

Basic Training Bible Conference

The Rapture: Our Blessed Hope



*“Looking for the blessed hope and
glorious appearing of our
great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” Tit 2:13*

Northern Virginia Conference

April 26–28, 2013

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Introduction

Every believer in Jesus Christ lives out his or her life according to their chosen inner motivation. This spiritual driving force is the product of a system of values and priorities that are, in turn, built day-by-day on a foundation, whether sound or faulty, that we call attitude. “Attitude is everything” is more than just a rousing slogan for a pep talk to business associates or athletic teams.

What we call “attitude” Jesus called the “eye of the soul.” Depending on the object of our spiritual focus, our life will inevitably conform, for our eternal gain or loss.

“The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good [literally “single”], your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad [literally “evil/harmful”], your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness! Mat 6:22–23

The Bible reveals to us that it is possible to set the “eye” on only one thing at a time.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also ... You cannot serve God and mammon.” Mat 6:21, Mat 6:24b

Our spiritual focus will determine our lifestyle—for good or evil. It is desirable for the child of God to live a Christ-centered life; but it is possible, by the independent exercise of our will, to live a self-centered life. Our focus in life may be temporal, instead of eternal. Therefore, our experience will be carnal rather than spiritual (1Co 3:1). It is arrogance (pride) to live for self; it is humility to live for Christ and others. Whatever way we choose has great ramifications, for ourselves and for others.

“Keep [guard] your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life.” Pro 4:23

“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” 1Pe 5:5 (Pro 3:34)

In the text above from which we get our title, “Our Blessed Hope” (Tit 2:13), Paul is setting before each and every believer “*a blessing and a curse,*” as Moses did to Israel (Deu 11:26). While it is true that the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ for His bride will ultimately result in eternal blessings for all who believe in Him, it is not necessarily true that all believers are “*looking for the blessed hope.*”

Far too many Christians today think the return of the Lord would be an interruption to **their** plans. The love of this world (1Jo 2:15–17) has supplanted the love of Christ (2Co 5:14–15).

Such believers, we are told, will ultimately “*be ashamed before Him at His coming*” (1Jo 2:28). It is in the hope of avoiding this tragedy for each of us, that this study is offered. May we all “[fix our eyes on] *Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith*” (Heb 12:2).

Point: I ask the readers forbearance and understanding in advance. These notes are often written on the road, in the air, along some trail—under many different conditions. I may tend to repeat myself, or make a leap of topic that you find hard to follow. In spite of my excellent editing team, the notes you receive are my simple attempt to include more than I can possibly fit into a given conference. All good that comes from them is due to the grace of God. All mistakes are my own.

Our Blessed Hope

I. The Prophetic Argument (two perspectives)

There are two perspectives of prophecy: the first coming from the Old Testament prophets, and the second coming from those of the New Testament. Whereas the prophets of the old order were given revelation concerning Israel, those of the New Testament (Paul, Peter, and John), were given revelation primarily concerning the Church Age. It is often difficult to synchronize these perspectives. In fact, the Scriptures tell us it was not always an easy task—even for the prophets themselves.

A. The Prophets' Dilemma—1Pe 1:10–12; 2Pe 3:14–16

In 1Pe 1:10–12, Peter (a prophet himself) tells us of the struggle of Old Testament prophets to comprehend their own writings. This was due to the fact that many passages show the first and second coming of their Messiah—the Lord Jesus Christ—as a continuous sequence of events. If we consider such passages as Isa 61:1–3; Jer 33:14–16; Dan 9:24–27; and Zec 9:9–17 (to cite just a few), we see the two great events of His first and second coming without interruption. Thus, the prophets wondered, “What kind or manner of time will this be, in which Messiah can both be rejected and slain, and yet come in glory and victory?”

But it was not only the prophets of old who faced this dilemma. In 2Pe 3:14–16, we have Peter referring to Paul (the greatest of the New Testament prophets) saying, “*In all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.*”

B. Moses Anticipates the Problem—Deu 29:29

Even Moses, author of the first five books of the Old Testament, saw this apparent problem. As he prepared the children of Israel to go into the Promised Land, he warned them of a coming time of national dispersion. This would be due to their widespread apostasy and idolatry. Because of this, they would be scattered into every nation under Heaven, and the land of Israel would become a wasteland (Deu 29:14–28). Yet, still God’s everlasting covenant with them, to bring them into their land and to send their Redeemer, would be fulfilled.

It would be natural for the believer of that time to question how this could be, and how God could both scatter and, at the same time, secure His people. To this question, anticipated by Moses, came the answer:

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” Deu 29:29

In essence, he was declaring that they were accountable for what had been revealed to them. It was not for them to worry about what God had yet to reveal. In this text, Moses declared that the revelation would be kept secret for another (future) age. Paul calls this revelation “*the mystery*” (Eph 1:9–10; Eph 3:1–6). What could not be known to the saints of old has been made known to believers living in this present Church Age.

C. A People Who Are Not A Nation—Deu 32:21

As Moses continues to warn Israel of their future defection from the Lord, he declares that they will provoke God by their idolatry (Deu 32:15–22). Though they were richly favored and blessed by God (the meaning of “*Jeshurun*,” v. 15), yet they would “*provoke Him to jealousy with foreign gods*” (v. 16).

In response, the Lord declares, “*But I will provoke them to jealousy by those who are not a nation; I will move them to anger by a foolish nation*” (Deu 32:21b). According to the Apostle Paul, this prophecy anticipated a new creation—the Church (Rom 11:11–14). From the viewpoint of the Old Testament believer, the Church was a “missing link” in how God would ultimately accomplish His promises to Israel.

D. Did David Give a Hint?—Psa 102:13–22

Moses was not alone in anticipating this new revelation. In Psalm 102, David writes of the coming of the Messiah and of Israel’s future deliverance. Of particular interest is Psa 102:18, where he says, “*This will be written for the generation to come, that a people yet to be created may praise the Lord.*” If we take “*the people who are not a nation*” of Moses and “*a people yet to be created*” of David—and see them as a prophetic reference to the Church—we can begin to resolve some of the problems in the interpretation of biblical prophecy.

E. Jesus Introduces the Solution—Mat 16:18; Joh 14:1–3

When the Lord Jesus entered onto the stage of history, this prophetic dilemma continued to result in confusion. The expectation was that if He were the Messiah, He would immediately drive the Romans into the sea and establish His Messianic kingdom. It was because He did not meet this expectation, that many rejected Him.

He gradually began the process of correcting this confusion when He introduced the concept of “*the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*” (Mat 13:11) in a series of parables. In essence, these parables introduced a concept of the hidden working of God in a world of good and evil, which would ultimately result in His promises to Israel being fulfilled. But before there could be a Messianic kingdom on this earth, He must first allow the “*kingdom of heaven*” to develop.

