



What is the Reformed View of Origins?

by Otto Bouwman

For three recent consecutive Thursday evenings, about 100 people gathered together in Abbotsford to hear Dr. John Byl speak. These lectures had been organized by the Reformed Bible College since this topic has been a prominent one in recent months.

Dr. Byl, who earned a doctorate in astronomy was head of the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Trinity Western University in Langley; since last September he has been professor emeritus. Byl proved able to speak clearly and convincingly about the topic. He is an internationally known academic authority regarding science and religion. One book he wrote is called *The Divine Challenge*. The book explores the failure of Naturalist and Post-Modernist philosophies to explain life as we experience it. The author shows that only a Christian worldview squarely based on the truth of the Bible and the comprehensive sovereignty of God can supply us with the necessary foundation for logic, mathematics, science and morality, while giving life coherence, meaning, purpose and hope.” His blog (<http://bylogos.blogspot.com/>) provides further evidence of his credibility in the field he would speak about.

Already early in the lecture series it became evident how well-versed our speaker was: he shared a clear understanding about how discussions regarding origins have evolved in other church federations. Twenty-five years ago Dr. Byl heard and participated in origins discussions in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). During the 1960s, Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland – GKN) had become embroiled in origins debates, and as time went on, increasingly theologians there wished to show more and more deference to the “discoveries of science” and less and less credence to the traditional understanding of God’s Word. Step one in the discussion was to legitimize the discussions about new interpretations of Genesis 1; soon enough leaders began putting question marks behind not just the historicity of Adam, but also the origin of death, the extent of the flood, the possibility of miracles, and even the resurrection of our Savior. Seeing the same pattern begin in Holland in Gereformeerde Kerken Vrijgemaakt and more recently in Canadian Reformed Churches brings a strong sense of “déjà vu” and is very concerning.

There were several essential ideas that the speaker wanted to impress upon

his audience. In the first place, adopting an old-age understanding of the earth is a huge step. It is not in keeping with the understandings that the church fathers and reformers expressed. It brings up new problems related to the order of events in creation as recounted in Genesis 1. Furthermore, inevitable questions about the arrival of Adam on this earth will come up: did he have primate ancestors? Was he really the first human? Do all humans

descend from Adam? Why did Eve need to be created if Adam had a mother? Those who embrace old-age understandings of earth history struggle to logically account for the arrival of sickness, suffering, death, decay, or natural evil on this earth. Furthermore, an old-age understanding of this earth requires one to adopt a different Biblical hermeneutic than we confess in our Reformed confessions. The speaker, in answering the question “What is the Reformed view of origins?” explained that we need to seriously accept what we confess in our Reformed confessions. When our Belgic Confession says that God’s Word is authoritative and to be believed, and that he created, out of nothing, all things, then we need to accept and believe that. If people wish to adopt an old-age understanding of earth history, then the logical implications are profound.

Another central truth the speaker wanted us to understand related to the limitations of science. Operational science is observable and repeatable; engagement in it has proven extremely helpful, and is fully in keeping with the cultural mandate we have been given. On the other hand, origins science is very speculative and

highly dependent upon one’s worldview. There is a vast difference between the two studies. The “facts” that people engaged in origins science often appeal to, always need to be interpreted. The interpretation of those facts is always dependent upon what one’s presuppositions are. The ultimate presupposition that we all need to

embrace is the sufficiency and authority of God’s Word. All logic, all philosophy, needs to be built on the foundation of accepting the truthfulness of

God’s Word. After all, our confession states that in order to make Himself “more clearly and fully known to us” God has given us His Word. There are voices that suggest that if our interpretation of Scriptures is too far out of alignment with “scientific realities” then people will no longer accept the basic message of Scriptures. However, those “scientific realities” might well in fact not be reality. Perhaps they will be entirely reinterpreted in another decade or two, because so many of these “realities” are in fact dependent upon people’s belief systems. Clearly, scientific theories cannot be the ultimate authority in life; that’s an honor that is held exclusively by God’s Word.

Repeatedly during the lectures, the audience heard the importance of worldviews. A Reformed worldview is one that accepts the sovereignty of God and the authority and reliability of His Word. It acknowledges that there are not only material aspects to God’s creation, but that there are also spiritual aspects to it. Of course, the creation – fall – restoration motif defines the world as we know it. Worldviews need to be internally consistent, rooted in real-life experience,

That we may rightly know



and livable. They also come as “package deals.” Either one accepts one kind of world view, with all it entails, or another one. A naturalist worldview, which is what many people of our day accept, does not accept the truthfulness of God’s Word, and therefore must be rejected by us.

