

Don'T Lose Your Focus!

We Must Concentrate on Christ's Interests

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Deuteronomy 29:29 The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

I think that you may be aware that there are a great number of perceptions floating around the greater church of God in regard to prophecies as to how the end times are going to be specifically played out. I hope that you understand that not a single one of us making prognostications has been proved right yet—and that includes yours truly. This verse says that spiritual things must be revealed, and Bible prophecies, emanating as they are from a spiritual God and pertaining to His spiritual purpose and plan, are of a spiritual nature.

I have concluded on the basis of the overwhelming evidence that nobody has been proved right, that God is not all that concerned that we grasp the particular steps that events are going to take, at least not just yet. Everybody has been proved wrong, especially in regard to the *timing* of the unfolding of events. What we are dealing with here has been a common problem for God's people, and right at the beginning of the New Testament church we can see this.

Acts 1:6-8 When they therefore were come together they asked of him, saying, Lord, will you 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 has put in His own power. But you shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and you shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

What we are dealing with here in this common problem, is you can see that the last question the disciples asked Him before He went off and disappeared from their sight was, "When are You going to return?" Actually, it was not quite that directly. They said, "Are you going to set up the Kingdom right now?"

Is this not the same thing that we are anxiously concerned about? We would like to see

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things drawn to a close. We would like to see good, strong evidence that things are lining up right in place, and thereby just buck ourselves up with all kinds of faith, with strong belief, [and say], "Now that I see all these things occurring, I can have faith in these difficult times." But did you notice that He shut them down quick? He did it by implying pretty strongly, "I want you to be thinking about something else besides Me setting up the Kingdom of God on earth."

This eagerness to see God's purpose worked out to a major conclusion continued right on through in the church. We see in I Corinthians 7 and in Romans 13, both of which were authored by Paul, that he expected Christ's return momentarily. Brethren, there is hardly any man in the Bible more respected than the apostle Paul, but almost two thousand years have gone by and Christ has not returned yet. Paul's anticipation of the return of Christ was not fulfilled in his lifetime either, but he had the feeling within him, just like we do, of an eagerness to see it concluded. In our time Mr. Armstrong was consistently wrong in regard to his timing of events as well.

Does this mean that we should stop looking into these things? The answer is no. It is incumbent upon us to seek understanding, and besides, nobody, including Mr. Armstrong and all who have gone before us, has anywhere near the amount of information to work with for understanding what is taking place on a worldwide scale as we do today. We should be able to discern somewhat more clearly than they. Modern electronic and satellite communication provides us with an almost instantaneous knowledge of events occurring in nations that may very well be spoken of in God's Word, and thus, on the contrary, we should be trying to understand, because prophecy *is* a part of God's Word, and we are commanded to live by every word of God. But there are many difficulties involved in properly interpreting prophecy, not the least of which is what Jesus mentioned in Matthew 24. I want you to turn there.

Matthew 24:4-5 And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. [The subject is deception. The subject also is touching on His return.] For many shall come in My name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many.

What I would like to point out to you is that the religious world, in the United States of America especially, is probably not to the same degree, to the same intensity, in other parts of the world. There is so much attention in the United States that is paid to religion. The dominant religion in the United States calls itself Christian, and most of those people are looking for the return of Jesus Christ.

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What I am getting at is all of these people who are coming in His name, saying that He is Christ, every one of them just about has a prophecy to offer you. Now take warning, because attached to that is He said, "Do not let anybody deceive you," and the subject of this chapter eventually, very strongly, becomes His return. As we heard in Martin's sermon on the Sabbath, it begins talking about the destruction of the Temple, but by the time you get through about another eight or ten verses, we begin to find that He is concentrating on the signs of His return.

Prophecy is especially difficult because it requires certain keys to unlock its mysteries, and some of these are so vague that they will seemingly apply in almost any time in history. I am going to give you a brief overview of some of the difficulties that we face in interpreting prophecy, because these things can be attractive but devious traps, consuming time and energy that is better used elsewhere.

I do not know how many men's names have been put forward, sometimes with very strong dogmatism and long documentation, that such and such a personality is surely the Beast. Everybody looks for a man whose name in some language (most often it turns out to be Greek or Hebrew, but sometimes other languages may come into it as well, such as Aramaic) adds up to 666. There is very good reason to do so because God certainly points to that, but I again want to point out to you that despite all these prognostications, nobody has been right yet, and these people come and go. They come on the scene. They might have a great deal of power for a while, but then they fade from power and eventually they die.