Finally, the Lord Jesus directly identified those “*who are not a nation*” and the “*people yet to be created.*” In Mat 16:13–20, we have the incident where Jesus asked

the questions “*Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am? ... But who do you say that I am?*” Here Peter boldly declares, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” And in response to this expression of faith, Jesus responds, “*on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades [Hell] shall not prevail against it.*” The “*Rock*” is, of course, Christ Himself, and His “*church*” are those who confess Him in faith as Christ, the Savior. This is made very clear by Peter’s repeated reference to Him as the “*living stone ... cornerstone ... stone ... rock*” in 1Pe 2:4–8. The Church of Jesus Christ is then the “*new creation*” which is built on the secure foundation which God alone has laid—that is His Son Jesus Christ (cf., 1Co 3:11; 2Co 5:17).

F. The Disciples’ Continuing Confusion—Acts 1:6–8

The spiritual transition from the promised kingdom to Israel and the “*kingdom of heaven*” was not easy to make, even for His faithful disciples. After His crucifixion and resurrection, the disciples still asked, “*Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*” (Act 1:6). They had, thus far, failed to grasp the significance of what had been taught, or what was about to come.

I’m sure if we had been in their place, we would have done no better. It was simply too great a shift from all they had been taught to expect—based on the prophetic structure of the Old Testament and their instruction in the synagogues. This spiritual confusion would continue into the new dispensation, ultimately resulting in the Jerusalem Council (Act 15:1–41), where an attempt was made to resolve the seemingly conflicting doctrines of Law versus Grace, of Old Covenant versus New Covenant. At that time, it was Paul—the apostle to the Gentiles—who became the champion of the Church and of the doctrines relating to this “*new creation.*”

G. The Revelation of the “Mystery” Doctrine—Eph 1:1–23, Eph 3:1–21

Because Paul had been specifically chosen by God to become the apostle to the Church, it was to him that God gave a new revelation for a new people and a new age. This body of truth, which we call the “*Mystery Doctrine,*” is directed to those who are “*in Christ.*” In this two-word phrase coined by Paul, we recognize a unique people of a heavenly kingdom.

In Eph 1:7–14, Paul writes of the revelation of “*the mystery of His will*” which was given for “*the dispensation of the fullness of the times*” (this present Church Age), concerning all who are “*in Christ ... in Him.*” This new revelation speaks to a new people (the Church) concerning a new eternal inheritance of “*every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ*” (Eph 1:3).

Then, in Eph 3:1–13, Paul further amplifies the truth concerning “*the dispensation of the grace of God,*” which he says, “*in other ages was not made known to the sons of men.*” This new revelation was primarily directed toward the Gentiles, who would form a new company known as “*the Church.*” This is “*My church*” of which Jesus spoke in Mat 16:18, and which is a spiritual entity separate from, but related to,

Israel. The means of entrance into the Church is by believing the Gospel message “*that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*” (Joh 20:31) and the resulting baptism and sealing of the Holy Spirit (1Co 12:13; Rom 6:1–8; Eph 1:13–14, Eph 4:30).

Conclusion of the Prophetic Argument

Because of failure to recognize the prophetic significance of the revelation of the Mystery Doctrine, many Bible students and scholars continue to confuse Israel and the Church, and to try to force New Testament truth—which applies to the Church—into a framework of God’s working with Israel. The result is a belief that God is done with Israel, and all her promises and provisions have now shifted to the Church. This is a dishonor to both entities, but even more so to God, whose plan has been clearly made known—particularly by Paul—the apostle of the Church Age.

II. The Historical Argument (two entities)

It is absolutely essential to accurate interpretation of God's Word to approach the Bible from a dispensational point of view. This is the only perspective that allows for literal interpretation of the Bible throughout. This approach recognizes a distinction between God's plan for Israel and for the Church, as well as a distinction between Old Testament and New Testament revelation, from the law of Moses to the law of the Spirit (Rom 8:1–4). We, therefore, draw a distinction between the Age of Israel and the Church Age. This Scriptural distinction plays out historically as well.

A. "Other Sheep," Another Fold—Joh 10:16

"And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd." Joh 10:16

In the "good shepherd" passage (Joh 10:11), Jesus speaks of "other sheep ... which are not of this fold." Since He is speaking specifically to the Pharisees (Joh 9:40) and, in general, to all Jews (Joh 10:22–23), it would be safe to assume that He is referring to the Gentiles. The fact that ultimately there will be "one flock and one shepherd" does not erase the distinction between Israel and the Church, but only highlights the fact that ultimately all will share in His eternal kingdom.

In Mat 10:5–6, our Lord made the clear distinction, when He sent out the twelve:

"Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Mindful of God's grace coming to us via Israel, Paul's early ministry was marked by the practice of presenting the Gospel "for the Jew first, and also for the Greek [Gentile]" (Rom 1:16b). Later, toward the end of his ministry and with the continued rejection of the Jews to his message, Paul declared to them:

"Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it." Act 28:28

Does this mean, as some would have us believe, that God's purpose and promises for Israel have failed? Such a thought was most repugnant to Paul, being considered by him as blasphemy against God (Rom 3:1–4, Rom 11:1–2, Rom 11:25–29).

B. A Provocative Prophecy—Deu 32:21

Once again, Moses, the first major prophet of the Old Testament, anticipates the historical outworking of God's redemptive plan and of His purpose for the Church.

*“They [Israel] provoked Him to jealousy with foreign gods ...
But I [God] will provoke them to jealousy by those who
are not a nation.” Deu 32:16a, Deu 32:21b*

Who are these people who are “*not a nation*”? Perhaps they are the same group spoken of by David in the Psalms. Speaking of God’s final victory for Israel, of their re-gathering and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, he writes:

*“This will be written for the generation to come, that a people
yet to be created may praise the Lord.” Psa 102:18*

This was in keeping with many promises that the Gentiles would also be saved (Isa 11:10, Isa 42:1, Isa 42:6; Isa 49:6). How and when this would be accomplished was not declared and, in fact, was probably part of the plan of God that perplexed the prophets (1Pe 1:10–12).

C. The Objective of Provocation—Rom 11:11–16

Not until God revealed it to the Apostle Paul were the “*people*” of whom Moses and David spoke identified. Drawing directly from the words of Moses, Paul declared:

*“To provoke them [Israel] to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles ...
For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles,
I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those
who are my flesh and save some of them.” Rom 11:11b, Rom 11:13–14*

There are many today who would claim that these verses show that the Church has therefore replaced Israel. Why then would Paul say later in the same passage:

*“For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery
[that is, Church-Age revelation] lest you should be wise in your own
opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel, **until** the
fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” Rom 11:25 (emphasis added)*

In fact, Paul’s whole argument in Romans 9–11 is that what God began with Israel, He will surely accomplish. The amazing thing is that he lays out the debt of the Church to Israel (Rom 9:1–5, Rom 11:1–7, Rom 11:17–24), and concludes that as we have received mercy through them, even so at some future point, they will benefit from God’s mercies shown to us (Rom 11:30–31).

D. A Difficult Transition for the Disciples—Act 1:6–8

*“Therefore, when they had come together; they asked Him, saying,
‘Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’” Act 1:6*

“*At this time,*” the disciples expected the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecies. The “*times [and] seasons*” (Act 1:7) of which Jesus speaks refer to ages and dispensations. At that point, how these differed and fit together was not for them to know. They could not understand yet, because Paul had not yet received the revelation of the “*mystery*” (Rom 11:25; Eph 1:7–14; Eph 3:1–13).