During the lecture series, there were a plethora of topics that our speaker informed us about. These ranged from strengths and weaknesses of intelligent design theory, to limitations of various dating techniques, to definitions of “day” or “hour” and so on. Man’s ability to understand is so limited; that causes us to confess bewilderment as we attempt to understand what light exactly was during the first three days of creation, or where it came from, or what exactly those first three days looked like; after all, the sun was created on the fourth day.

Though it was clear that our speaker’s knowledge and understanding of

matters related to origins was much greater than the audience’s, it was also clear that his knowledge was profoundly limited. And he seemed quite okay with that. While striving to understand, he could comfortably confess his limitations, because that’s in keeping with how much God has revealed to man about earth origins. Byl’s desire to keep all of our understandings completely in line with God’s revelation to man in His Word came through loudly and clearly. That faithful submission to God’s revealed will needs to be continually embraced by each successive generation of God’s people.

The board of the Reformed Bible College was grateful for the insights that Br. Byl was able to share and for the positive reception those insights received. The board hopes to make an online version of his presentation available soon at www.rbcollge.com.

Address to the 2010 Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches

By the Rev. Jonathan Merica of the Reformed Church in the United States

12 May 2010

Esteemed Fathers and Brethren in Christ, I bring greetings to you in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ on behalf of the Reformed Church in the United States. We rejoice in our relationship as fraternal brethren, and also for your steadfast love for the Word of God, and the Biblical truths as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity. It is a certainty, that in the work of the Lord, we shall continually be tested by the Tempter, the world, and false professors of Christianity who endeavour to shake our faith.

We give thanks to God, Who will cause us to triumph in our Lord Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul says in I Corinthians 15:57-58, “But thanks be to God, which gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, for as much as ye know your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”

The RCUS gives thanks to God for our ecclesiastical fellowship with the Canadian Reformed Churches of North America. I can still remember when our churches first began the process of entering into our fraternal relationship with the Canadian

Reformed Churches. We admired your steadfastness to the confessions and your concern for accuracy in the doctrines of Scripture.

“At the 246th Synod of the RCUS (1992), the Synod adopted the following five rules that must be agreed upon before the RCUS will establish fraternal relations with another denomination:

1. Agree to heed to one another`s doctrine, liturgy and church government, that there be no

deviations from the Holy Scriptures or from the Reformed confessions.

2. Will exchange delegates at one another`s assemblies or general synods and invite them to

participate as advisors.

3. Will inform one another of the decisions taken at their assemblies or general synods by

exchanging minutes or at least by forwarding decisions which are relevant to the churches concerned.

4. Will inform one another in case of changes in or additions to confessions, church order or

liturgical forms, when these are of a doctrinal nature. The denomination concerned will notify the other denomination of these changes so that consultations can take place if considered necessary.

5. Will inform one another regarding new relationships with third parties and membership

in ecumenical organizations.”

The Apostle Paul instructing Titus in the Gospel ministry in Titus 2:1-8 says, “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers, or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God. Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.”

The Reformed Church in the United States seeks by the grace of God to be vigilant and steadfast in the spreading of the Gospel and in the defence of the faith. The Apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:10-12 calls us to be “strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the Devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but with principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”

It is my prayer that God will make our churches stronger in the faith in our generation, and the generation to come. We may well hope that He will, because the Gospel “is the power of God unto salvation.” The opening message of the Synod meeting was from one of my favourite passages, Psalm 93. What a comfort to know that “the

LORD reigns.” The early first through the third century Christians gained comfort in their afflictions by greeting other saints with the words, “the LORD reigns.” Let us also do the same.

The Canadian Reformed Churches has set forth a good example of fidelity to the Word of God by training ministers for their churches by their own seminary. The RCUS is seeing the need to have its own seminary to train young men for our congregations. The RCUS has approved the concept of a denominational seminary. Heidelberg Seminary in Rapid City, SD is looking to fulfill this need in our churches. The RCUS also has Sacramento City Seminary in Sacramento, California training prospective pastors.