Now the same thing is going on in pretty much the same way regarding the False Prophet. Partly this is because of a vague Catholic Church prophecy that has been interpreted as saying that there will be so many popes in a line up to a certain number (which is somewhere around 264) and then either **he** will be the last pope and be the False Prophet, or the **next** one will be the False Prophet. Well, we have reached that number, and passed it. Demons lie. I hope we know that. But you see, this is something that is floated out there, and it may get our interest for a while, and we hopefully anticipate that we have come that much closer, and that right now everything is going to start going real fast, but it does not.

Here is an important one. Are you aware that we—the greater church of God—are not even aware where every nation mentioned in the Genesis 10 table of nations **is** today? We have pretty good indication of where some of them are, but there are some where there are prophetic indications regarding them, but we do not know for sure where they are.

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Consider this: Does not most of the Protestant-Evangelical world, which is really the major group besides the church of God that seems to be really intensely interested in end-time prophecy, believe that the Jewish nation of Israel is the Israel of the Bible? Almost every one of their interpretations of prophecy that has Israel mentioned in it is pointed toward that little nation of about eight or ten million people. That really twists the understanding of what is going on in this world, because they do not know that the Israel of the Bible is the most powerful nation on the face of the earth. Their interpretation is focused on that little nation, and how wrong that makes their interpretation.

But brethren, the church of God does not even know where all the nations of Israel are located! There is disagreement. The only two they really are sure of (and even here is a question or two) are the United States and Britain, that these are the tribes of Joseph—Ephraim and Manasseh. But there are some people in the church of God who believe that we have got them reversed, that Britain is Manasseh and that the United States is Ephraim. That one usually has its basis in the fact the Scripture does say there in Genesis, where Jacob laid his hands, that Ephraim will be the greater of the two. At the end time there is no doubt at all that the United States is the greater when compared with Britain in terms of economic power, military power, and influence in the world, and so that twists *their* interpretation of prophecy.

Also within the church of God it almost seems as though it is written in Scripture that the Beast is going to rise in Europe. Are you aware that this interpretation is on shaky ground because it is very dependent on how one interprets *secular* history, not Scripture. Secular histories are always somewhat distorted. It is not completely dependent upon that interpretation of secular history, but secular history is *within* the interpretation.

When we look over at Europe at this time we find that Europe's political unity is a joke. If we are looking for a Beast power, if we are looking for somebody that really shakes the nations and makes them frightened so that the Scripture says, "Who can make war with the Beast?", it almost looks like "Who can make war against the United States?" Are we the Beast?

Let us think about this because it has been put into our minds that the Beast is going to rise in Europe, but when we look at Europe right now, their political unity is a joke. Their economic unity is weak. A couple of the nations are giving signals of pulling out of the Euro configuration and returning to their own national currencies. They do not even have an army, and they have almost no weaponry. They are completely dependent upon the United States of America through NATO. We are beginning to see that there are problems here.

The United States of America is the strongest friend Europe has. Since Europe might be the site of the Beast, and since many of the Israelitish nations are in Europe, does this mean then that many of the Israelitish nations are going to be part of the Beast? This has been considered before, and our general teaching when we were in the Worldwide Church of God was that when the time came, Britain would pull out. It was almost accepted that the United States, which is Britain's brother, would not be a part of it, but Britain would be, and at the last minute somebody would kick them out, or they would withdraw so that they would be with Joseph.

Let me give you some more problems. I want you to consider other nations that are mentioned in prophecy. Is Turkey really Edom—Jacob's brother? Who is the King of the South, and in what nation does *he* reside? Is he an Arab from Ishmael? Is he an Egyptian, or a Persian from Iran? Is he an Iraqi? A Syrian? A Jordanian? A Pakistani? An Afghani or a modern Amalekite? Can you begin to see how many questions and how few specific answers we have?

Are the historical events recorded in the Bible really patterns that we should assume are going to be repeated in the end-time? This becomes very important. For example, in Daniel 11 the prophecies regarding the King of the South geographically located him in what is today Egypt. However, even though he was geographically located in Egypt, the King of the South was a Greek. How do you figure that one?

