:1-5). Theirs is obviously a special experience, but it is not a “works trip.” They are not “little christs” running around puffed up with special spiritual pride. No, a million times no. Theirs will be a “faith trip,” if you please, a people whose faith has matured, who “grow up” “unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” “henceforth . . . no more children’ (Eph 4:15, 14, 13). “Children” are wonderful, innocent, sweet; but it’s a tragedy never to grow up.

Could it be that the time has finally come when God is getting serious about a people getting ready for the second coming of Christ? The Saviour dares not come while they still have sin buried in their hearts for “our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29), and His coming would therefore be disaster to them. And all the dead must remain prisoners in their graves until the Life-Giver returns, for only the Son of God can resurrect them. Therefore everything depends on a people getting ready for Him to come! The Good News is that the Holy Spirit IS WORKING night and day, seven days a week including our holidays, preparing a people for Christ’s soon coming. Are you letting Him work?

A young man had a \$500 bicycle. And mom wanted him to chain it to the porch outside. And he said to her, “Mom, I don’t think that this is a good idea. No offense, but this is not the safest neighborhood in the world. I’d feel more comfortable if I could keep it in the laundry room.”

And she said, “Aw, you’re just being paranoid. There’s nothing wrong with the people in this neighborhood. It’s your imagination. And besides, there’s no way I’m going to let you keep a bicycle in the laundry room.”

And so he had to keep the bike outside. Three days later, he came home from work. And mom said, “Your bike got stolen last night.” He was ticked! Because he knew deep down that he should have taken the necessary precautions. And he just didn’t do it. He wasn’t prepared for a thief in the night.

Even a child can see that there is something special involved: there is a final exam coming, a great test that Revelation 13 says is “the mark of the beast” that in one final issue will divide the sheep from the goats forever. The “mark of the beast” will involve “great signs and wonders, insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Mt. 24:24). Never in history have God’s people met such a test! Jesus said, “Ye shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake and then shall many be offended and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another” (vss. 9, 10). In other words, many who now profess to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus will then turn traitor and accept the mark of the beast. And Paul sobers us even more when he warns us, “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Peter was cocksure he would never “fall,” but a girl in or barely out of her teens overthrew him.

The Good News is that there is an alternative to the mark of the beast: the seal of God (Rev. 7:1-4). That involves a special work of purification of the heart: “When [Christ] shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure” (1 Jn. 3:2, 3). On this great cosmic Day of Atonement, that precisely is the work of the great High Priest. Don’t stop Him, don’t resist Him. Cooperate with Him!

Jesus promised in Jn. 14:1-3, “I will come again.” And He clearly explained in Mt. 24 that His coming will be personal and literal, and He will resurrect the

dead in Christ.” And 1 Thess. 4:16, 17 tells us that those who will be resurrected are “the dead in Christ” who have chosen to abide in Him. So, the question makes real sense: “What kind of special preparation will those people make who go through the final time of trouble, overcome the mark of the beast, stand on the sea of glass ‘without fault’ (Rev 14:1-5) and actually welcome Christ at His second coming?”

The Bible is full of Good News, but here is where it is finally focused to its greatest brilliance: (1) First comes what appears on the surface to be intense bad news—the Holy Spirit will shine that Light into the darkened chambers of the human heart until every secret, previously unknown sin is mercilessly exposed. God’s people will be painfully aware of its deep existence that they had never before fully realized. Every last vestige of spiritual pride will be laid in the dust. The popular glib, superficial “I’m OK you’re OK” will be shattered by the realization that no one of us is one whit better or more righteous OF OURSELVES, than anybody else in the world. The sin of somebody else will be seen to be OUR sin—but for the grace of Christ. At last, those who believe in Christ will realize what God said through Isaiah long ago, “Their righteousness is of Me” (54:17), not of themselves. And what will be the crowning sin in which they at last realize they share guilt? The crucifixion of Christ. Zechariah 12:10 says “they shall look upon Me whom THEY have pierced.” Each will see himself/herself at the cross! (2) Then comes the Good News: “There shall be a fountain opened” for cleansing that will flow in

unprecedented glory (13:1). Grace will abound “much more,” corresponding to the “much more” conviction of sin that God’s people will experience. The final negative will be matched by the final Positive. A PEOPLE WILL BE READY!

On one of the Andy Griffith episodes, a vagrant comes to town and takes up with Opie. Opie admires him; he looks up to him. The problem however is that the vagrant is a procrastinator. Andy offers him some work around the house so he will no longer be considered a vagrant and loiterer. The job was only to trim the shrubbery, but even this he put off. He preferred to go fishing. His procrastination rubbed off on Opie to the extent that Opie cut school to go fishing with him. His excuse for putting off work: “Tomorrow is the most perfect day to start any job.” Many too put off the preparation for the coming of Christ.