More and more we see in our culture in the United States a great moral decline. Those who oppose righteousness are becoming more bold in their attacks upon the righteous. May the Lord give us grace to stand together in holding fast to the Word of God alone for our life and doctrine.

While the wicked goes the broad way of unrighteousness, we must stay in the narrow way of truth which is the way of everlasting life. May God bless our churches as we labour together for His kingdom and glory.

OUR CHRISTIAN HOPE AND EXPECTATION: THE RETURN OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

By Rev. B. J. Berends

Can you imagine the kind of world our Lord and Saviour came to when He left his heavenly home the first time? How godless it was, all around. With the exception of some true believers in Israel and some among the Jewish settlements around the Mediterranean Sea, the rest of the world was godless. There was no true worship of the Lord to be found anywhere, and certainly no expectation of a Saviour to save the world – man would ask, to save the world from what?! In fact, even among the people of Israel there were very few who had a proper expectation of the coming of the promised Messiah. You could just about count them on one hand: Zacharias, Elisabeth, Joseph, Mary, Simeon, Anna, and a few more. No wonder that the apostle John had to write in the first chapter of his gospel: *He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.* (vs. 10, 11).

Can you imagine such a world, a world of global godlessness, i.e., a world without God, a world as described by the apostle Paul in Romans 1. A world where *they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped the creature and served created things rather than the Creator* (vs25). As punishment God had given them *over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion* (vs26, 27). And this is how Paul continues to describe the world which he had to enter as an apostle of Christ, as a missionary of the

gospel: every nation under the sun, with the relative exception of Israel, had *become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity*. Throughout the earth people were *full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless . . .* (vs29-30)”

That was the kind of world our Lord and Saviour came to at his first coming to this earth. Can you imagine such a world, such a godless world? Indeed, we can, because in the last two centuries and specifically in the last hundred years the world has turned into exactly such a world. All around us we observe a philosophy of living and a lifestyle as was described by the apostle Paul. But now this philosophy of living and ungodly lifestyle is being pursued **after** having heard the gospel, after an age in which the gospel was preached far and wide, after an age in which it has reached practically every nation, tribe, people and language. It should surprise us that this present world is filled with all the abhorrent lifestyles as mentioned by Paul, especially our Western world! Our world, because of its world-wide apostasy, because of its deliberate rejection of the only Saviour given by God, is increasingly given over to nothing but vain philosophy, dead theology, and false prophecy. In short, it has surrendered to a death culture the likes the history of man has never seen. No wonder that those who teach history – church history – speak of our era as the Post-Christian era, an era in which the Christian faith is driven into a corner, is being banished from the land.

Well, how great then to know that this era of apostasy, of false prophecy, of dead theology – an age so similar to the one our Saviour came to the first time – will come to an end. No, it will not end in the same way as it did in Paul’s days, by the preaching of the gospel of Christ, far and wide, across the globe, but it will come to an end by a just judgment of God, i.e., at the second and final coming of our Saviour, i.e. the Return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are confident about this glorious event because of what we read in Romans 8:18ff. This future glory will become a reality at the return of our Saviour, His second coming. This topic deals with our Christian hope and expectation, thus, with matters of the greatest interest to us, especially in view of the direction our world is going. It leaves the strong impression that the end is near, that it is just about upon us. It leaves the impression that our Lord and Saviour is about to return, an impression which is, as we will see, not without Scriptural foundation.

In a typically Reformed manner we will break down our topic in the following manner: **OUR CHRISTIAN HOPE AND EXPECTATION: THE RETURN OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.** We want to pay attention to four aspects:

- 1. The Promise of his return;**
- 2. The Longing for his return;**
- 3. The Signs of his return, and**
- 4. The Day of his return.**

1. The Promise of His Return

Throughout the Bible there is spoken of our Saviour's second coming, of his promised return to inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth. Understandably the Old Testament as a whole focuses more on the promise of his first coming, his coming in our flesh. Still, there are a number of Scripture passages that already speak of the time of His second coming, the time of the resurrection of our body, the time that *In my flesh I will see God* (Job 19:26). For the Lord *will not abandon me to the grave*. (Ps. 16:10) We think of Ezekiel 37, of that telling parable about **the Valley of Dry Bones**, which gave that promising revelation, manifestation of the power of the Lord our God to turn dead dry bones into living beings. And what about the prophecies of Isaiah! Even though they contain those memorable passages of the promise of our Saviour's first coming, there are nevertheless also a number of them that speak of the promise, of the time of his second coming. *Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth*. It will be something so great that *the former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind* (Is. 65:17), which expression already reminds of our Romans 8:18, that *our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*. Thanks then to the **Branch of Jesse**, thanks to our Saviour's righteousness and faithfulness (Is. 11:5) we have that promising picture, the sure promise of a world of perfect love and peace, a world where *the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them* (Is.11:6).