Antiochus Epiphanes, who is thought to be a type of the Beast, was the victorious King of the North who sacked and burned Jerusalem because he was angry at somebody else. (We see this in Daniel 11.) He sacrificed a pig on the brazen altar, erected a statue to Jupiter Olympus in the Holy of Holies, and then proceeded to destroy the entire Temple. This very corrupt leader's home base was in what we call today Syria. He too was a Greek. Now how closely will end-time events follow that scenario? That one has already been played out.

I want to assure you that I am not saying that the Beast will not arise in Europe, but I am saying that the prevailing interpretations of prophecy are not all that secure as we might hope. What this circumstance we find ourselves living through demands of us is that we have a humble balance in our mind by not allowing ourselves to get so set on a particular version that there is no room for other possibilities. Prophecy is just one way that we can unwittingly be led to lose what should be our focus. I do not know whether there has ever been a time in the history of the church of God when the people, who are part of the church, have been so intent on prophecy.

I want you to reflect back again to what we just read in Acts 1 when the apostles wanted

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to know whether Jesus was going to set up the Kingdom immediately. He shut them down in a hurry, essentially telling them that there were more important things for them to begin doing immediately. They were not to sit there and wait for Him to return. There were other things to do, and He kicked off three things very rapidly that He wanted them to do. He flat out told them that they did not even need to know the times or the seasons. You can read that yourself.

Much the same trial faces us. We must control our focus, putting first things first. I want you to notice how Paul addresses what I was beginning to get to at the beginning of this sermon. We are going to turn to I Corinthians 12. The apostle Paul here puts his finger on what should always be of first importance to you and me.

I Corinthians 12:31 But covet earnestly the best gifts and yet show I unto you a more excellent way.

I Corinthians 13:1-2 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge: and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity [love], I am nothing.

In another place, the apostle Paul says that he was more gifted than they all. I do not know for sure exactly who the "they all" were that he was referring to, but I do know this from reading the book of Corinthians that they were overly concerned about gifts of the Spirit. They did not have the right focus. If you know anything about that congregation, (and you know what I just told you) they were all worried about who had the best gifts, they did not have their focus on love. They neither loved God nor their fellow man. They loved what their vanity would give to them because they were more gifted than another person.

Unfortunately, there are people in the church of God—I do not say that they are in the Church of the Great God—but there are people in the church of God who are very interested in prophecy and they spend almost all their time, it seems to me, seeking prophetic understanding, and as I said, nobody has been proven right yet. It is turning out, I believe, (and I hope I am not unfair in judging them) to be pretty much a waste of time. I hope they are putting their attention on what Paul said here, and what Jesus said back in Acts 1. There are more important things for us to do than to be overly concerned about prophecy. The focus is wrong.

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What Paul is doing here in the last verse of I Corinthians 12 and in the whole of I Corinthians 13, is telling us what must be of primary importance. It should be the focus of the church of God at any time in its history, and that is, loving God and loving fellow man. Those are the two great commandments upon which all of the law hangs. They are **the** most important things in our life. Keeping that first one—loving God—will keep us from breaking the rest of them. In short, it is the proper use of the law of God in daily life in order to glorify God and at one and the same time developing the character of God in preparation for the Kingdom of God. That is focus number one.

We are going to make what I think is an interesting comparison back in the book of Revelation. We are going to compare the Laodicean with the Philadelphian in one narrow area.

Revelation 3:15-20 I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot: I would you were cold or hot. So then because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. Because you say, I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing: and know not that you are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that you may be rich: and white raiment, that you may be clothed, and that the shame of your nakedness does not appear: and anoint your eyes with eye salve that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: If any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me.

If you look carefully at those five verses, you will find that Christ nowhere said that the Laodiceans were lazy. Rather His accusation focuses on their indifference toward, and thus their inattention to, things important to Him. Aside from His personal concern for them, He has every right to refute them for this, because they belong to Him. One of the things that we see here is that the root of the Laodicean problem is that his time and energies are focused on the wrong things because he has a false confidence in his own righteousness.

Any one of us today who has a similar misdirection is guilty of the same sin, and that sin is indifference toward what Christ deems as important. The Laodicean may be very busy. He may be energetic.

