

DOES ANYONE KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS?

By Richard Jordan

“And that, knowing the time, that now *it is* high time to awake out of sleep: for now *is* our salvation nearer than when we believed”
(Romans 13:11).

The past twelve months or so have seen another rash of “date setting” and prognostications concerning the timetable of our Lord’s return.

In 1988, a man named Edgar Whisenant widely distributed a book professing to give the date of the Rapture based on the Jewish feasts of Leviticus 23. His date—September 11-13, 1988 created quite a stir, even gaining the notice of the secular press. But, alas, September came and went—and no Rapture.

Not to be outdone, others immediately arose to declare the *real, correct* date to be May 1989. If you are reading this— they misfired too!

All such speculations have one basic flaw: a failure to recognize sufficiently the *distinctive* character of Paul’s apostleship and message. The present dispensation is called “*the mystery*,” or “secret,” and was first revealed through Paul (Ephesians 3:1-9; Romans 16:25, 26). This dispensation is, in fact, a gracious *interruption* of the prophetic program.

It was after Israel refused the offer of the Messianic kingdom through the twelve apostles that ‘God, in grace, interrupted the prophetic program, concluding “all in unbelief that He might have mercy on all” (Romans 11:32).

“I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but *rather* through their fall salvation *is come* unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy.”

“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in” (Romans 11:11, 25).

We should bear in mind that while the ministry of Peter and the twelve was basically concerned with prophecy and the coming of Christ *to earth to judge*, Paul was basically concerned with the *mystery* and Christ’s continued *absence in grace*. Even the Rapture is His coming into “the air” *to take us away from the earth* to be with Him in glory.

It is this event for which we wait. We do not look for signs or for some great change to take place on earth—we look for *Him* and He may come for us *at any moment*. Perhaps very soon—perhaps not.

TIMES, SEASONS AND SIGNS

In Scripture “*the times and seasons*” as well as “*the signs of the times*” are *not* associated with the Body of Christ but rather with the Messianic kingdom and the ushering in of “the day of the Lord.” They have nothing to do with the Lord’s return to take away the Body of Christ but rather look to His return to the earth, later to reign in majesty and glory.

See, for example, Acts 1:6, 7 and I Thessalonians 5:1-2.

“When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?

“And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power” (Acts 1:6, 7).

“But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you.

“For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night” (I Thessalonians 5:1, 2).

In both these passages “the times and seasons” are clearly associated with the restoration of Israel’s kingdom and the ushering in of the day of the Lord.

It should be further noted that in Paul’s epistles, which give us God’s program for *this* age, we are never once told to look for “the signs of the times.” The simple reason is, as Pastor J. C. O’Hare said, “There are no signs of the times today because these are not the times of the signs.”

When Paul speaks about “the last days” of the dispensation of grace (II Timothy 3:1-5) he gives no more than general trends and movements—things that could be said about any period of time during this dispensation. Not once does he give *specific* signs to tell just when Christ will return. The reason is clear: the Lord would keep His people throughout the age of His rejection always watching, always waiting, always ready—regardless of current trends and events.

Every specific sign of the Lord’s return (e.g. Luke 21:25-28) has to do with the coming of Christ to reign on earth and not one has yet been fulfilled.

We realize this last statement will raise an immediate objection: what about the 1948 founding of the nation Israel? We answer that while this may, indeed, prove to be a foreshadowing of prophetic events, we know of no specific passage that can be cited as being fulfilled in the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel.

The general assumption is that Mathew 24:32-34 refers to this event but this is surely faulty, missing both the real intent of this parable as well as the nature of the present “dispensation of the mystery” (Colossians 1:25, 26).

The key to understanding the prophetic outline set forth in Matthew 23 is the fact that the whole of our Lord’s answer does not concern the end of our age, but rather the end of the prophesied, Jewish age—yet in the future. But if Matthew 24 looks to the future “time of Jacob’s trouble,” to just what does the parable of the fig tree refer? Let’s see.

THE BUDDING FIG TREE

“Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer *is* nigh:

“So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, *even* at the doors.

“Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (Matthew 24:32-34).

The general assumption is that the parable of the budding fig tree is a reference to the reemergence of Israel as a nation and state as in 1948. To this date is added 40 years for the supposed length of a “generation,” thus arriving at 1988.

While the identity of “this generation” has been widely debated—mainly due to the influence of Post- and A-Millennialism—the most natural reading seems the obvious one: the generation that sees the fig tree’s new growth will also see the end of all the judgments. Thus the crux of the parable rests with the identity of the fig tree.