But be it then that this promise of our Saviour's second and final coming was still somewhat obscure, hidden, in the Old Testament, this promise really comes to its own in the New. We think of those telling words spoken by the angels of God to the disciples immediately following our Saviour's departure from this earth: *This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven*. (Acts 1:11). We think of what the Lord Jesus himself has said on his Parousia, about his coming back from heaven: In his talks with his disciples, in his confrontations with the Pharisees and Sadducees, in his parables and in his many discourses, and most notably in that so-called eschatological discourse, as recorded for us in Matthew 24 and 25 (to which we will refer during our third point: the **Signs** of his return).

But of all his words how striking and most comforting are those found in John 14:1-3. It certainly was to his disciples. *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will **come back** and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am*. Those memorable words of our Saviour were spoken during the last Passover. They were addressed to his own, to his disciples, who had become most sorrowful on hearing that their Lord was about to suffer and die, was about to leave them. And that's how we have with a view to his departure back to heaven in this and the following chapters a reference to his replacement, to the second comforter, God the Holy Spirit.

For it is especially after Pentecost that we hear the rest of the story. The apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, speak at great length of the promise of our Saviour's return.

They present his coming return to the believers, to us, Christians, as the central theme of all our hope and expectation. Paul speaks about it in Romans 8 in connection with that eager expectation of all of creation for the liberation from its bondage to decay (vs21), just as we, who believe and trust in God, in Jesus Christ, *wait eagerly for our adoption of sons, the redemption of our bodies* (vs23). In his letter to the Thessalonians Paul speaks of this hope and expectation in connection with those who have died, *those who fallen asleep in him* (1Thess.4:14.) To those who wonder what will become of them he gives this inspired confession: *We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus* (at his return from heaven!) *those who have fallen asleep in him*. And he furthermore informs them that *the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air* (vs16,17). Lastly, we think of the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, where the Lord Jesus himself speaks – this time from heaven, in a vision – about his promised return: *Behold, I am coming soon! Yes, I am coming soon* (vs 12,20).

We see then that the Bible in many and wondrous ways speaks of the promise of our Saviour's return from heaven, and this promise constitutes our hope and expectation, which ought to make us cry out from day to day: *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus* (Rev. 22:20).

2. The Longing for His Return

What greater expectation is there than to wait for our Saviour to come from heaven? And still, the question is whether we do; whether we do indeed long for Him to come back, not to mention of longing for his return **eagerly**. Is it not true that we are so occupied with earthly things that we hardly take time out to think of those heavenly things, things of the future, things that express that Christian hope and expectation, our hope for an eternity to come, our life with the Lord Jesus, our life in the midst of all the saints in his presence, our life with Him and them on the new earth?

When you speak about that future life, then it is surprising how little thought is given to that Christian hope, to that life of the future, not only with a view to the so-called intermediate state, the future state of our soul between our death and resurrection, but also with a view to that perfect and complete state, the future state of our soul **and** body, to be realized at our Saviour's return. How strongly do we really long for that next state of our existence? To be where the Lord Jesus is, to see Him return rather today than tomorrow?

It's true, we are called to live here on earth, and still have an important task to carry out here on earth, something that the apostle had to emphasize to the Thessalonians: do not stop what your hand finds to do; do not stop your work until your Saviour is actually here. But still, how alive was their future expectation! Is it then only to be at special moments that we are to lift our hearts high in heaven, where Christ is, that we lift them up to Him already here and now? What do we understand by this well-know phrase from our Lord's Supper celebrations, and how do we apply it? Is not this what should

characterize our Christian hope and expectation each and every day: O I wish that I would be where He is . . . O I wish that He would return, now today already.

Well, we know from Romans eight that there is such an eager expectation, such a constant longing expressed, manifested, among us. It is mentioned in one breath with the adversities we as Christians may have to suffer, first of all, for the sake of the Lord, for the sake of his Name, for the sake of the gospel of Christ, and then, secondly, may have to suffer because of the curse to which the whole of creation has become subject ever since man's fall in Paradise.

