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WHY DATE-SETTING THE RAPTURE IS UNBIBLICAL

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

I often encounter people that want to talk with me or receive information in the mail about why they believe the rapture will come soon or on a certain date. They often have complicated schemes and reasons why they believe they are right, even though everyone has been wrong in the past. One of the key features of the pre-trib rapture is that it is signless, meaning that there are absolutely no signs preceding it. This is why church age believers are to always be looking for the Lord, because His coming in the air for us is truly imminent and could happen at any moment. If a believer could learn of the time when Christ will shout from the clouds, then the rapture would cease to be imminent. God has fixed a specific day on His calendar when this longed for event will occur, but He will never tell us since we are told to always be expecting His return. Just like a waiting bride is listening for the shout of the bridegroom.

The second coming will be dateable, once the rapture has occurred and the events of the tribulation commence. It will be dateable since signs and dates (days, months and years) will be a part of the events that will precede Christ's return. If one becomes a believer in the tribulation, they will be able to figure where they are on the calendar of prophesied events and have a pretty good idea when Christ will return. This is why Luke 21:28 tells believers at the end of the tribulation, "But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

NO SIGNS FOR THE CHURCH

When the disciples ask Jesus in Acts 1:6 "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Christ had not yet revealed to them the mystery (i.e., secret) about the intervening dispensation of grace called the church. Christ's response set the tone for chronological matters in relation to the whole church age. "It is not for you to know times or epochs [seasons] which the Father has fixed by His own authority" (Acts 1:7). Notice the "times and seasons" are set having been predestined by God, but for the church we are not to know them, they are a part of God's secret counsels. Why? I think because "times and seasons," chronology, and signs all relate to God's earthly people Israel. However, for God's heavenly people—the church—things related to heaven cannot be discovered or figured out, they must be revealed. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us [Israel]" (Deut. 29:29). Further, Moses notes that in order to find out what is going on in heaven, we on earth need someone from heaven to come down and tell us (Deut. 30:11-12). In other words, we need revelation from God as to what He is doing. What is God's revelation to His heavenly people (Eph. 1:3, 20; 2:10; 3:10; 6:9; Phil. 3:20; Col. 1:5; 3:1-4), the church?

Christ, upon instructing His disciples on how citizens of the kingdom should conduct themselves after His departure until His return, counseled a posture of "readiness," "alertness," "waiting and watching," faithfully engaged in performing the tasks He left His followers to do (Matt. 24:45-47; Luke 12:35-40; Mark 13:33-37). While it is true that these passages from the Gospels refer to the coming of the Messianic Kingdom at the second coming following the Tribulation, it appears that the posture of readiness, alertness, watching, and waiting is also Christ's will for His church as commanded in the Epistles. Nowhere is there even a hint that signs will relate to the rapture.

ISRAEL'S FALL FEASTS

Without a doubt, the most popular scheme in our day for those who attempt to date-set the rapture is the endeavor to relate the rapture to the fall feasts of Israel. This is wrongheaded for a number of reasons, but foremost is the fact that all seven of the feasts are for Israel and occur in relation to their calendar and God's plan for His elect nation, not in relation to the church. Once again, the rapture is signless and that includes possible signs related to Israel's feast cycle.

Some today believe that the annual feasts of Israel have typical significance. I, as do most evangelicals, have no objection to this view. We all agree that the first four feasts (the Spring cycle) were fulfilled at the time of Christ's first coming, and that the final three feasts (the Fall cycle) will be fulfilled in relation to His second coming. The difference between myself and some date-setters is whether or not the church fulfills any of Israel's feasts. I contend that only Israel fulfills the feasts, all seven, since these feasts were given to Israel.