Until the truth of the Church Age was made known, our Lord simply gave them a task—a mission statement—for that new age:

“*But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” Act 1:8

Later, after Paul came on the scene and explained the uniqueness of the Church and her mission, he was able to write to the Thessalonians:

“*But concerning the times and seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.*” (1Th 5:1–2)

It is clear that these believers understood what the disciples earlier had not. Since the “*day of the Lord*” has to do with the resumption of God’s plan for Israel (see Zec 14:1–5, more on this later), the Thessalonian saints were clear on the Church Age, and the means of its ending (1Th 4:13–18).

E. A New Era, and a New People—Act 2:1–5, Act 28:25–31

“*Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*” Act 2:21

The Church began on the day of Pentecost, and it began with Jews. Note the clear identification that runs through this section.

“*And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven ... both Jews and proselytes ... men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem ... men of Israel ... let all the house of Israel know ...*” Act 2:5, Act 2:10, Act 2:14, Act 2:22, Act 2:36

Though commanded to go “*to the end[s] of the earth,*” the early Church was quite content to remain Jewish. Thus God provided a solution, in the form of early persecution. With the stoning of Stephen and the rise of Saul of Tarsus as chief enemy of the Church, the purpose of God began in earnest:

“*Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the Word.*” Act 8:4

First Philip, then Peter and John, reach out to Samaria (Act 8:5, Act 8:14). Next, the Ethiopian comes to Christ (Act 8:37). Then Saul is confronted and converted on the Damascus road, and becomes a witness to Christ (Act 9:1–6, Act 9:20–22). Finally, Peter is sent to the house of Cornelius (Act 10:1–48), the Roman centurion.

However, even the other apostles did not yet understand the new nature of the Church, and they attacked Peter for his association with Gentiles (Act 11:1–2). Meanwhile, others were continuing the outward ripples of the spread of the Church (Act 11:19–22). It was at Antioch—the first major Gentile church—that Paul began his apostolic ministry (Act 13:1–3), and it was at the first church council at Jerusalem that Paul began to fight for his new revelations concerning the nature and purpose for the Church (Act 15:1–5; Gal 1–2).

In fact, Paul had to defend the distinctive message which he preached:

“But I make known to you, brethren, that the Gospel which was preached by me is not according to man, for I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Gal 1:11–12

This is what Paul calls “*my gospel*” (Rom 2:16, Rom 16:25). Paul’s message was new, not because salvation had not been previously offered, but because it was divested of its earlier Jewishness and dependence upon the Law (Act 15:1–5; Gal 2:1–21). Through the revelation of the mystery, Paul not only clarified that the Church is not Israel, but that at the end of this age, following the Rapture, God will again gather Israel and finish His work for them (1Th 4:13–5:11).

Conclusion of the Historical Argument

It is clear, as we follow the history of Jesus and the early disciples, down to the calling and ministry of the Apostle Paul, that a “sea change” of great magnitude had taken place. Today, critics of the Bible accuse Paul of “perverting” the original Gospel message, which they would identify as “*love your neighbor as yourself*” (Mat 22:37), or “*the kingdom ... is at hand*” (Mat 3:2)—or some other palatable social gospel.

Paul was able, single-handedly, to bring about a radical shift in focus—away from the law to grace, away from Israel to the Church—because he was gifted, called, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to this end. It is no small boast, when we consider the task he was given, to understand what he meant when he said:

“I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power ... to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery ...” Eph 3:7, Eph 3:9

“To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.” Col 1:29

III. The Contextual Argument (two days)

Both prophecy and history confirm that we live in a unique age and are (for all who believe in Jesus Christ) part of a unique company, called the Church. This Church and Church Age began on the day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2.

The nation of Israel—blinded by fanatical devotion to the Law as a means of salvation—could not recognize her own Savior (Rom 11:25; 2Co 3:14–15). God is now continuing the work of building the Church, the Body of Christ. When that work is completed, the Church will be raptured, and God will finish His work and purpose for the nation of Israel (Rom 11:26–32).

We now must consider an argument from the context of Scripture. In the study of the Bible, it is not only necessary to identify passages which speak of the same thing, but equally essential to identify those things which differ. This is especially important in regard to two critical “days” that affect our perspective regarding our “blessed hope.” That is, the distinction between “*the day of the Lord*” versus “*the day of Christ*.”

A. The Day of the Lord

The day of the Lord is a distinctively Old Testament concept. It originates in the prophecies dealing with God’s final plans for Israel. In every passage where it occurs, it is seen as a time of wrath, judgment, terror, and testing for the children of Israel.

1. The Purpose—Hos 5:15–6:3

*“Then they will seek My face; in their affliction
they will earnestly seek Me.”* Hos 5:15b

The divine purpose in “*the day of the Lord*” is to bring Israel back to Himself in humility and faith. It will take the future Tribulation period, and the tyranny of the Antichrist to do this. It will be the most horrible time in human history, yet it will see Israel redeemed and restored to her land and her rightful place in the plan of God.

*“After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us
up, that we may live in His sight.”* Hos 6:2

While the three days no doubt has prophetic significance relating to the three days Christ’s body lay in the tomb, it likely has greater significance to the nation of Israel. If the two days relates to the roughly two thousand years of Church history, and the third day speaks of the thousand-year kingdom promised (Rev 20:6), then it is clear that “*the fullness of the Gentiles*” (Rom 11:25) is about to be brought in.

2. The Place—Joe 3

“For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the remnant whom the Lord calls.” Joe 2:32b

“Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.” Joe 3:14

That Joel is writing about the day of the Lord is clear from his repeated references to it (Joe 1:15, Joe 2:1, Joe 2:11, Joe 2:31). The focus of *“the day of the Lord”* passages is always Israel in general and Jerusalem in particular.

The *“valley of Jehoshaphat”* (Joe 3:2, Joe 3:12), also called *“the valley of decision”* (Joe 3:14), is the scene of the final climatic victory over the enemies of God and of Israel. It will bring to an end the time of Tribulation, and begin the Millennial Kingdom, where Christ shall rule over the earth from Jerusalem. It is most significant that *“Jehoshaphat”* means *“Jehovah is Judge.”*

“So you shall know that I am the Lord your God, dwelling in Zion My holy mountain. Then Jerusalem shall be holy ...” Joe 3:17

3. The Nature—Zep 1:14–15, Zep 1:18

“The great day of the Lord is near ... a day of wrath ... neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord’s wrath.” Zep 1:14–15, Zep 1:18

This time, or *“day,”* is often designated as the time of the *“wrath.”* It is the outpouring of the wrath of God on all who reject Jesus Christ as Savior. The term *“day of the Lord”* is not a twenty-four hour day, but rather the entire time of the Tribulation (seven years), with some passages even including the Millennial Kingdom in the term. The reason this term is so significant is that Paul twice refers to it (1Th 1:10, 1Th 5:9) as a time to which the Church is not appointed.

Here is Zephaniah’s brief description of the nature of that time:

“That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness ... I will bring distress on all men ...” Zep 1:15, Zep 1:17a

4. The Victory—Mal 4:1–6

“But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings.” Mal 4:2

The “*day of the Lord*” covers the entire Tribulation period, including the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in victory over the armies of the world, in the conclusion of the battle of Armageddon. In fact, some of the Old Testament prophecies include the entire Millennial reign of Christ as part of “*the day of the Lord*.” This would make that “*day*” cover 1,007 years!

