

MATERIALIST IDEAS ABOUT THE END-TIMES

There are groups of Christians who distort the Gospel by materialist views about the last times. One basic one is that the literal nation of Israel will rule over the Messiah's kingdom. They hold that eventually the Jews will be converted and rule over the other nations. Unfortunately this literalism has deprived them of one of the most beautiful symbols of the Bible, Israel as the Communion of Saints. The Old Testament prophets never speak of mass salvation for all Israelites. The prophets preached that salvation was for God's remnant of grace. People who claimed physical descent from Abraham did not impress John the Baptist. When Paul wrote about "children of promise", he meant all believers from both Jews and Gentiles. When he said that all Israel would be saved (Rm 11:26), the context makes it evident that he was speaking about those in Israel who had not hardened themselves together with Gentile believers to whom the Gospel came in the wake of part of Israel's hardening themselves. Paul often uses "Israel" for the church of Jesus Christ (Rm 4:1-16; 11:5; Gl 3:26-29; 4:26-31; 6:15-16; Eph 2: 12-13). The Gentiles have now been brought near this Israel through the blood of Christ.

Much the same can be said of those who expect that the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and those who expect a thousand years of peace on earth, either before Christ returns, or after His return. In Revelation, as in other apocalyptic literature, the number ten is the number of completion, in general. A thousand is ten by ten by ten, just as 666 is 6, the number of man who seeks to be like God, but always falls short, three times over. Revelation chapter 20 does speak about a thousand years, but the context makes it clear that it is figurative language. Satan is a spirit, for example, and cannot be bound by a physical chain. In truth, what binds Satan is the preaching of the Gospel. Just imagine the horrific results for Christians and for others if the Gospel can no longer bind Satan, for the short period before the end (Rv 20:3). In the book of Revelation, as in Daniel, the basic time of the New Testament is 3½ times (half of 7), followed by a short season of trouble, sometimes called 3½ days. After Daniel refers to these 3½ times, he adds, "When the power of the holy people has been finally broken, all these things will be completed" (Dn 12:7). The power of the holy people is the Gospel, the power of God to salvation. All of us ought to pray that we are kept faithful in that last period of testing.

Materialistic ideas have had considerable success in modern times. Selective interpretation of Scripture, either literalistic or figurative according to the whim of the interpreter, which thrives in times of spiritual decay, liberalism, Biblical illiteracy, moral decline, deterioration of churches, and political unrest. There is also in it an element of escapism. It suggests that Christians may escape from the world and its troubles, that the believers will be "raptured" away from tribulation. All that Paul means in 1 Th 4:17 is that when the trumpet sounds at Christ's return the dead in the graves will rise, and then the believers who are still alive will be "caught up" with them, and both groups will be taken to meet the Lord Jesus as He return on the clouds. There will be no snatching away of all the believers from this earth before Christ's return. The separation of believers from unbelievers will occur at the judgment, and not before (Mt 13:41-43; Mt 25:31-32). When Jesus says, "Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left" (Mt 24:40), He means that the day of His return will be decisive and divisive. Believers who are ready for Him will be accepted into eternal life, but unbelievers will be rejected. However, believers shouldn't think that, because they are Christians, they will escape all tribulation. Ultimately, from the point of view of eternity, it is true that no one hair of their heads will be lost.

Materialistic interpretations of wolves dwelling with lambs, lions eating straw like oxen, nursing children playing beside the cobra's hole (Isa 11:6-9), swords beaten into plough-shares, and the end of war, all in a literal millennium (Isa 2:4) aren't just harmless opinions. They turn people's eyes away from Jesus Christ, His vicarious atonement, justification through faith, and the joy of eternal life in glory with the Lord.

God is the interpreter of prophecy. If God had not interpreted many Old Testament prophecies in the New Testament, people would still be guessing about their meaning. Probably we shall not understand how many prophecies have been fulfilled until we stand on the sea of glass before God's throne. If Daniel was told that the words were closed up and sealed until the end of time when he asked for more understanding (Dn 12:8-9), we are foolish if we deal with them as if they had not been sealed.

If materialistic ideas lead people to rely on ear-tickling attempts to identify prophecies instead of relying on Jesus Christ, that is sad. It turns their eyes away from the beauty of heaven to a false material kingdom of God on earth. Such ideas in fact show that Satan is alive and well, and he is using Biblical words (falsely understood) in an effective way to lead sincere Christians away from the Gospel of Christ into human speculations. Such ideas militate against salvation by God's grace alone, through faith alone, for Christ's sake. They challenge believers of today to know their Scriptures well. We can meet satanic heresies only with the God's Word as our weapon of spiritual warfare.

Peter wrote: “According to His promise we expect *new heavens and a new earth* where righteousness lives. With this to look forward to, dear friends, make every effort to have Him find you without spot or blemish, and at peace” (2 Pt 3: 13-14).