Yet there are those today who believe that Rosh Hashanah or the Feast of Trumpets relates to God's program for the church, specifically that the rapture will occur on Rosh Hashanah in the future. This cannot be true since it would mean that the rapture cannot come at any time, as the New Testament Epistles clearly teach. If this view were correct, the rapture would have to occur on the Feast of Trumpets. I agree with Terry Hulbert, who wrote a doctoral dissertation on Israel's feasts. "The seven appointed times were given as a typical presentation of the commitments made to Israel in the Abrahamic Covenant and those which amplified it," notes Hulbert. "As these can be fulfilled only by Israel, so the typology of the feasts can relate only to that nation."¹ This would mean that a believer should only be waiting for the Lord's return in the Fall of each year, instead of at all times.

If we are going to consistently apply the method of literal interpretation, then we cannot see *any* of Israel's feasts being fulfilled by God's program for the church. Why? Because these feasts are given in Leviticus 23 to Israel as part of her law. The church has been given the Lord's Table as the feast we are to celebrate "from now on until the kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22:18). If we believe some of Israel's feasts are fulfilled by the church then we have adopted elements of "replacement theology," since we view the church replacing Israel in God's plan. Nowhere does the New Testament speak of the church fulfilling any of Israel's feasts. Therefore, since Israel's feasts are fulfilled only by Israel and not by the church, then the Feast of Trumpets *cannot* involve a prediction of the rapture of the church.

Israel's fifth feast does not give any insight into the day of the year on which the rapture will occur. Instead, it will be fulfilled in conjunction with the Second Advent when the nation of Israel is gathered in at her conversion (Matt. 24:31). Hulbert's summary of the purpose for the fulfillment of Israel's feasts makes the best sense within the framework of a *consistent* literal hermeneutic.

When God fulfilled the first four feasts He had provided everything necessary for Israel to enter into literal kingdom blessing—redemption, separation, resurrection, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Israel's rejection of these, however, made necessary a national change of heart before the Kingdom could be established. Foreknowing this, God included the Feasts of Trumpets and Day of Atonement in the annual cycle. Thus, the Feast of Trumpets predicted God's alerting of the nation for the impending event

which would bring about repentance. The Feast of the Day of Atonement predicted, not the death of Christ which had already been typified in the Passover, but the new reaction of Israel to the Redeemer's death. This change will take place when the believing Remnant repents during the Tribulation period. The event which fulfills this sixth feast is identified as God's intervention to save Israel from destruction as Gentile armies attack Jerusalem.²

CONCLUSION

Date setting usually has a negative impact upon many people's interest and their perception of the study of Bible prophecy. Critics of the rapture and prophecy will use these abuses to justify to many their opposition to our beliefs. Sadly others who might have otherwise been interested in learning more about the subject may be frightened away by these extreme applications.

The thing that bothers me the most about this whole issue is the apparent lack of understanding by the date-setters, who are advocates of pretribulationism, that their very date-setting schemes are inconsistent with the New Testament teaching of the any-moment rapture. They do not seem to realize that by introducing into our futuristic approach to prophecy ideas and conclusions that flow from the logic of the long discredited historicist hermeneutic they are changing and misrepresenting the very character of rapture theology. Our friends need to wake up and realize the unintended harm they are doing to the overall teaching on our Blessed Hope—the rapture!

In spite of many attempts to the contrary, date setting is still prohibited in the Scriptures. Christ said, "of that day and hour no one knows" (Matt. 24:36). We may believe that we are near the general time of Christ's return since Israel is back in her land and other players are being placed on the end-time stage. However, Christ's rapture of His church is a signless event that could happen at any-moment. When it does then God will complete His plan for Israel as forecasted in the three Fall Feasts of Israel. Meanwhile, the Feast of Trumpets does not in any way relate to the rapture of the church.

Our calling as church age believers is faithful waiting for our Beloved Bridegroom to catch us up into the clouds and take us to His Father's house. What a glad reunion with our Savior we will have. I don't know about you, but I can't wait to see Jesus. This is why I am eagerly awaiting His any-moment return at every moment. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Terry C. Hulbert, "The Eschatological Significance of Israel's Annual Feasts" (ThD dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1965), p. 2.

² Hulbert, "Israel's Annual Feasts," pp. 2-3.