It’s one of the most serious topics of debate in Bible classes: can God’s people do anything to hasten or to delay the second coming of Christ? Probably just asking that question will spark contention among my readers!

The question is so important that we must look at what the Bible actually says: (1) We are not to know “the day or the hour”; not even the angels know, nor does Jesus Himself (Mk. 13:32). (2) But we are to know when it is near (“when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors” (Mt 24:33). (3) He expressly declared that the generation which will see and recognize all those “signs” is not “to pass away, till all these things be fulfilled” (vs. 34). (4) The timing of His coming will

catch everybody by surprise (“Watch therefore, for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come”; “ye know not when the master of the house cometh . . . lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping”; Mt. 24:42, Mk. 13:35, 36). (5) Nowhere does the Bible say that the timing of His coming is irrevocably fixed by the Father in a predestination manner, but the Father in His infinite foreknowledge knows the time. But foreknowledge is not the same as predestination, but still Jesus does not know, He says. (6) In His love and mercy, the Father will not permit the final seven last plagues of Rev 16 to fall until in fairness the people of the world have had an opportunity to hear the message of the gospel: “This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations and then shall the end come” (Mt. 24:14). This would seem strongly to suggest that the timing of the second coming is directly related to the zeal with which that special “gospel of the kingdom” is proclaimed. (7) Twice at least the Bible declares that the time of the second coming is dependent on a process of development in the hearts and lives of His people.

Why have 2000 years of human suffering had to drag by since Christ the Saviour of the world was born? Why do so many people have to go on suffering? At His birth, the angel promised “good tidings of great joy . . . to all people, . . . peace, good will toward men” (Lk. 2:10-14). He would “make wars to cease unto the end of the earth” (Ps. 46:9), and “He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till He hath set judgment in the earth” (Isa. 42:4), and that “the work of righteousness shall be peace; and

the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever” (32:17). Why the long delay?

The popular view taught through most of these 2000 years is that when good people die they go straight to heaven, or at least to purgatory to be purified for heaven—the doctrine of “natural immortality of the soul.” But the Bible teaches (1) that those who die, sleep until the resurrection day (John 11:11). And (2) the resurrection depends on the second coming of Christ, for He alone can raise the dead (John 5:25-29; 1 Thess. 4:16, 17). And (3) when Jesus returns, those who are not ready will not be able to endure the glory of His appearing (2 Thess 1:7-10). And therefore (4) the time of Christ’s second coming depends on His people getting ready, for He would not dare to come if they are not ready (Heb. 12:29). (5) Jesus likens their getting ready to a farmer’s crop growing up and maturing until it is ready for harvest (Mk. 4:26-29). (6) The growing up makes it possible for Him to come the second time to “reap” the “harvest” (Rev. 14:14, 15). (7) But the “crop” cannot become mature until “the latter rain” of the Holy Spirit’s outpouring comes (Joel 2:23, 24). The “former rain” fell at Pentecost at the beginning of the Christian dispensation; but the latter rain will close that dispensation. Therefore (8) nothing can be more important than for the church to seek the blessing of the latter rain (Zech. 10:1). And where is the Good News? (9) The latter rain is a message of “much more abounding grace,” a clearer view of what the Saviour of the world has done for us, a revelation of His love (*agape*) that “constrains” every honest-

hearted soul to live unto Him and not unto self (2 Cor. 5:14, 15), so that (10) this truth can “lighten the earth with glory” (Rev 18:1-4).

“Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. . . . If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:1-3).

Obviously, He doesn’t want us to be afraid of His returning to our troubled earth. Anyone having no fear about His first coming need not be fearful regarding His second coming. For those who believe, it is easy to see how this is the most welcome, exciting Good News. But will it be the same for everyone?

When He went away, two angels assured His disciples, “This same Jesus . . . will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:10, 11). Who was “this same Jesus”? He was a physical person, for after His resurrection He told His disciples, “Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have” (Luke 24:39). He will come as a real Person in a literal, physical body and will interact with real people. “He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, and they also who pierced Him” (Rev. 1:7).¹

¹ This must include the high priest Caiaphas who handed Him over to the Romans to be crucified, whose bones have recently been discovered in an ornate ossuary marked with his name, south of Jerusalem (*Biblical Archaeology Review*, September 1992). Jesus promised Caiaphas that he would actually see Him return in glory (Matt. 26:64). This requires a special resurrection, of which Daniel speaks (12:2).

But “this same Jesus” is not One with a different character. If He was loving and compassionate when He was here, He must be the same when He comes again. But what about those who irrevocably reject Him? His love and compassion must take a different form for them. It would not be love to perpetuate an existence which for them, would only be endless misery.

