

NECMA 2nd May 2004

Introduction to the Time of the End

Today's message has changed from what I had prepared over the last three weeks.

Before we start, you may remember we used half an hour of video from a modern oratorio as part of Good Friday's reflection on the Passion of Christ. The pieces were from a work composed in 1988, called "The Jerusalem Passion".

Because of interest shown afterwards, we might look to present the entire 2 hour work on an afternoon or evening here, if there was enough interest, and I would be prepared to bring it to life using the extensive composer's notes. Please let Aman or me know if this is your wish.

One description given to this work is an "eschatology in song".

The dictionary defines "eschatology" as *"a branch of theology concerned with the final events in the history of the world or of mankind"*. It comments on the diversity of beliefs that exist over the events and timing of the end of the world - *"specifically: any of various Christian doctrines concerning the Second Coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgment, or the nature of human existence upon the completion of history"*.

The "Time of the End" is something we should look forward to, rather than dread, if we know the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some erroneously believe, because they have been so taught, that things will get progressively better and better with us in charge, and therefore we should spend all our efforts on improving secular government and society here on the earth.

That is the gospel of social welfare. It is a lovely cosy friendly thought, but it does not fit in with what the Bible says. Not at all.

Some teach the doctrine of standing up against all unjust laws by using civil disobedience. What scripture actually says is that we should support our government and uphold it and its members in prayer. It says that all governments - and that does mean all, both good and bad - govern with God's provided authority.

Because God has provided this authority does NOT mean He either agrees with the laws they enact, or the way in which those laws are executed. At the end of the age, God's will is that the Anti-Christ shall reign during the Tribulation, and scripture describes some of the dreadful legislation the Anti-Christ shall enact in fulfillment of God's will.

I suggest that what we really should do as Christians, is not lobbying members of parliament to improve conditions in the workforce for our own financial gain and working comfort, but to convert our employer or manager, and legislators, to receiving God's word and how it applies to relating to one another.

Jesus said *"let your light so shine forth before men that they may see your good works and (as a result they may) glorify your Father who is in heaven"*.

In summary: Live our lives totally in accordance with biblical instructions. When we do fail, we must openly admit so to God, and then put it right with our brother or sister we have hurt. That way we can go the next step, asking God to forgive us for our trespasses, something that we cannot in fairness ask Him unless we are dinkum about it in the first place. *"Forgive us our trespasses (just) as we forgive those who trespass against us"*.

Each of us needs to share our love for the gospel message, and total involvement in living it with everyone with whom we come into contact. Do you do that? Do I do that?

Foremost, we have to truly believe in that gospel message. We should not need special classes and videos to tell us how to share the Word of salvation with whoever is prepared to hear it.

Let's compare this with something worldly. Are you enthusiastic about your footy team?

Most people are. And they will rave on and on and on about them - often ad nauseam! But they do rave, and they don't go to classes to learn how to rave, ask any Port Adelaide or Norwood supporter!

There is a lot to the "Time of the End". Many learned experts have juggled this statement & that verse around; several quite different calendars each appear to be valid in their exegesis.

I'm no theologian, but because I'm retired from employment, I have time to research puzzling or apparently contradictory issues. I would not if I were holding down full time employment - even as a minister - and raising a family.

Take, for example, the "Latter-Rain Revival", which came to the Sharon Brethren in Canadian Saskatchewan, a huge tent city visited by thousands a day over many months in 1948.

Out from there sprang groups named like the "Manifested Sons of God", the "Kansas City Prophets", these are just a few from one line of modern church history.

They have had enormous impact on shaping what many churches and whole denominations now teach through these peoples' promoting, rather than relying on the biblical faith of our fathers.

Many of their beliefs and teachings don't just contradict scripture, but have infiltrated a high percentage of Christian churches right around the world, including Australia.

Knowing a bit about some of the untruths being peddled as gospel today may have some positive effect on your and my personal comfort as the end approaches.

The Bible definitely says there will be a cut-off point in time at which true believers - as opposed to pretend believers - get removed from society and placed elsewhere. We call this "The Rapture" - though that word is not in the bible. Pretend believers and unbelievers will be left behind.