But the victory is more than just the defeat of the armies of Antichrist. According to Dan 9:24, this will be a time of particular victory for the nation of Israel. In this verse, there is anticipated a six-fold spiritual outcome bringing the sinfulness of Israel’s unbelief to an end, and entering them, through the trials of their history—including the Tribulation—and bringing them to the righteousness of faith, and the fulfillment of all God’s promises and prophecies concerning them.

B. The Day of the Lord is not for Church-Age Believers—1Th 5:2, 1Th 5:4

“For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night ... but you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.” 1Th 5:2, 1Th 5:4

Earlier, in 1Th 4:13–18, Paul has already explained what he calls in other passages as “*the day of Christ*” (2Th 2:2), which we will cover soon. The key in the above passage is that Paul shifts to another “*Day*,” that is the “*day of the Lord*,” which he clearly declares is not—repeat NOT—related to believers in the Church Age.

This theme runs through the epistle of First Thessalonians, parallel to the theme of the Rapture, which ends each chapter of the book. But in 1Th 1:10, Paul says, we are “*to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.*” Remember that according to Old Testament prophecies, the “*day of the Lord*” is also declared to be the “*day of wrath*.” Again, in 1Th 5:9 he says, “*God did not appoint us to wrath but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” This “*day of wrath*” is further defined in 2Th 1:8–10 and 2Th 2:4–12.

The word “*delivers*” (1Th 1:10) and the word “*salvation*” (1Th 5:9) are the same in the original text, and refer to the Rapture of the Church. This is what Paul calls “*the day of Christ*.”

C. The Day of Christ, the Lord

The day of Christ is for Church-Age believers—those whom Paul declares to be “*in Christ*.” This day we call “*the Rapture*,” and it is this that Paul speaks of as “*our blessed hope*” (Tit 2:13). We will now consider “*the day of Christ*” in contrast to “*the day of the Lord*.”

1. A Day of Blamelessness—1Co 1:7–8

“... Our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The Church-Age believer is imputed with the righteousness of Christ (Rom 4:23–24), and has been forgiven all sins (Col 1:14, Col 2:13). We are truly “*accepted in the Beloved*” (Eph 1:6), and have a standing of “*peace with God*” (Rom 5:1). This blameless standing will follow the ultimate sanctification of the Bema Seat of Christ.

2. A Day of Ultimate Purification—1Co 3:11–15

The “Bema” or the “*judgment seat of Christ*” (2Co 5:9) will be a time when all that is not of God in our lives is burned up, and all that is of His grace will be rewarded (1Co 3:11–15). There are many rewards, including five crowns, which are available to believers. The work of sanctification began at the cross, continued through our lives, and will ultimately be completed. Finally, on this “*day of redemption*” (Eph 4:30), we will stand “*faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy ...*” (Jud 1:24).

3. A Day of Boasting—2Co 1:14

“... we are your boast as you also are ours, in the day of the Lord Jesus.”

The implication here is that when we stand before the Lord, we will boast in those who have contributed to our spiritual lives. Those who have served as teachers, mentors, counselors, and advisors to us will be glorified and honored. As well, those who have instructed, exhorted, and corrected us—to our ultimate glory—will be able to boast in what the grace of God has accomplished in our lives.

4. A Day of Completion—Phi 1:6

“Being confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

Again, sanctification is a process, begun at the cross, through faith in Christ, and not completed until we stand in His presence. This is why Paul sometimes speaks of salvation as a work in progress (Rom 5:9–10). This does not deny that eternal salvation is secure from the moment of faith in Christ. But the work of purification—or sanctification—continues through life. Not until “*the redemption of the purchased possession*” (Eph 1:14), will that work of grace be complete.

5. The Day of Ultimate Salvation—1Co 5:5

“... That his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”

The individual of whom Paul speaks in this passage was guilty of sexual immorality that was both condemned by Moses (Lev 18:7; Deu 27:20), as well as criminal under Roman law. This was considered to be a gross violation of human nature and yet the response in Corinth (known for its accepted immoralities) appears to have been a boast (1Co 5:2), probably of their “gracious” attitude.

However, though Paul commands strict church discipline, amounting to excommunication, which would result in loss of spiritual protection, and the sin unto death (1Jo 5:16), *“the destruction of his flesh”* (1Co 5:5a), yet the great truth of the grace of God and of the security of our salvation is that he would be *“saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”* It is crucial to recognize again that salvation is totally of grace, and one’s works—neither before nor after the point of faith—while affecting one’s eternal reward or loss thereof (1Co 3:10–15), do **not** affect their eternal salvation.

6. A Day of Eternal Reward

“Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that day ...” 2Ti 4:8

“That day” is a reference to the day of the Lord, or of Christ. It includes the Rapture of the Church, and the Bema Seat of Jesus Christ. Every believer will, at that time, see their life from God’s perspective, revealing not only one’s works, but more importantly, *“the secrets of the heart”* (Rom 2:16). As Paul makes clear, works done without the motive of the love of Christ will be rejected (1Co 13:1–3; 2Co 5:14–15). All that is “of the Spirit” and in accordance with the Word will be rewarded by God.

Conclusion of the Contextual Argument

It is clear from all the above references that these two days cannot be one and the same. Further, since Church-Age saints will return with Jesus Christ at the Second Coming (Jud 1:14; Rev 19:19), these events must take place sometime beforehand. The dispensational approach takes Scripture at face value (not denying figures of speech or hyperbole) and recognizes the distinction between Israel and the Church, between the Rapture—which is for the Church—and the Second Coming—which is for Israel.

As a final point, in one context Paul contrasts the two days. In Rom 2:5, he warns the unbeliever that their continuing unbelief is *“treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath.”* This, as we have seen, is a reference to “the day of the Lord.” Then later, he speaks to the Gentile believer concerning *“the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.”* (Rom 2:16). The day of wrath, and the day of Christ, cannot be reconciled as the same day.

IV. The Exegetical Argument (two prospects)—1Th 4:13–18, 1Th 5:1–11

The exegetical argument follows and agrees with the contextual argument. Again, we see the two days set in clear contrast. What is most interesting is what comes out of the specific words used by Paul. Here both the context and the grammar help us to see the “blessedness” of our blessed hope.

A. Rapture Versus Second Coming

“For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night ... but you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.” 1Th 5:2, 1Th 5:4

In 1Th 4:13–18, Paul describes the event we call “the Rapture.” In fact, it is in this text that we get the basis for the word “rapture.” In 1Th 4:17, the phrase “*caught up*” is *harpazo* in the Greek, meaning “to snatch up, to carry away.” This was first translated into Latin by the word *rapio* from *rapere*, meaning “to captivate in rapture.” This event, in which both living and dead saints from the Church Age, those who are “*in Christ*,” would be gathered together to “*meet the Lord in the air*” (1Th 4:16–17 was truly a “*blessed hope*” (Tit 2:13). By the knowledge and assurance of this, believers were intended to “*comfort one another with these words*” (1Th 4:18).