We read the whole of creation, creation in all its parts, is waiting with eager expectation for the end, for the Lord Jesus to return, to liberate this present world from that curse, to liberate it from its bondage to decay, to liberate it, to have it regain its former freedom by inaugurating a new heaven and a new earth, yes, by revealing the total number of the elect of God, that multitude of believers of every age, all the sons and daughters of his one and age-old covenant of grace.

Well, I don't have to prove to you how the whole of creation is groaning as in the pains of childbirth. We are all too familiar with the disasters, the calamities, the catastrophes, the earthquakes, the floods, the illnesses and diseases, to which this one-time perfect creation has become subject. Yes, has become subject, not because **it** asked for it, but because of man, the crown of all creation, the God-given steward of all creation, because he broke the bond with God, so that God, because of man, because of us, had to make the whole of creation subject to the divine curse that man with his deliberate disobedience to God had called upon himself, and as a result, upon all of creation.

Well, then, as a result, the whole of creation is waiting with eager expectation, with great longing for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, because it is only at his return that an end will be brought to its present frustration (NIV), to its futility (RSV), to its "fruitlessness" (as translated from the Dutch version). And what we are expected to do, Paul makes clear, is to join in with all of creation, we, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we, who have come to believe in Jesus Christ as the only Saviour, we too then will wait with eager expectation for the redemption of our bodies, for we know that it is only at our Lord's return that an end will come to all those illnesses and diseases, to all that pain and suffering, to that widespread death and destruction, so very familiar to us all.

No wonder, then, that when we are lax in expressing that eager expectation, that strong longing for the Lord Jesus to return, that God, in His Fatherly love (see Heb.12), brings those terrible adversities upon us . . . upon us as his adopted sons and daughters, so that we would bring, bring more and more, our thoughts and desires, our words and deeds, in harmony with all of creation, that creation that because of us cries out as in the pains of child birth, cries out loud and clear for the liberation from its bondage to decay, cries out for that glorious freedom we children of God will receive in perfect measure at the return of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Therefore, let the Lord use our pain, our

sufferings to make us aware of our call to wait with good hope and eager expectation, with eager longing, *the blessed hope — the glorious appearance of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13)*.

3. The Signs of His Return

This brings us to our third point, the Signs of our Saviour's return. Those who have made that blessed hope and expectation their own, those who know themselves rich in God, rich in Jesus Christ, and those who know what kind of world we live in and will be delivered from, will also, without a doubt, have an open eye and ear for the signs that point to our Lord and Saviour's return. Of course, we have to be careful of how to approach them and to draw the right conclusions from them. As you know, there are many who become completely enmeshed, if not obsessed, by this part of eschatology, on the doctrine on the end times. It was the reason why Paul had to address the Thessalonians, for eschatology was just about all they cared to talk about, just as there are many today, who want to spell out the exact sequence of future events, and in the process run the danger of treating the Bible as a Jigsaw puzzle, and as if the Lord Himself, and via his apostles, had not warned against determining the times and dates of His coming return. For we should know, Paul says, *that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night* (1Thess.5:2). Obviously, we will have to watch for two extremes with these signs: to leave them be, pay little or no attention to them (perhaps, with an attitude of whatever will be will be) or to let one's whole life, one's whole theology, one's whole relationship to the Lord, to His church, become governed by it.

On the basis of Scripture then we can observe two preliminary signs preceding our Saviour's return. The first sign that tells us of his imminent coming is the moment the gospel of his kingdom has been preached *in the whole world as a testimony to all nations* (Mt. 24:14), and when that countless multitude will have been gathered *from every nation, tribe, people and language* (Rev.7:9) Concurrent with this time to preach the gospel to all nations, is the binding of Satan for a millennium, i.e., for a thousand years (Rev.20). The second sign will be the release of Satan to deceive the nations for a short time, to which sign belong as subheadings: the great Apostasy (the great desertion from Christ and his Church), the great Tribulation (the persecution of true believers), the reign of Antichrist (the man of lawlessness, as mentioned in 2Thess.2), as well as the concurrent signs of wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines and the rise of many false prophets.