Your neighbour's, your brother's, your cousin's, your children's or your parents' future may hinge on your knowing what the Biblical message is, rather than going along with the great majority who believe that it will all pan out okay in the end.

That belief has a name. It is called "Pan-Millennialism". Its followers really do say "it will all pan out okay in the end. Some also teach that everyone is really going to be saved regardless. That's called "Universalism".

These are recognised alternative beliefs within mainstream Christianity, linked to "container theology" - belief that the Bible "contains" - rather than "is" - the Word of God. Meaning that part of the Bible must be lies, to be able to logically reject it.

God made the decision exactly how much we "need to know", so that we are forced to walk by some faith, rather than having everything spelled out in detail in advance, which is what unbelieving skeptics demand.

Everyone who has worked in defence has been scrutinised. I was cleared in 1953 when I went into the Royal Air Force to learn to fly, through to about 1996 when my clearance with the Australian Submarine Corporation lapsed. All that time, I was briefed on just what I needed to know. Nothing more.

That “need to know” is similar to God providing us with just what we need to know - no more, no less - so we may make the choice of accepting Him and his plan, based on faith rather than proof. It is a concept designed so that you and I may know, understand, and accept that His gospel is embedded in scripture, with absolutely nothing taken out, and absolutely nothing added.

We can piece together the “end times” from many places. Parts of the gospels of Matthew and John, Paul’s letters (specifically to the Thessalonians), John’s epistles and that to the Hebrews, and the Revelation of what Jesus showed John while on Patmos.

Add some of the writings of the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, and the Torah, the five books of Moses, all of which contain important stuff given to us for us to use in understanding the time of the end. They are part of God’s plan for us.

God wouldn’t bother telling us anything He didn’t need us to hear, know and understand, and hold ready to use. I suggest that a working knowledge of them is probably important, or otherwise WHY did God include them? Nothing in the 66 books is irrelevant. 2Tim 3:16 makes that quite clear. We ignore that at our peril.

Let us recapitulate on what Jesus said about the unacceptable servant who failed to develop the potential of the silver coin he was given. On his return, the master took away the article the man had buried, and gave it to one of the other two who had wisely used theirs according to their gifts. He soundly reprimanded the unprofitable servant while so doing.

The parable of the talents is normally related to money, the talent being a piece of silver, and probably the English word “talent” is related to the German word “thaler” from which the American “dollar” is derived, also a silver coin.

I think we need compare the parable with God’s people, each of us being given enough “need-to-know” information, and then some of us refusing to work it, leaving it unused.

What is Jesus saying He shall do at His return?

He SHALL take the gift and give it to someone else.

We could speculate that the actual gift might even be salvation. I don’t present this thought as factual scripture, but I do ask you to consider it carefully in the context in which it is mentioned, because many people get upset at this thought, stating that once we are saved, we have no further choice, and nor has God.

I disagree with that. God is sovereign, and can and may do what He likes, and choose when He likes to do it. This does not contradict the concept that God is “the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.” Our rejection of salvation received may well work against us if we read the details of the Great Tribulation, where

God has made it perfectly clear that those who are not dinkum in their believing on Him at the time He raptures the Body, shall be “left behind”, albeit with one further chance which will need to be paid for with their lives. Crystal clear. Save YOUR eternal life now. Remember Jesus said...

“Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.”

God has already given us everything that we need to know. Some of us have been blessed with more understanding - NOT more knowledge - than others. Each of us has received personal access to the same knowledge. We all have this great database. It is called the Bible. You log in using the password “Holy Spirit”.

Remember the ten bridal attendants? Five were careful with their lamp oil, and had chosen to keep what was needed to light their way to the wedding when finally called. Five were not wise.

In modern language, they were “dumb”. They wasted their oil - perhaps because they decided to have their own party, just like the world does, rather than waiting for the real one. Are you and I going to party? *“Eat drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die”*.

The Old Testament, from which we can learn so much, is full of many real-life anecdotes, histories of real people, many of whom - like you and I - stuffed up, and then got right with God again, later.

