

Preparing for Christ's Return

By Jane Titrud

Before Jesus left this earth to go to the Father, He comforted His disciples by promising them He would return again to receive them unto Himself: *"Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And 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, NASB).

In addition, the Bible says that the Lord is coming to rescue Israel from the Antichrist and the armies that will be gathered together against them in the last days: *"Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as when He fights on the day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south"* (Zechariah 14:3-4). We know this is referring to the return of Christ because, after this, it says He will rule and reign on the earth (Zechariah 14:9-11).

Many people consider these revelations about the future return of Christ as merely describing different aspects of one great event. Thus, they tend to group them together within the same timeframe. Others believe that these revelations describe two separate and distinct returns of Christ that bracket a period of time known as the Great Tribulation Period, a time in which God's wrath will be poured out upon the earth. In this latter scenario, Christ will first come back to deliver His Church from the wrath to come. This is commonly known as the rapture of the Church. Then, a literal Second Coming of Christ to the earth will occur at the end of the Great Tribulation Period.

There are good reasons for considering these two separate and distinct events as opposed to different aspects of but one return. The most significant is that the Bible assigns different and seemingly conflicting characteristics to the return of Christ when it is viewed as merely one event. When the Lord comes for His church, for example, He will meet His people in the air without touching His feet on the earth: *"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord"* (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). By contrast, the Lord will physically stand on the Mount of Olives east of Jerusalem when He comes back to rescue Israel from the armies of the Antichrist (Zechariah 14:4). At this later time He will furthermore come back *with* His saints rather than *for* His saints (see Revelation 19:11-14). Moreover, His return to rescue Israel from complete destruction requires the fulfillment of definite prophecies, whereas the return of Christ for His Church could seemingly happen at any time with no prophecies left to be fulfilled. For this reason, Christ warned His people to be watchful and ready for His coming: *"Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming"* (Matthew 24:40-42).

I believe this distinction is important for Christians to understand because the elements of both surprise and imminence with respect Christ returning for His Church seem to be the very things the Bible uses to encourage Christians to be ready for His return. Jesus, for instance, compared the coming of the Son of Man to the days of Noah: *"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah[...], and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be"* (Matthew 24:36-39). His parable of the Ten Virgins also speaks of the need to be ready: *"Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom...Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the prudent answered, saying, 'No, there will not be enough for us and you*

too[...]' And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut[...]Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour" (Matthew 25:1-13).

But, since everyone who has accepted Christ as his or her personal Savior is said to be "saved," one might then ask why the Bible still speaks of the need to be ready for the Lord's return. Being delivered from the wrath to come is part of the promise of salvation: *"For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing"* (1 Thessalonians 5:9-11). So, how can one be more ready than being saved in the first place? Either one is saved or one is not.

In order to answer, let us first consider whether the warnings in Scripture regarding the Lord's return are for true Christians or only for nominal Christians—those who might *think* they are saved but are not truly serving Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus compared two so-called servants: *"Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But if that evil slave says in his heart, 'My master is not coming for a long time,' and shall begin to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, and shall cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth"* (Matthew 24:45-51). This is an example of a warning that might only seem to pertain to those who were never saved in the first place—those who are not true Believers. The idea then is that such people are not ready to meet the Lord. They need to get saved and cease their hypocrisy. Nevertheless, we are all slaves. Our lives are not our own. We need to be about the Lord's business faithfully until He comes.

Yet, another aspect of being ready for the return of the Lord has to do with the need to pursue sanctification or, in other words, to grow in holiness. It is to this end that we were saved in the first place. *"For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. Consequently, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you"* (1 Thessalonians 4:7-8). *"But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

Failure to pursue sanctification can have dire consequences. Christians are called to *"pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord"* (Hebrews 12:14). Moreover, such a directive is not for unbelievers but only for Believers, for growing in holiness is ultimately a work of the Spirit in the lives of true Believers.

Seeing sanctification as a necessary element in preparation for the return of Christ has nothing to do with promoting salvation by works. Nor is the last generation of Believers before His coming expected to achieve a level of holiness which surpasses that of previous generations. Growing in holiness merely involves submitting to the Holy Spirit more and more as we learn to walk in Christ. Moreover, every generation since the birth of the Church has been expected to submit to the control of the Holy Spirit.

True, no one can add to the perfect and completed work of Jesus Christ to affect the salvation of mankind. As He said on the cross: *"It is finished"* (John 19:30b). For one thing, this means that He paid the price in full for every sin that had been committed up to that point in time and all that ever would be committed in the future. *"Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, waiting from that time onward until HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET"* (Hebrews 10:11-13). He sat down because there was nothing left for Him to do.

But God accomplished something more on the cross besides having Christ pay the price for the sins of mankind. By *"sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not*

walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:3-4). In other words, He provided a way to deal with the principle of *sin* itself—not just *sins*. Jesus’ death on the cross paved the way for the gift of the Holy Spirit and herein makes up God’s provision for victory over the power of sin in the Believer’s life. *“So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God”* (Romans 8:12-14).

By faith, we are new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Yet, we are also told to *“lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lust of deceit”* (Ephesians 4:22) and to *“put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth”* (Ephesians 4:24). This is something each of us can and must do by faith in God’s provision of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, this the only real way of demonstrating God’s complete victory over sin on the cross. What kind of salvation would it be if Christ only paid the penalty for our sins but could do nothing to keep us from sinning in the first place?

Sanctification is a process which involves failures as well as victories. No one can expect sinless perfection in this life. Nevertheless, we are called to pursue holiness: *“Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God”* (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Giving up and becoming complacent about sin basically amounts to saying that the saving power of Christ is inadequate when it comes to deliverance from the indwelling principle of sin. And, in that case, what then do we believe, and wherein is our hope?

The imminent return of Christ should spur us on to walk more and more by the power of the Holy Spirit rather than yielding to the flesh. Herein is the essence of the Lord’s return being a purifying hope, as it says in 1 John 3:2-3. The Believer is merely expected to increasingly exercise faith in the provision of God and thereby walk in victory. *“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him”* (Colossians 2:6)—that is, by faith. *“He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”* (Revelation 3:21-22).