Assuming that each of these congregations named here and described in Revelation 2 and 3 depicts eras, one of the major differences between the Philadelphian and the

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Laodicean falls right in this area of being misfocused.

Let us look at the Philadelphian in verses 9-11.

Revelation 3:9 Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews and are not, but do lie: Behold, I will make them to come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.

That is a tremendous thing there that I will draw attention to in a future sermon. Now why are these people going to be worshipped? Do you see that is what it says? In the very next verse He tells them why they are going to be worshipped by others.

Revelation 3:10-11 Because you have kept the word of My patience, I also will keep you from the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which you have, that no man take your crown.

That phrase, "because you have kept the word of My patience," is better translated in modern versions as "because you have kept My command to persevere." Perseverance is a major spiritual work, and a major part of our trial in the end-time is to control our desires to simply escape from the end-time pressures rather than make good use of the time afforded to us to grow.

One of the things that really made Joseph stand out is that despite the fact that he was in prison, despite the fact that he had been chained, despite the fact that he was innocent of what he was accused, he always kept his mind on the first order of business, and that was to please God. Regardless of where he was, what the circumstance was, how he was hurt, or how unjust the treatment was, he kept the focus away from himself and instead turned his attention to what was important to God.

Was there any indication in Joseph's life that he was concerned about prophecy? He focused on the problem at hand and how he could best respond to it by his conduct. And he did a very fine job of it and left us a fine example.

He made the best use of a bad, bad, terrible situation that could have made him so depressed that all he thought about was, "Woe is me!" "How am I going to get out of here?" "God is unfair. He will not allow me to do this, that, or the other thing." "Everybody is against me. I am going to go out and eat worms!" He kept his wits about

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him. We can look back on this now and see that what he said was, "How can I use this to glorify God?" "How can I use this to love these people who did this to me?" "How can I use this to help the people who are in prison with me?"

I am not saying that he turned his attention to that immediately, but we know from the story that is written there, he did get to that position pretty quick, and he began to stand out. He was glorifying God regardless of the situation.

I am submitting to you that since the Philadelphian is going through the same kind of situation that the Laodicean is because they are both part of the same general era of time, the Philadelphian is persevering. Do you know what that means? It means he is hanging on to what he had been previously been taught, and he is making the best use of a bad situation in which he finds himself. He has not lost his focus. That is the difference between the two. Even the name "Philadelphia" means "a brotherly lover." It is telling you that his mind is not on himself.

You look at what it says about the Laodicean. He might be very busy. He might even be prosperous and making a great deal of money in the terrible times, but his mind is on himself. "I am rich!" He looks at himself and says, "I am all right." He is so spiritually weak that he cannot see that he has put himself in prison to his own feelings that are about himself. Is he busy? Probably, if that is what he is looking at. "I am rich and increased with goods."

It actually goes further in regard to the Philadelphian. The implication from what is said here is that the persevering Philadelphian is not merely holding on to the values that have previously been given to him, the Philadelphian is concerned about the same spiritual things Christ is, and those things have his time and attention. Christ's exhortation is given with the implication that if the Philadelphian holds on, he will grow. There is a physical parallel to this that everyone of us ought to be able to relate to.

When I was a young man, the Charles Atlas muscle-building course was very popular. I never took it (as you can see), but it was very popular. Almost every comic book you bought had an advertisement in it for it. That particular course operated on a very simple premise that required little or no physical equipment to do it. The premise was that as long as a muscle is kept under tension, the life-giving blood will flow to that muscle under tension in greater volume, and the muscle will grow. It is that simple. That is the whole premise behind muscle building.

The weights used in the muscle-building did not have to be particularly heavy unless one wanted to build an extremely bulky muscle, but the muscle had to be used whether

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the weights were light or heavy, and if they were used, the muscles would grow. That is exactly what is being said here in a spiritual sense. "Philadelphians, if you hang on, you are going to grow." It is almost as if there will be an automatic response to the very fact that they will not give up on the things, the truths, the concepts, the principles that they have previously been taught. Even though they may be scattered, they will continue to grow.

Now by way of contrast, the Laodicean as compared to the Philadelphian is, as we would say today, "all over the place." Busy! Busy! Busy! But as Christ reports, they are not interested in what **He** is interested in. They are wasting their time.