Frank Peretti is a Christian novelist, a God-fearing man. I had never read any “Christian” novels until I borrowed one of his, twelve years ago, hearing his “heavenly places all around us” parable, and after following up on the scripture, it put things in much better perspective.

And, yes, if we read scripture, we will often find that the inspired writings of others can open an insight into what is going on, about something of which we have previously been totally ignorant. But we need to remember, scripture is true, novels are just stories.

Exactly the same with the Peretti novels as with the more recent “Left Behind” series written by Jerry Jenkins.

These are also novels - fiction - stories; each is a masterpiece that has captured readers from both the secular and the Christian world, and they have received a number of best-seller awards.

Twelve novels over six years, a total circulation figure of over 55 million, is quite awe-inspiring. That’s the number of books sold, not the number of readers, and I’m the ninth reader of the ones I’m borrowing, so they could be approaching 500 million readers.

But the amazing thing is, as you step through them towards the end, that they never contradict scripture as the brilliance of Jerry Jenkins’ penmanship unfolds. I did not say that they left no questions unanswered. Nor that I agreed with each and every piece of the theology exactly as it was presented.

Okay, I can hear you saying, is this guy using the pulpit to preach the gospel according to “Left Behind”? Or to promote a series of commercial books? No.

Let me share some interesting thoughts that ran through my head while reading the series. First, every character depicted was a real life fallible human being just like me. Or even like you.

A human being who has suddenly come to a renewed faith - or a brand new faith - as a result of something happening, and yes, that happened to me in September 1993, as a result of what I believe to have been an angelic ministrations, which I’m not going to discuss here, because it’s not relevant.

Each character in the novels recognises how their previous attitudes had prevented their salvation, or maybe had even lost their salvation, as we just discussed. Some genuinely get saved in the end - because of circumstances - and as a result, they change and get their priorities in life right.

Most importantly they realise they have to learn in depth without going over old ground continuously, because there just isn't time. They don't get bogged down in inter-denominational stuff. There were no denominations, just brand new Christians, each eager and hungry to learn, knowing there was a high chance they would have to seal their acceptance of God and Christ with their lives within the next very few years.

"I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years."

I relate to those fictional people, because although hit with the everlasting gospel, they were still very aware of their own fallibility, in the same way we are. Like them, we repeatedly ask ourselves "How can I possibly know that this is what God wants me to say, rather than it being 'me'"?

That is human. God wants to encourage us to fully trust Him, to have faith in Him so that we accept His will totally.

However, throughout the series, typical human traits that are less lovely also surface. One principal character twice over insists on exercising their own individuality, putting not just themselves into danger, but all their colleagues in the "Tribulation Force".

The second time this happens results in their capture and public execution by the world government forces, and almost the discovery of the entire headquarters underground cell.

We see that type of attitude so much in the church these days, people like you and I who insist on "doing it my way". Some just never learn about obedience and submission.

Secondly, although they become converted to Christianity, not a single one of them ever speaks in "Christian-ese". You know what that is? Using the right words and expressions, at the drop of a hat - at the drop of every hat!

No hype. No special Christian words for younger people, the same Gospel is for all ages. It is there in its entirety, understandable without disguising it in the language of any generation.

We are saved by God's grace, it's as simple as that. He requires us to drop our external worldly culture, replacing it with his - which is not American, Australian, British, or of any other nation.

The people are real, facing daily life under considerably more persecution than we are subjected to... so they discover the need to put God first, communicating with Him to offer thanks... and to pray for others... and then setting aside the irrelevant things of daily life as they prepare for His work.

Would you believe there's no mention of football? Could you and I reshape our life like that?

I am willing to bet if we suddenly found that there were just three or four of us left in this congregation right here, instead of thirty to forty, we would make darned sure we did. A

second chance after God gathered His real people to Himself out of this world is more than any should expect, but He is a great generous God.

Another intriguing point. Brothers Jenkins and LaHaye present angelic beings very factually at crucial points in the plot. God does deal with us, also in a very matter of fact way, through angelic beings. Last week we heard from Ron and Aman about the angel Michael being delayed three weeks trying to obey orders to go to help Daniel. Angels are still used now. They are also involved here and there at similar moments in *Left Behind*.