Now, as you can understand, I will not be able to give more than a brief outline on this rather broad topic. Hopefully, it will be just enough to wet your appetite to study the doctrine of Eschatology, by reading the relevant Scripture passages, to study a number of Reformed commentaries on them, and then always with that underlying purpose, to strengthen yourself and others to wait patiently, but ardently, for the appearance of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

A. The preaching of the gospel as a testimony to all nations (Mt.24)

The disciples had drawn the Lord's attention to the temple, to that impressive building complex of this house of worship. How sobering was our Saviour's response: *I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another . . .* (vs2). And then the disciples ask Him, "*Tell us, when will this happen, and what will be the **sign** of your coming and of the end of the age* (vs3)? Obviously to the disciples, the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, would mean the end of the world. However, the Lord Jesus corrects them. He tells them that wars, rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes are only *the beginning of birth pains* (vs8). Indeed, they will be signs of the fall of Jerusalem, but that fall itself will not be **the** sign of his coming. The Lord then proceeds to point to two preliminary signs to indicate his return: the preaching of the gospel in *the whole world as a testimony to all nations* (vs14), and a fearful time of *distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equaled again* (vs21). This tells us then that our Saviour will not come back until these two have come to pass.

Four comments:

- First, with respect to the preaching of the gospel to all the nations, we realize that it does not imply that the Lord will return only after **every** person in the world has heard the gospel, but it will have to have been a testimony to all the **nations**, the acceptance or rejection of which will prove to be decisive, for every day since Pentecost is characterized by: *now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation* (2Cor.6:2).

- Secondly, this reference by the Lord Jesus *to all nations* is a prelude to what happened after Pentecost: the sending out of the apostles not just to the Jews but also to the gentiles, to all the peoples of the earth, which at the same time is then the fulfilment of this promise given to Abraham: *all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*, i.e., through Abraham's offspring: Isaac, Jacob, Judah, David, **Jesus**.

- Thirdly, it should be clear that we are rapidly nearing the time that the testimony of Jesus will have reached every nation, and,

- Fourthly, that we, as members of his catholic church, should be fully involved in bringing this gospel age to a close, by diligently testifying to the Name of Christ at home and abroad.

B. The release of Satan to deceive the nations in (to) the four corners of the earth. (Rev.20)

1. The great Apostasy

The preaching of the gospel to all nations will be followed by a great apostasy or falling away. It will be a time during which the faith of the fathers will be abandoned on a large scale. It will be an apostasy of great proportion, for *many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold* (Mt.24:10-12). It will be a time of false security and a time of materialism. It will be as in the days of Noah and Lot, and Lot's wife, with an over emphasis on *eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage*, i.e., used as ends in themselves, used without any reference to God and his Christ. During this time a sharp demarcation line

will also be drawn between those who fall away and those *who stand firm to the end, and who will be saved* (Mt.24:13).

2. The great Tribulation

This gospel age, which age is at the same time the millennium, the thousand years during which Satan was to be bound, is also followed by a period of great tribulation, a period of unparalleled distress. The believers will be grievously persecuted because of that widespread apostasy in those days, because of the very many that will fall away. In fact, if those days would not be *cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened* (Mt.24:22). How good it is to know then that in the end the wicked *will go away to eternal punishment, and the righteous to eternal life* (Mt.25:46).

3. The Antichrist

2 Thessalonians speaks about the coming of the Man of Lawlessness. During that time of apostasy this lawless one will come on the scene and lead the apostate, the unbelieving masses in their rejection of the Word, the law of God, and will also lead them against the Christians, the true believers. He will be **permitted** to come on the scene, but not before the gospel has reached every nation. To that end he will be **restrained** by God. After that he will indeed be **allowed** to do his satanic worst, be it for a very short time. He will be allowed to do his worst, as an instrument in the hand of Satan, yes, but also a winnow in the hand of God to sift out the truly righteous, and at the same time to draw that sharp demarcation line between them and the apostate, the wicked. Even though there is the suggestion that this lawless man consists of many persons, 2 Thessalonians leaves the strong impression that it is one definite person living at the end-time, a man in who is embodied the sum total of man's wickedness. He will not only oppose Christ, but present himself as his replacement, a man who usurps the honour and glory which is due to Christ alone. In view of the power unleashed by this Antichrist how great to know that it is our Saviour Jesus Christ who has the last word. He will overthrow this man of lawlessness, this global terror among man, *with the breath of his mouth and destroy (him) by the splendour of his coming* (2Thess.2:8).