Again, assuming that the Laodicean represents the final period of time during which Christ will return, the exhortation given them shows what Christ is most interested in during this period. He is interested in His brethren becoming **spiritually** rich. The contrast is given there. The Laodicean says, "I am rich." That is the way he judges the situation. Christ looks at him and says, "You are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." Incidentally, Laodicea means "judgment of the people," so you can turn it either way. Christ is the Judge, and says, "You are in sad shape." The Laodicean judges and says, "Hey! I am in great shape." It is the judging of the people, or the judgment of the people. We have an important distinction here.

Let us turn our attention to a somewhat different direction that involves me and my relationship with you. We are going to go back to Ezekiel 33. What we are seeing here is, as we would interpret today, an end-time situation.

Ezekiel 33:1-6 Again, the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Son of man, speak to the children of your people, and say unto them, When I bring the sword upon a land, if the people of the land take a man of their coasts, and set him for their watchman: If when he sees the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people: Then, whosoever hears the sound of the trumpet, and takes not warning: If the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, and took not warning: his blood shall be upon him. But he that takes warning shall deliver his soul. But if the watchman see the sword come and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned: if the sword come, and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity: but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand.

Back when Evelyn and I were baptized into the church, Mr. Armstrong used these

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verses very frequently. He assigned these verses to himself, saying that it was his responsibility to look into the prophecies, to interpret them in the light of events going on in the world, and then warn the nations of Israel of its impending destruction and the return of Jesus Christ. I have no argument with that, but I do want to make a more direct spiritual application of this verse in reference to myself and you—to those of you who are here, and to those who are listening to the sound of my voice—because I am your watchman.

It says here that when you choose somebody to be your watchman, then he is your watchman. You have chosen to be with the Church of the Great God, and so now I am responsible to be giving you warning, and specifically it is warning about warfare. But I am a watchman of a different sort from Herbert Armstrong.

Ezekiel 33:7-9 So you, O son of man, I have set you a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore you shall hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, you shall surely die: If you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at your hand. Nevertheless, if you warn the wicked of his way to turn from it: if he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity: but you have delivered your soul.

These verses are telling me that each of us has a responsibility before God. If I do not speak God's Word to you so that you are able to make proper choices in your life, then your blood is on my head. But, if I am telling you, and you do nothing, your blood is on your own head, and I am free and clear before God. I will tell you right now I am going to do everything in my power so that your blood is not on my head.

Now, I am warning you of the close approach of the enemy, and I have been doing it for years. As a matter of fact we are already involved in a very serious spiritual warfare that gives every impression of increasing intensity.

I want you to see how Paul approached this even back in his day. We are going to go to II Corinthians 10.

II Corinthians 10:3 For though we walk in the flesh, **we do not war after the flesh.**

Paul says that as though we are already in a war, and we are!

II Corinthians 10:4-5 (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations [or intents], and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.

Our war is largely mental, and how we handle it *internally* is going to give evidence *externally* as to whether or not we are winning the war, or even aware that we are involved in a war.

Let us go to another well-known warfare metaphor in the book of Ephesians. Here we find named the enemy—the general of the enemy.

Ephesians 6:10-18 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world [or age], against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith you shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Praying always with all prayer and supplications in the Spirit, and watching [being alert] thereunto with all perseverance [Remember the Philadelphian.] and supplications for all saints.

I want you to consider how many symbols of warfare Paul used in this one metaphor so that we could not miss a spiritual fact, a truth that is essential to our well-being. It is telling us how we need to fight this battle and what needs to be the focus of our attention, because the battle is right here. It is not two months down the road, or five months down the road. It is not through the fulfillment of prophecy. The battle that comes to you and me is not prophetic down the road of time. It is right here and right now.

In this one illustration Paul used the following:

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- (1) wrestling
- (2) wiles (meaning devious strategy)
- (3) armor (mentioned twice)
- (4) standing (as in battle won)
- (5) breastplate
- (6) shoes
- (7) shield
- (8) fiery darts
- (9) helmet
- (10) sword
- (11) being alert

There are eleven of them in one illustration, so that hopefully when anybody reads through there he is going to pick up something that should be getting his attention.