Why shouldn't God use angels? I believe in a supernatural God who is unchangeable. Why should we tie Him to the theories that men have dreamed up? And only working in the Old Testament?

Being understood in your own language in a gathering of many nationalities, like on the day of Pentecost when thousands were added to the group of believers, is similarly dealt with, and is described in situations where it could obviously be needed again.

Again the point is that we are talking about activities that were originally described in scripture for the benefit of God's people, and on which the authors draw for their future help. God is unchangeable. If He does something in the past there is absolutely no reason why He shouldn't do it again in the future. Either in the same way, or similarly. Or even differently. But that does not tie Him to having to do it in any particular way.

The Old Testament narrative as a type or shadow of the future is frequently used by commentators when drawing comparisons between the Old and the New. The authors of "*Left Behind*" draw that sort of analogy quite frequently.

More than anything else, I found the books a refreshing approach to the scholarly method of study. I don't know about you, but I find scholarly works of great soporific value; they work well if taken at bedtime - they send one off to sleep within five minutes!

The first book of the "*Left Behind*" series begins with the sudden disappearance of all Christians everywhere. Those who are not caught up to meet Christ in the air are left on the earth to try to make sense of this cataclysmic event. They are all unbelievers, even though many accept Jesus as an historical person.

One of the main characters, a senior 747 pilot, is not a believer. He knows exactly why he has been left behind; his wife was a devout Christian who had tried to talk to her stubborn husband for years about the Bible, and his need for faith in Christ.

He didn't listen. Now, he is mourning his wife's and son's dis-appearance, and is concerned about his and his daughter's fate.

You know, this pilot chap wasn't alone in his confusion, in his inability to understand the Bible. Many people have little idea how to make sense of it, especially the parts that concern future things. Let me quote from a study guide...

"What would you say are the primary reasons the average person doesn't know more about the Bible?"

And what keeps people (especially those who claim to be followers of Christ) from reading and studying the Bible?"

It then quotes from Dr. Howard Hendricks' "*Living by the Book*" twelve reasons people regularly give for not reading the Bible:

1. The Bible doesn't seem relevant to my life.

2. *The Bible seems confusing and hard to understand. I don't know how to make sense of it.*
3. *I used to read the Bible, and it made me feel good. But after a while, it didn't seem to have the same impact, so finally I gave it up.*
4. *I feel guilty when I read the Bible.*
5. *The Bible is hopelessly out-of-date. It may have some interesting stories, but it has little significance for life today.*
6. *I rely on my pastor or minister to explain the Bible to me. If I need to know something, he will tell me.*
7. *I have doubts about the Bible's reliability.*
8. *I don't have time. I'm just too busy.*
9. *The Bible seems boring.*
10. *I don't own a Bible.*
11. *The Bible is full of myths and half-truths. Why study something that lacks credibility?*
12. *I don't read, full stop! It's not just the Bible; I don't read anything.*

Can we identify with any of these sentiments?

There is actually a set of four bible studies on the "Left Behind" series which allows the theology used to be examined and studied, either on your own, or as a class.

We might do well to look at these studies in a group environment, and I leave that idea with the elders.

My final thoughts today go back to the question "are we, ourselves, ready?" Joshua, that great leader of the Hebrew people, unlike us continually had altar calls to encourage the people in their spiritual wandering away; and they repeatedly responded positively, only to be distracted shortly afterwards by things that appeared to be much more fun...

"If you forsake the LORD, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that he has done you good'. And the people said to him, 'Nay; but we will serve the LORD'.

And Joshua said unto the people, 'You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him'. And they said, 'We are witnesses'.

'Now therefore put away', said he, 'the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD God of Israel'.

And the people said to Joshua - yet again - 'The LORD our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey'."

Will we do so? Or will we be like the Israelites, always finding an excuse to find something better to do? Just before he died, Joshua issued another challenge to the people, which was this...

"Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD. And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers

served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD'.

And - again - the people answered and said, 'God forbid that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other gods'."

Something mentioned earlier was about hearing and acting on the word before we miss the bus. Isn't it our priority to open our roadmap and timetable to ensure we catch the right bus? The one which is going to the right destination?

God bless you all.

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