The obvious contrast between this blessed event and “*the day of the Lord*” (1Th 5:1–11) is too great to miss. On that day, instead of “*peace and safety ... sudden destruction comes upon them [unbelievers] ... and they shall not escape.*” In fact, Paul makes it clear that this “*day*” is a part of “*the times and the seasons*” (1Th 5:1), which relates to the dispensation of Israel—not the Church (cf., Act 1:6–7). Although “*the times and ... seasons*” had been revealed to the prophets of the Old Testament, the Church Age was a “mystery,” hidden from their view. It is worth repeating again that no Old Testament prophecy speaks specifically of the Church, and no prophecy in the New Testament concerning the Church refers to Israel!

Now we come to a word that must be examined in more detail. That word is “*sleep*” and occurs in the English language in 1Th 4–5. In 1Th 4:13–15, the word “*asleep ... sleep*” speaks of believers who are “in Christ Jesus” who have died. This is clear since Paul shifts to the term “*the dead in Christ*” in 1Th 4:16. The phrase “*in Christ*” tells us we are dealing only with Church-Age believers, for this term cannot be used of any Old Testament saint, as the baptism of the Holy Spirit did not occur until the day of Pentecost, resulting in a “*new creation*” (2Co 5:17), the Church.

However, in 1Th 5:6 and 1Th 5:10, we find the word “*sleep*” again, and here two apparently contradictory things are said. First, we are told not to “*sleep, as others do*” (1Th 5:6), and secondly, that “*whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him*” (1Th 5:10). Is Paul commanding us not to die? The answer to the dilemma is that in these two sections, he uses two different words in the Greek, having two very different connotations. In the section on the Rapture (1Th 4:13–18), the word used is

koimaomai, meaning “to fall asleep, to rest.” It is a word having nothing but good connotations, as it implies restful slumber. Paul adapted it to speak of the body of the believer, which rests in the grave, even while the spirit is already in Heaven (see 2Co 5:6–8). At the resurrection, the body will “awaken” and body, soul, and spirit will be reunited (1Th 5:23).

However, in the text of 1Th 5:1–11, Paul is warning believers not to be deceived by thinking they would enter the day of the Lord. The same theme runs through 2Th 2:1–12. Since “that day” will not overtake the Church-Age believer (1Th 5:4), we should “*not sleep, as others do*” (1Th 5:6). Here the word is *katheudo*, which always has a negative connotation in Scripture. It implies a lack of awareness, a state of being unconscious, unconcerned with surrounding events and realities. In Eph 5:14, Paul quotes what appears to have been a fragment of an early hymn, based on Isa 60:1:

*“Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ
will give you light.”*

Here, he uses *katheudo* to picture a believer who is spiritually asleep—unconscious of the great and glorious purpose God has for his life. What Paul means by using this term in 1Th 5:6 and 1Th 5:10 is that believers ought not be deceived regarding “the day of the Lord,” nor of our present purpose as the Church—the Body of Christ. The deception that seeks to merge Israel and the Church and, therefore, confuse the “blessed hope” with the Tribulation period, has been at work since the beginning of this age. There were even some who tried to pass off their “*visions and revelations*” (2Co 12:1) as coming from Paul (2Th 2:1–2), of which we will see more later.

While it is possible for believers to be deceived, and therefore to be “asleep” in the negative sense of spiritual unconsciousness, their security in the Body of Christ is assured, for “*God did not appoint us to wrath [i.e., Tribulation] but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep we should live together with Him*” (1Th 5:9–10). This statement demolishes the “partial rapture” view. All who are in Christ will be included in the Rapture of the Church, because our security is based on the death of Jesus Christ for us, and our faith in Him—not on our conduct or performance.

B. Eager Expectation or Fearful Surprise?—1Jo 2:28; 1Co 3:10–15

*“And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears,
we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him
at His coming.”* 1Jo 2:28

Those who are “asleep” in the sense of spiritual carnality and indifference will be ashamed when the Lord returns. The “day of Christ,” the Rapture of the Church and accompanying Bema (or judgment) Seat, will not be joyful for all (cf., 1Co 3:14–15). It is a reflection of our love for Christ and His Word for us to live “*soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age*” (Tit 2:12).

How we live does not affect our eternal destiny, which is secured by the cross of Christ, but it definitely will affect our eternal standing and service. This life is only preparation for greater opportunities of service in the life to come. Faithfulness in the present life equips us for the “reward” of even greater service in His eternal kingdom. Paul reminds us that “each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor” (1Co 3:8), and “let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart” (Gal 6:9).

The “blessed hope” (Tit 2:13) is the prospect of the believer who “loved His appearing” (2Ti 4:8b). Not all believers are eagerly anticipating His return, simply because many are not serious about the will or the Word of God as it relates to their lives.

The two options for every believer is faithfulness now with reward at His coming, or slothfulness now with loss at the Bema Seat (1Co 3:11–15). While there are many who have little concern for rewards at the present time, when the time comes that those rewards are seen with all their glorious attending possibilities, and they are lost, there will be great shame, and many tears.

C. Parallels of Those “Caught Up”—Act 8:39; 2Co 12:2–4; Rev 12:5, with Act 1:11

In the passages cited above, we have three biblical examples of the Rapture of the Church. In each case, the word *harpazo*, translated “caught up” in 1Th 4:17, is used. The first is of Philip who, after leading the Ethiopian eunuch to faith in Christ, was “caught away” and “found at Azotus” preaching God’s Word. One moment he is in the desert of Gaza, the next in a city, continuing his ministry.

Next, we have the case of Paul, speaking of himself in the third person, who describes being “caught up to the third heaven ... caught up into Paradise.” This experience possibly occurred at the time of his stoning by the mob in Lystra (Act 14:19–20), which would match the timeframe of “fourteen years ago” of 2Co 12:2. Here, Paul experienced a preview of the Rapture of the Church.

The prophecy of John (Rev 12:5) is interestingly retroactive, in that it speaks of the ascension of our Lord (Act 1:11). In this prophecy, John is told that the seed of the woman (see Gen 12:3) “was caught up to God and his throne.” The resurrection and ascension of Christ, the Head of the Body, is a preview of the Rapture of His Body at the end of the Church Age. This is why the angels said to the watching disciples on that day, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (Act 1:11). When He comes for His bride, as He promised (Joh 14:3), we will then “meet Him in the air” and our “blessed hope” will be fulfilled.

One last example—yet a very important one—is the case of the Apostle John. In his vision of “the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:1), John heard a voice like a trumpet, saying “come up here” (Rev 4:1), and he found himself before the throne of

God in Heaven. While the word “caught up” (*harpazo*) is not used, this incident is of utmost importance. It separates the portion of the book of Revelation which is addressed to the churches from the portion that addresses the tribes and nation of Israel. While the words “church ... churches” occurs 19 times in the first three chapters, the Church is not seen from Rev 6–19, where the Marriage of the Lamb and His Bride takes place. For those who will take Scripture at face value, with a literal/literary approach, this confirms beyond doubt the pre-tribulation Rapture of the Church.