There are *four trees* used in Scripture to represent Israel: the vine, the olive, the fig and the bramble. While all of these trees represent Israel, each has its own special area of emphasis, so that each represents a *specific aspect* of Israel’s life and history.

The two trees that concern our present study are the vine and the fig tree. We say that the identities of both these trees are important because almost all commentators mistakenly identify the fig tree as representing the national life of Israel.

In Psalm 80:8-19, a summary history of Israel, is given which opens with the words: “*Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it. Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land.*” The record goes on to describe how this vine spread across the country from Jordan to the Mediterranean. It is clear that the vine represents Israel *as a nation*. See also Isaiah 5:1-7.)

But if it is the vine that represents the national life of Israel what is the significance of the fig tree? Its first occurrence in Scripture will help us.

“And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they *were* naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons” (Genesis 3:7).

The fig tree here is associated with man’s attempt to cover his guilt before God. As Adam and Eve sought to replace the spiritual light that had once covered them with the poor substitute of a covering made by human hands, they give the fig tree its proper association—*religion*. Passages such as Matthew 21:17-20 demonstrate that the fig tree is particularly suited to symbolize Israel’s *religious* history.

The parable of the budding fig tree, then, has no reference to the restoration of Israel as a nation. Rather the reference is to the *religious* life of Israel, to the day when the fig tree is seen sprouting (and flourishing) in the vineyard.

Thus when Matthew 24 is allowed to stand where it should in the program of God, we see that it does not give us today in the dispensation of grace any real light on the timing of the Rapture.

As significant—or insignificant—as the establishment of the modern state of Israel may prove to be prophetically, we simply have no real way of knowing for sure until and unless the Rapture does take place.

THE SEVENTIETH WEEK

The most common means of Rapture-dating is to seek to date the beginning of Daniel 9’s 70th week, since Daniel 9:27 clearly sets forth the means of identifying this event.

For example, Whisenant confidently declares, “The 69th week of Daniel ends 6 April 30 A. D. at the closing of Jesus’ tomb. The 70th week of Daniel ends seven Jewish years later on the Day of Atonement 1995, at the battle of Armageddon, 4 October 1995, thus lasting seven Jewish years. Because the 70th week of Daniel starts 21 September 1988 (the Day of Atonement 1988), the Rapture of the Church must precede the Peace Pact signing between Anti-Christ and Israel. Thus we look at Rosh Hashanah 1988 which is ten days earlier than the Peace Pact signing date, 21 September 1988.”

But even this seemingly foolproof procedure has a glitch, for there are a number of specific prophetic events which must take place before the Anti-Christ’s revelation to begin that 70th week period. Take, for example, Daniel 7:24:

“And the ten horns out of this kingdom *are* ten kings *that* shall arise: and another shall rise after them; and he shall be diverse from the first, and he shall subdue three kings.”

Space doesn't allow us to go through all the details of Daniel 7, but the verse is clear that this last king, who will "speak great words against the Most High," arises only *after* the ten kings have risen to power. In other words, the path by which the Anti-Christ rises to the position of Daniel 9:27 is preceded by tremendous political realignments in the Eastern Mediterranean area.

Our point here is that these things must be fulfilled *prior* to the revelation of Anti-Christ is unsound, failing to take into account other specific prophetic events which precede his revelation. The old idea that "seven years after the Rapture Christ returns to earth" must give way to further light and understanding. There is one *obvious gap* between the Rapture and the beginning of the 70th week—a gap prophesied in Daniel 9:26!

NOW WHAT?

What then are we to make of all the date setting and sensationalism popularly associated with the Rapture?

First, we should remind ourselves (and others) of the need to clearly recognize "the preaching of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery." God's timetable for the dispensation of grace and the Rapture is not connected with the Jewish ingathering feasts, the beginning of Daniel's 70th week or the rise of the Anti-Christ. The basic element in the dispensation of grace is *the fall of Israel* and the *temporary suspension of the program* committed to her.

Because the dispensation of grace is not part of the prophesied program, *no one can tell how long it will last* or when it will last for another day or that judgment will not strike tomorrow!

These are indeed wonderful days filled with great opportunity and need for the sharing of the unadulterated message of grace committed to our trust—and we should be using each day to that end! Little wonder that Paul wrote to the Romans—and us.

"And that, knowing the time, that now *it is* high time to awake out of sleep: for now *is* our salvation nearer than when we believed.

"The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light" (Romans 13:11, 13).

Not being asleep to what is going on around us but being alert to every opportunity to live for and serve our soon coming Savior—this is the Pauline way to be looking for His coming.

"Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.

"See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise,

"Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

"Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord *is*" (Ephesians 5:14-17).