In a democracy, presidents or prime ministers are elected by the people’s wishes. But at the present time, the vast majority of earth’s inhabitants either 1) don’t know about it, 2) don’t believe it, 3) don’t care about it, or 4) really don’t want Jesus to come back to Earth. That being so, . . . then why should He?

Two compelling reasons make His personal return to this world necessary:

(a) He is the world’s rightful Ruler. He has been temporarily ousted by a *coup d’etat* engineered by an enemy—Satan, who subverted Adam and Eve in his rebellion Adam and Eve in his rebellion (Gen. 3). When Christ first appeared as the world’s Saviour, Satan deceived His own people into rejecting and crucifying Him. But far more than the Jews were involved, for “the kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the LORD and against His Christ” (Acts 4:26). Therefore the rightful Ruler of earth must return, take His rightful position and restore His peaceful and beneficent authority after the *coup* has run its course. The Lord speaks by His ancient prophet,

“Take off the crown; nothing shall remain the same. Exalt the lowly, and abase the exalted. . . . It shall be no longer, until He comes whose right it is, and I will give it [the crown] to Him” (Ezek. 21:27).

Although He came the first time as a meek and lowly One, He comes the second time as “KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS” (Rev. 19:16).

(b) “A time of trouble” will engulf the world (Dan. 12:1). A new and unhappy development on earth will make His intervention necessary—a final, ominous scene in the last act of the cosmic drama of the ages. Those in rebellion against God will issue a terrible and evil decree causing “as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed, . . . and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name” (Rev. 13:15, 16).

In fact, at that fearful time only a few left on earth will not be bent on self-destruction. Christ’s second coming will thus literally be a rescue mission of world proportions. As a nation ousts a tyrannical and cruel usurper and welcomes back its true sovereign, so His loyal subjects will long and even plead for His return. In the end, the only sane and reasonable people left on earth will joyously welcome Christ at His glorious return. The Psalmist represents Him as enthroned upon the praises of His people (Ps. 22:3, NIV).

Throughout history, the vast proportion of the inhabitants of earth have joined with the Great Deceiver in his rebellion against God, yet they have not known what they were doing. The murder of Christ fully disclosed that guilt, but the people did

not realize it. Christ prayed for them, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). This hidden layer of rebellion is something natural to all human hearts: “All the world [has] become guilty before God” (3:19). Not only did some far-off Jews or Romans crucify Him two millennia ago, but “all alike have sinned” (vs. 23, NEB). Today, we are all alike guilty of the pain sin has caused the heart of God, since its inception.

“The carnal mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (8:7). Throughout history the sinful, cruel, selfish nature of Satan has led some human beings to act worse than beasts. Surely in many cases, the conventional mores of society and civilization have kept most of these raw forces of evil passion somewhat in control.

A little thought demonstrates how reasonable is the idea of a “pre-advent judgment.” Jesus says that the people who are privileged to be resurrected in glory when He returns of course will have been “accounted worthy” of that reward in a judgment beforehand (Luke 20:35). Otherwise, how could the angels know whom to call forth in the first resurrection (“blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection,” Rev. 20:6), and whom to allow to sleep through until the dreadful second resurrection (vs. 5)?

Further, there will be two classes still living on earth when Jesus returns—those who are to be translated without tasting death, and those who will be unable to endure the sight of seeing Jesus come

in glory. How will these two groups be distinguished unless there is a pre-advent judgment?

Jesus speaks of it in Luke 21:36: “Watch therefore and pray always that you may be accounted worthy . . . to stand before the Son of Man.” Those solemn words were spoken of today—this very day now dawning. The “accounting” is today’s agenda.

Actually, no one can judge us against our will. This pre-advent judgment is determined by ourselves. God can never force anyone into heaven or hell against his/her own will. He gives us each a new 24-hour day that we may demonstrate to the world and to the universe exactly where we want to be. Your first conscious moments after waking indicate your free choice.

It’s wisdom to remember what the Bible says—each day begins with “evening” (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). Spend your last hour of each day in prayer and contemplation of heavenly reality; then your waking hour will also be “blessed and holy.”

There is an old Peanuts cartoon strip in which Lucy comes up to Charlie Brown and does something that is very unusual for her. She says—“I love you.” But Charlie Brown keeps responding by saying: “No you don’t.” And each time Lucy answers a little bit louder: “Yes I do, I really love you.” But Charlie Brown has been rejected so many times that he keeps saying: “It can’t be true. It can’t be true.” So in the last square, Lucy has reached the limit of her patience and she screams out in a loud voice: “Hey stupid, I love you!”

Maybe you’re here this morning. And you’re having a hard time believing that God loves you.

Maybe you don't want to believe it. Maybe it sounds too good to be true. But God really does love you.