Conclusion of the Exegetical Argument

The careful examination of both context and word usage in passages speaking of the Rapture of the Church confirms the position that the Rapture of the Church will precede the time of Tribulation and “the day of the Lord.” It is inexcusable to take an Old Testament concept (“day of the Lord”) which is addressed to Israel, and seek to read it into passages in the New Testament addressed to the Church, which speak of “the day of Christ.” The two days are mutually exclusive as to nature, time, and purpose.

V. The Utilitarian Argument (two trees)—Rom 11:11–32; 2Th 2:1–12

By “utilitarian,” I am not speaking of the school of philosophy that goes by the same name, but rather of the “usefulness” of God’s separate plans for Israel and the Church. Only the doctrine of the “mystery,” as revealed primarily to the Apostle Paul, can demonstrate the infinite wisdom of God’s revealed purpose for the Church.

*“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!”* Rom 11:33

This “mystery” revelation which God gave to Paul was something that he works out through his epistles, beginning with 2 Thessalonians (51 AD) and reaching its fullest development in the book of Ephesians (61 AD). [Note: That is unless the book of Hebrews was written by Paul, a possibility I am beginning more and more to consider. (More on this in the conference in Denver “Taking the Enigma out of Paul’s Mystery.”)]

A. The God of the Unexpected—Rom 11:11–32

For years, I have viewed Rom 9–11 as a “parenthetical” section of the book of Romans. I now see this as the pivotal section of the book. For it is here that Paul explains—both to Jewish and Gentile believers—the purpose for the unexpected appearance of the Church in history. Remember that no prophet of the Old Testament saw the coming of the Church. Although the dispersion of Israel into all the nations was anticipated (Deu 29), there was no expectation of a new spiritual agency that would exist to further the worship of God or the work of world missions. But God did the totally unexpected on the day of Pentecost, creating a “*new creation*” (2Co 5:17), neither of Jew or Gentile, but made up of all who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior.

On the day of Pentecost, Jesus began the work of building His Church (Mat 16:18). With the “*new creation*” came also a new dispensation—the “*dispensation of the grace of God*” (Eph 3:2). This new age would last from the day of Pentecost to the Rapture of the Church, when God would resume His plan for Israel. The Church Age, therefore, became an insertion into the previously understood path of history. It is the equivalent of suddenly having a new day “inserted” between Friday and Saturday. This is called, theologically, “an intercalation of time.”

In Rom 9–11, Paul answers three rhetorical questions asked earlier in the book:

1. First, “*what advantage then has the Jew?*” (Rom 3:1). This is answered in Rom 9:1–18 where he specifically identifies the “*oracles of God*” (cf., Rom 3:2 with Rom 9:4–5), and the reason for the (temporary) loss of those advantages is given in Rom 9:19–33.
2. The second question is raised in Rom 3:3, “*what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect?*” This question is answered in Rom 10:1–15, and the means by which God will remedy their

unbelief is declared in Rom 10:16–21. Specifically, God will raise up “*those who are not a nation*” (Deu 32:21) so as to provoke Israel to jealousy (emulation). That unknown people, anticipated by Moses but not identified, is the Church of Jesus Christ!

3. The third and final question is in Rom 3:5, “*Is God unjust who inflicts wrath?*” This question is answered in Rom 11:1–10, and the remedy for Israel’s spiritual blindness is given in Rom 11:11–32. That remedy is the Church of Jesus Christ!

Paul asks, “*has God cast away His people ... whom He foreknew* (Rom 11:1–2) ... *have they stumbled that they should fall?*” (Rom 11:11). If not for the grace of God, it would be so. But God has raised up “*those who were not My people*” (Rom 9:25) and “*those who are not a nation*” (Rom 10:19) and an apostle of the Gentiles who is “*the least of the apostles*” (1Co 15:9), so as “to provoke to jealousy those who are of my flesh” (cf., Rom 10:19 with Rom 11:11 and Rom 11:14). Paul was a **unique** apostle, with a **unique** message, for a **unique** people, for a **unique** purpose. God, in His infinite wisdom and inscrutable purpose, chose to use the Church to ultimately bring repentance and restoration to the nation of Israel.

B. A Tale of Two Trees—Rom 11:11–24

Here, we have one of the most amazing explanations of the purpose of God in the mystery dispensation of the Church Age. Israel, who had “*a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge*” (Rom 10:2), would be “*provoked*” (Rom 11:11) by the very Gentiles which they held in derision. God would use the Church—primarily made up of Gentiles—to outstrip (surpass) Israel in the work of the exegesis and interpretation of the Scriptures, and the work of world missions.

The Gentile church would be “*grafted into ... [the] olive tree*” of Israel, “*contrary to nature,*” in order to keep the “*holy root*” of the tree alive. In the due course of time when the Church has run her course as ordained by God, the “*natural branches [will] be grafted*” in again (Rom 11:24).

Of special interest is Paul’s repeated warning against “*boast[ing] against the natural branches*” (Rom 11:18–22). All those who say that the Church has replaced Israel are making this boast, and will suffer the consequences. This warning comes with what amounts to a prophecy of the end of the Church, “*you also will be cut off*” (Rom 11:22b). At the cutting off of the wild branches (the Rapture of the Church), the “*natural branches*” will be grafted in again, and Israel will fulfill her intended destiny. She will then, in humility and repentance, be “*provoked ... to jealousy*” (Deu 32:16). The word used in this repeated phrase is *parazelloo*, coming from the same root as “*zeal*” in Rom 10:2. However, it contains the addition of the preposition *para* meaning “*beside,*” thus to zealously “*emulate beside*” those used to provoke her.

Israel will now be looking to the Church—as the Church once looked back to Israel—for examples of courageous faith (cf., Rom 15:4 with 1Co 10:11).

C. The Mystery of Iniquity—2Th 2:1–12

“For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way.” 2Th 2:7

The ministry of the Church to yet-future Israel is not only that of a provocation to faith, but is also one of preservation. If the Antichrist had appeared immediately after the crucifixion, history would have ended in disaster rather than glory! Most Jews would have accepted him as the promised Messiah (Joh 5:43), and Satan’s long-desired annihilation of Israel would have been accomplished.

Therefore God formed a "restrainer," by creating the Church as His Body on earth, and indwelling it by His Spirit, to keep this phase of history at bay, until Israel could be dispersed, chastened, and brought back to the land. That restrainer is both a “what” and a “He” (cf., 2Th 2:6–7). The Spirit of God, indwelling the Church, will keep Satan’s plan from fruition until the Rapture takes place.

This is precisely why Satan so attacks the doctrine of the Rapture. He hates the Church, for she stands in the way of his malevolent plans for Israel. Those who are deceived regarding the mystery of the Church Age and of the pre-tribulation Rapture (2Th 2:1–3), fail to see the role of the Church to Israel and, therefore, fail to play their intended part as an intercessor “*according to the [priesthood] of Melchizedek*” (Heb 7:11) (more on this in the Denver conference; this is the “enigma” with which we must deal).