4. The Concurrent Signs

As you know there is also the mention of wars, and rumors of wars, of earthquakes and famines, and the rise of many false prophets. Even though they were going to precede and would be signs to the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD, they were also to be signs of the end-times, especially that matter of many false prophets. During the course of history there have been many wars and many earthquakes. One author counted as many as 300 wars in the last 300 years in Europe alone, and another counted no less than 7000 earthquakes in the nineteenth century alone. How then can they be considered sure signs of our Saviour's return? Now to be sure, we will never know which wars, which earthquakes would be the last ones and thus be immediate signs of his coming. Even so, there is that word of our Saviour: *when you see **all** these things, you know that it*

is near, right at the door (Mt 24:33). In other words, when all those calamities begin to accumulate, including the appearance of those many false prophets, when they come at us all at once, more extensively, and with more intensity than ever before, we will know that the time of our Saviour's return is close at hand.

4. The Day of His Return

And then, finally, there will be our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. *Immediately after the distress of those days 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'* *At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky . . .* (Mt.24:29,30). And what a sign, what a sight that will be! Our Saviour's royal, majestic appearance in the sky will itself be the sign of the things that are to take place on this great and glorious day, and which will follow one another in rapid succession. He is descending while his people quickly ascend up to him, to meet Him in the air. And that's how every one *will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory* (Mt.24:30). Truly, it will be a sudden visible self-manifestation. His coming will be very sudden and yet, still most surprising. Indeed, *like a thief in the night* (1Thess.5:2) And what will be the purpose be of his coming? To gather all his own to Himself, to overthrow the man of lawlessness; to execute justice over all his and our enemies; to judge the living and the dead, and to make all things new. On that day will take place:

a. The Resurrection

The Lord Jesus said, *all who are in their grave will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned* (Jn.5:28,29).

Again, what a sight to behold, to see all those who at one time lived on earth, to have them rise up from the dead: the martyrs, those fed to the lions, those burned on the stake, those beheaded on the scaffold. Not one of them got lost, not one of them is missing: their bodies preserved like a seed in the soil (1Cor.15:42-44), they are now outfitted by God with a new body, a glorified body, and that *in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet* (1Cor.15:52). That's how every one will stand there each with his own body, each with his own identity. No, not stand there, but immediately moving upward, to meet their Lord and Saviour in the air.

b. The Rapture

As you know, the members of the church at Thessalonica wondered what would happen to the believers who died, those whose bodies were put in the grave. Paul, then, comes to assure them that those who have fallen "asleep" the Lord Jesus would bring back with Him at his return. He will bring their souls from heaven, so that they may be quickly united with their respective bodies. Then the believers still living, who have survived the apostasy, false prophecy, the tribulation, and the Antichrist, *will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air* (1Thess.4:17). And that's how the Lord will come **with** his saints and **for** his saints, for their entire persons (soul

and body). This Rapture will be public and it will be **audible**: *The Lord will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God . . . (1Thess.4:16)*. (No wonder that someone called this “the noisiest verse in the Bible.”)

c. **The Final Judgement**

It will take place immediately following Christ’s second coming and the resurrection of the dead. *When the Son of Man comes in his glory . . . all the nations will be gathered before him (Mt.25:31,32)*. *For we must all appear, Paul says, before the judgement seat of Christ, that each may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad (2Cor.5:10)*. To be sure, the Standard that will be used is the righteousness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and, therefore, all who believe and acknowledge through faith that He is their righteousness, satisfaction and holiness before God will be received in glory, despite all the sins committed while in the body. For, indeed, *salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12)*.

This then brings me to the conclusion of my essay. I hope that it has been edifying. May the overall result be a greater awareness of the time in which we live: the end times – the very end times! May it encourage us to take the present physical and mental persecution in stride. May the Spirit of Christ grant that we more consciously and conscientiously, with increasing zeal and dedication, and with joyful expectation keep waiting and looking for our blessed hope – *the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself to us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (Titus 2:13,14)*. For hasn’t it become clear again that the coming return of our Lord and Saviour will be so glorious that not one of us, not one of those who are his own, will want to miss out on it. May then our hope and expectation be born by a deep-felt gratitude and make us cry out with all the saints everywhere, *Amen! Come, Lord Jesus. Maranatha!*

ESCHATOLOGY

Romans 8:18-27; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:2; Revelation 22:20

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