We come around to what we began with: prophecy. Even something like prophecy, which is a part of the Word of God, would give us the impression that since it is spiritual and must be revealed by God, it really must be important. Let me make this clear: Yes, it has an importance to it, but it cannot be our focus. Our focus is much closer to home than that.

In II Timothy 2, Paul drew upon military metaphors fairly often.

II Timothy 2:3 You therefore endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, endure difficult situations. Be a Joseph. Joseph endured and persevered. He

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made the best use of a bad situation.

II Timothy 2:4 No man that wars entangles himself with the affairs of this life: that he may please him who has chosen him to be a soldier.

That is pretty clear. Our responsibility is to our General, and He is the one we have to please. He has already told us in Revelation 3 what He wants us to pay attention to, and that is the things we have already been given. If we work hard at hanging onto those things, we are going to grow even despite the uncertainty of the times in which we live.

The spiritual pressures are increasing. They are making many of us feel a sense of tiredness, of weariness with the speed of the times and how fast things are occurring; and yet, even though we can see little bits here and there happening, in one sense nothing is happening fast enough. It is an interesting dilemma. My concern is that it grabs our attention so that we lose track of what is right in front of us, and we are looking too far away from what Christ is concerned about.

I Timothy 1:18 This charge I commit unto you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on you, that you by them might war a good warfare.

Brethren, we do not hear the sound of bombs exploding, or the barking of orders given in the midst of the confusion of a firefight, or the cries of agony from men in the throes of death from a frightening wound that has seized their life blood flowing out onto the ground. But our enemy and the battle is every bit as real, though silent. If we are not alert, or have allowed ourselves to be distracted so that we lose focus as to what is important, we may be in very serious trouble.

A number of years ago (I believe it was in the early seventies), I attended a ministerial conference and I took in a lecture on demonism that was given by Raymond McNair. He mentioned something in that class which he attributed to Herbert Armstrong. Since that time, I have seen this proclivity in human nature even though a demon may not be involved, and that is that human nature has a tendency toward obsessing on something so that a person's life becomes unbalanced. If a person's life is unbalanced, he is going to stagger and fall.

Just recently I heard an interesting illustration of obsessing on the Paul Harvey news program at noon here in Charlotte. Paul Harvey said this on the day of Mickey Rooney's

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85th birthday. Harvey gave something he said he heard from Mickey Rooney's own lips. He said that Rooney said, "When I was fifteen, I lost a dollar gambling, and since that time I spent six million dollars trying to win it back."

Do you see what I am getting at here? Mickey Rooney was obsessed with gambling, and he was confessing it before people that it does not work. But he was obsessed with it. He kept losing, losing, losing. He could not seem to get away from it because his mind was unbalanced by obsession with, "The next time I am going to win." He probably won just enough to keep the obsession going.

People will obsess on sports, on movies, playing card games, with stock markets, and fashions. We had an illustration here about a dozen or so years ago of Imelda Marcos. She is reputed to have had one thousand pairs of shoes in her closet. The woman was obsessed! This is what I mean about how easy it is for a human being's mind to become obsessed on something.

We have got to watch out. There are people in the church who are obsessed with prophecy; something that we would think normally is good, but if you are obsessed on it, it is not good. It may be the thing that sinks you. It is a **spiritual** thing, but it is not what Christ wants us to be interested in. We are not obeying our Commander's orders. He was asked, "What is the great commandment of the law?" He came right back with, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. The second is like unto it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That is what He is interested in, because that is going to accomplish in your life what He is aiming for, but He needs our cooperation.

We cannot allow ourselves to become obsessed. The next step, you see, is something that Mickey Rooney got caught in, and that is that human nature *is* by nature not only obsessive, it also is a natural born gambler. Everybody does not have the money to gamble, but everybody, rich or poor, male or female, young or old, is a gambler. Adam and Eve began it. God told Adam and Eve, "In the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die." They bought what Satan said. They gambled that they would not die, and they did.

Do you see what I am getting at here? We all do the same thing that Mickey Rooney did. All of us are capable of obsessing on gambling spiritually, and those who are most likely to fall into this trap are those who are not directed to the things that God is interested in, like the Laodiceans. I can look at that now and I can see the Laodiceans are gambling their life away by being indifferent to what Christ deems to be the most important. It is so simple. They can be very energetic in pursuing something that really

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interests them, but is it what our General is interested in? They are fighting the wrong battle, and what is so sad is that it is so easy to fall into this by letting our vision wander in the wrong direction.