One last important factor in this passage is essential to note. The Antichrist is said to not be revealed “*unless the falling away comes first*” (2Th 2:3). The word used here is *apostasia* which we transliterate as “apostasy.” However, the root is *aphistemi* which simply means “to depart” and, in this case, should be translated “the departure.” Since it occurs with the definite article, it stands to reason that it refers to something specific in the immediate context. The only possible reference would be “*the coming of our Lord and our gathering together to Him*” (2Th 2:1). Thus, the departure is the Rapture—which must come first—before the man of sin can be revealed. This fits with the “restrainer” being the Holy Spirit indwelling the Church.

Conclusion of the Utilitarian Argument

God’s purpose for the Church is glorious indeed! It is far greater than simply to carry out “the great commission” to the world. As we have become the recipients of blessings through Israel (though these blessings are greater than hers), so one day Israel will become the rightful heirs of their inheritance through us (see Rom. 11:29–32). And it is precisely because of this unique role played by members of the Church that Paul urges and exhorts us “*by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God*” (Rom 12:1). When we rightly understand the book of Romans, the flow of the argument continues—without break—through the book. The theme of “*obedience to the faith*” which “bookends” this epistle (Rom 1:5, Rom 16:26) takes on much greater significance. Especially in light of Paul’s closing words.

“Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith ...” Rom 16:25–26

VI. The Practical Argument (two choices)—Tit 2:11–15

“Looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.” Tit 2:13–14

We now come back to our theme verses concerning our “*blessed hope*.” Confronted with the truth about the return of Jesus Christ, we are faced with two possible choices. Either we choose to be misled into a life of aimless spiritual drifting, or we choose to engage with God’s Word and promises toward a more fruitful and effective life.

A. The Personification of Grace and the Transformation of Men

1. God’s grace appeared in the Person of Jesus Christ. This is clear from Tit 3:4–6. Apart from the Person and work of Christ, His coming into the world, His sinless life, and His crucifixion and resurrection, we could not grasp the magnitude of the grace of God. The purpose and power of God’s grace is personal, because it came in a Person whose very existence is a message of the love, grace, and mercy of God. Jesus’ message to the early disciples to “follow Me” was spoken quietly in the Galilean countryside. But that same message was shouted triumphantly to the world by His resurrection from the grave.
2. The very name of Jesus is an invitation to enter eternal life (Act 4:12). But simply being “born again” by faith is just the beginning. When one becomes a “new creature in Christ” (2Co 5:17), he or she has become a member of a new order, which is the “*kingdom of heaven*” (Mat 13:1–52). This new and eternal kingdom has invaded and permeated this present evil world, and is engaged in a battle that will rage until the defeat of “*the god of this age*” (2Co 4:4) and his deluded armies.
3. This makes every believer, however seemingly insignificant, a warrior in a holy cause. For this reason, we are repeatedly urged to take up our spiritual armor and engage in the fight (Rom 13:11–14; Eph 6:10–18; 1Th 5:8–9). Bold and courageous action in the cause of Truth is to be the order of the day. Skillful and powerful tactics are to be used in order to defeat an invisible and sinister foe (2Co 10:3–6). The winning strategy is revealed in the pages of the Bible. As the believer advances “*from faith to faith*” (Rom 1:17), a full and mature understanding of the “*gifts and calling of God*” (Rom 11:29) for his or her life is discovered. The passion to “*run with endurance the race that is set before us*” (Heb 12:1) grows with each Spirit-led decision. At this point, an all-consuming fire begins to burn in the believer’s heart to fulfill the will of God. This is what Paul means when he says “*His own special people, zealous for good works*” (Tit 2:14b).

B. How Do We Become a Member of Such a Company?

1. Enlisting at Salvation

*“For the grace of God that brings salvation
has appeared to all men ...” Tit 2:11*

We all know that there are many who have trusted Christ, but done little with their faith. **It is not for us to question the salvation of others.** Those who make a habit of this would do well to examine their own lives more closely. The key that makes a difference—right from the start—is found in the word “*grace*.” It is “*by grace ... through faith*” that we are saved (Eph 2:8). Far too many salvation messages are void of grace and often full of human works. When we truly understand that eternal life is a free gift (Rom 5:18, Rom 6:23), without strings either before or after receiving it, then we become overwhelmed with gratitude for such matchless grace. Unless an enlightened perception of the nature and fullness of God’s grace infiltrates our lives (and this can only come from repeated exposure to the accurate teaching of God’s Word), then we will not be compelled by the love of Christ (2Co 5:14).

2. Becoming a Disciple

“teaching us ...” Tit 2:12a

While there are many believers, there are few disciples. The biblical illiteracy of the majority of the saints is appalling. Yet from the very beginning, Jesus declared that what makes disciples is consistent and accurate teaching (Mat 28:19–20; Joh 8:31–32). The very word “disciple” comes from the verb *manthano*, which means “to learn.” The complement of teaching is learning. If in fact God’s grace is always teaching, then each believer must make the commitment to be a life-long student. We must pray that God will daily “*awaken my ear to hear [as a disciple]*” (Isa 50:4b). This process of learning is guided and informed by the indwelling Spirit, who is our ultimate teacher (Joh 14:26; Joh 15:26–27; Joh 16:13; 1Jo 2:27).

3. Engaging in the Battle

*“... to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, [to] live soberly,
righteously and godly in the present age ...” Tit 2:12b*

The word “*deny*” is *arneomai* and means “to reject resolutely.” The grammar here requires that the “rejecting” must precede the “looking.” This perhaps explains why so few believers are living expectantly for Christ’s return. This echoes John’s admonition against loving the world and all that is in it (1Jo 2:15–17). When we speak of the world in this way, we are not speaking of nature, trees, mountains, rivers, etc. The Bible uses the world to refer to the present order of

this fallen realm under the headship of Satan. All around us, we see an organized, orchestrated attempt to blot the name of Jesus Christ from history. We see many coordinated attempts to squelch the Gospel message, and to penalize those who take a stand for truth and righteousness. In this way, our invisible enemy manifests his insidious presence in dominating this world. When we learn to consistently say “no” to this world-system, we have truly entered onto the field of battle. To deny this world is to say, “I cannot be bought, I cannot be pressured, nor can I be driven through fear from the call of God on my life!” This is the way spiritual warriors are born!

4. Keeping Your Eyes on the Horizon

“Looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and savior Jesus Christ.” Tit 2:13

The word for “*looking*” is *prosdechomai*, and it carries the idea of eager anticipation. This is the earnest expectation of a bride awaiting the return of her husband from war. It is the longing of the father for the prodigal (just as God the Father eagerly anticipates one of His children to return “home”), who—because he kept his eyes on the horizon “*when he was still a great way off ... saw him ...*” (Luk 15:20). A spiritual believer lives in light of eternity. Time, and all that pertains to it, is held lightly for we must always be ready to let go of this life. To such a believer, death has little fear, for death is the door that leads us to our eternal home.

In the original Greek, “*blessed*” meant to share the happiness of God (Mat 5:1–12), and “*hope*” spoke of an absolute assurance and certainty. Our hope is not vague or poorly defined. It is centered in the victorious resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ and the certainty of His return for His Bride (Joh 14:3; Rev 19:6–10). In fact, so sure is our “*hope*” that the author of Hebrews says, “*this hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil*” (Heb 6:19). Our souls are anchored to the Throne of God, where we are spiritually seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Col 3:1–4), now awaiting His return.

5. Zealots for His Glory

“who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every Lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works ...” Tit 2:14

Earlier, we saw that the Church is the instrument God will use to provoke Israel to jealousy (Deu 32:21; Rom 10:19, Rom 11:11, Rom 11:14). The words “*provoke*” and “*zealous*” come from the same root. Here the word *zelotes* could be translated “zealots for good works.” We have all known people who are zealots when it comes to being a “do-gooder.” Often they are misguided Christians who

do not understand passages such as this. It is not difficult to understand what it means to be a zealot. This is a person who is fanatically devoted to a cause. The cause may be good or evil; therefore, a zealot may be described as a lunatic or a patriot. The defining question is what is the cause?

When Paul, or any biblical author, speaks of “*good works*” or “good deeds,” we must fit the term within a biblical framework. Paul has a lot to say about “*good works*” in the book of Titus (cf., Tit 1:16, Tit 2:14, Tit 3:1, Tit 3:8, Tit 3:14). But the term that helps to define what he means by this, is another oft-repeated word, “*sound*.”

- a. First he speaks of “*sound doctrine*” (Tit 1:9),
- b. then of being “*sound in the faith*” (Tit 1:13),
- c. then he combines the two in Tit 2:1–2: “*sound doctrine ... sound in the faith*,”
- d. and finally he speaks of being “*sound in speech*” (Tit 2:8).

The word he uses, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is *ugiaino* which is a medical term for one who is “healthy, well, sound in mind and body.” In the spiritual sense, it speaks of a spiritually healthy believer, nurtured on the Word of God, and engaged in His purposes.

This gives the idea of “*good works*” a far more heavenly and much less earthly definition. A typical “do-gooder” will violate persons, privacy, property, and even peace, all “for the greater good” (just consider some of our political class). This is not good, however, but evil. The things they violate and trample underfoot are of far greater value than that which they seek to impose. This is why “doing good” in a worldly sense actually serves the policies of Satan—and not God.

In the biblical sense, “*good works*” are those things which are of eternal value—things that are in keeping with the nature and character of God. All the commands of Scripture are divine good, originating with God Himself. As such, they cannot violate privacy or personal freedom for God has ordained these things. While there are too many facets of divine good to enumerate, a basic understanding can be gained in the areas of the service God has ordained for each and every believer.

6. Every Believer is a Priest

In 1Pe 2:5–9, Peter speaks of the priesthood of the believer. He says we are a “*royal priesthood*” because we are united with the King of kings. Since Jesus Christ is “*a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek*” (Psa 110:4; Heb 5:5, Heb 5:10, Heb 7:21), this is the order of our priesthood. This priesthood is of a heavenly and eternal order, and has tremendous present ramifications—especially for those of us living at the end of our age. Our primary obligation or “*good work*” in this regard, is in intercessory prayer, “*to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*” (1Pe 2:5, cf., Heb 13:15). Since we can “*come boldly to the throne of grace*” (Heb 4:16a), we can intercede for the

salvation of the lost, for the strength and wisdom of fellow believers, and we should never forget our obligation to pray for Israel to come to Christ (Psa 122:6–9; Mat 23:37–39). In God’s eyes, this qualifies as “*good works.*”

7. Every Believer is an Ambassador

In 2Co 5:14–21, Paul presents the “*ministry of reconciliation*” we have as “*ambassadors [of] Christ.*” He gives us the true **spiritual motivation** for service (2Co 5:14–15), which is the love of Christ. “*We love Him because he first loved us*” (1Jo 4:19). He sets before us the **objective** (2Co 5:16–17), which is to see every man in Christ, a new creature. We then see the **ministry** itself (2Co 5:18–19), which is a ministry of reconciling men with God by faith in Christ. Then we are given the **message** (2Co 5:20–21), which is that reconciliation to God is based on the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross. Because he was imputed with our sins, we may be imputed with His righteousness if we believe in Him.

The work of an ambassador is to live as a representative of Christ. It is far more than just “witnessing,” but rather seeks to make the whole life a living testimony to the love of God and the salvation and abundant life available in Christ Jesus (Joh 10:10). This is how God defines “*good works.*”

8. Every Believer is a Minister of Grace

“But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore He says; ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.’” Eph 4:7–8

Paul has much to say about spiritual gifts. Neither time nor space allows for a full study of that subject here. One of the most succinct passages on gifts is found in 1Co 12:4–7. This passage is significant for four reasons:

- a. First, it tells us that the gifts are given by the Spirit of God—a truth confirmed in 1Co 12:13, 1Co 12:18. These gifts are given at the moment of salvation.
- b. Secondly, he tells us that with each gift comes a ministry (1Co 12:5), and this ministry is to glorify the Lord—not us.
- c. Thirdly, while “different gifts have different ministries,” it is also true that these gifts and callings have “different activities.” The word “*activities*” (1Co 12:6) is *energema*. According to the Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament, that word means, “*performance; that which was accomplished through energy. These are the results or effects of the working given by God.*” Not every gift will work in the same way, or have the same visible results (1Co 12:4–10).
- d. Finally, he says that the exercise of these gifts is a “*manifestation of the Spirit ... for the profit of all*” (1Co 12:7). In other words, the Holy Spirit works through the gifts given to believers to benefit and bless the entire family of God.

Since “*the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable*” (Rom 11:29), these three areas of service—priesthood, ambassadorship, and ministry—help define the plan of God for each and every believer. They go a long way to help us understand what God means when he speaks of “*good works*.”

The ultimate motivation in maintaining “*good works*” is the love of Christ (2Co 5:14). But the love of Christ will inevitably lead us to “[look] *for the blessed hope*” (Tit 2:13). Let us remember that Paul declared that the “*crown of righteousness*” was to be given “*to those who have loved His appearing*” (2Ti 4:8). It is my prayer that this study will be an aid toward that end for many believers.

Conclusion of the Practical Argument

The blessed hope is only “*blessed*” to those who love the Lord Jesus Christ, and demonstrate it by a love for His Word—both in study and in application. Every day, we have a choice to make: either we live for time or we live for eternity. This means either living for self or living for Christ. May we make the countless decisions that will lead us to keep the “blessed” in the blessed hope!

Keeping the “Blessed” in His Coming

1. Salvation is provided for **every** member of the human race, due to the cross of Christ. Jesus died for **every** person, and paid the debt for **all** sin.
2. God’s grace is conveyed in the Gospel message, and is directed to **all** men.
3. God’s grace in Christ is the basis for a body of Truth—New Testament doctrine—which instructs members of the new creation how to live.
4. The three-fold focus of the teaching is: learning, living, and looking. Thus, God’s Word provides instruction, enablement, and expectation (hope).
5. Receiving the Gospel in faith results in salvation. Continued reception of God’s Word results in sanctification—a life that is blessed and honoring to God.
6. The “*good works*” of which Paul speaks are not just good deeds, but actions that stem from a renewed mind which is daily refreshed by God’s Word.
7. The choice before us in the passage above is whether we will live in the light of our blessed hope—or not. To do so, the grace supplied through God’s Word must be received, applied, and constantly refreshed in our minds and souls.