I want to give another illustration about obsessing. To me this is rich. This is in regard to the male gender of our species. According to the people who study into these things, they tell us that the male brain is wired to be very easily obsessive, much easier than a woman's. Women are able by nature to multi-task. They can do a number of jobs at the same time. Men though find concentrating on one thing to be easy, much easier than a woman.

A woman is really adept around children. She can have three or four kids, all saying, "Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!" She is adept at taking care of them. You know what the household is like. A man would be driven to distraction because he wants to concentrate on what he is doing at the moment.

I am going to tell you something that actually happened. Do you remember the name John Dewey? He was a little strange. He was the leader of a group of educators who are largely responsible for the kind of things that are now being taught in the government schools. He managed, back in the thirties and forties, to turn the government's attention toward using schools for social experimentation, changing the thrust of school to social things rather than reading, writing, and arithmetic. His powers of concentration apparently were immense.

One day he was walking across the campus of a university with another teacher friend of his, and a little kid came running up to him and said, "Hey! Will you give me a nickel?" John Dewey just kept right on going. He pulled a little bit of change out of his pocket and handed it to the boy, and the boy scampered off. John Dewey muttered to the friend he was walking with, "That is the trouble with these city kids. They come running up to you and they ask you for money." The friend said, "Mr. Dewey, wasn't that your son?" He did not even recognize his own kid. He was so focused on the conversation that he was having he did not even recognize his own child. This is kind of funny, but it again shows the way a man's mind will obsess on something and gets locked in.

Here is another something that actually happened. There was a man named Metaxas. He was the dictator of Greece right around the time of the beginning of the Second World War. This man was a pilot as well as being a general in the army. He piloted his own plane.

One day somebody asked him if he would like to go out in one of the latest hydroplanes

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that had been developed. A hydroplane is a plane that takes off on water and lands on water. He said, "Yes, I would like to do that." So the fellow took him out to the plane. They went up in the plane, and while they were up in the plane the fellow asked the general if he would like to pilot the plane. "Yes," said the general. "I would like to do that." And so they flew around for a little while, and then the fellow said, "Would you like to land the plane?" The general said, "Yes. I would like to do that."

The first mistake Metaxas made was that he headed for the city airport. Here is this fellow thinking, "How do you say to the dictator, without getting your head shot off, that he was making a mistake here?" But he got his courage together, and he told the man, "I think it would be good if you took the plane over to the bay and land it there because we have to land on water." "Oh, oh, yeah," replied the dictator. So he took the plane to the bay and made a beautiful landing. He taxied up to the dock, got out of his seat, and the fellow said, "General, that was really a very good landing that you made." Metaxas said, "Thank you," turned around, and stepped out into the bay. That really happened. He forgot where he was. He was so obsessed on the immediate.

When Evelyn and I were out in Anaheim the last time, the drive to the Reids' home in Anaheim became a bit of concern for me. It is about a 40-42 mile drive from LAX to the Reids' home. I do not know whether or not you know what the freeways are like in Los Angeles, but they are interesting, to say the least.

By the time we got to the point where we were going to get off the freeway, the Friday afternoon traffic was beginning to build up. We were going along about 60-65 miles per hour, and the automobiles were spaced out so that I felt generally safe. But when we got off the 91 Freeway to Fullerton, the last lap before you get to the Reids' home, the Friday afternoon traffic began to get interesting. Even though we were going between 60-65 miles per hour, the other drivers on the freeway were going much, much faster. In some cases they were passing us almost like we were standing still.

I did not mind them passing me, but these same cars were weaving from lane to lane. If it were just one guy doing that, then you think there was just one crazy person there in Southern California doing that, and I just happen to have him go past me. But it was not. They were really going fast, but it was the weaving in and out of the traffic that had me concerned. To me the pace was frantic.

You have to remember that it was Friday afternoon. People, I am sure, were looking forward to the weekend. What this illustrated to me was the pressure of the times that we live in. What were the people who were weaving in and out of traffic focused on? They were focused undoubtedly on the moment, and just shortly ahead. They were

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anxious to get somewhere, and be able to do the next thing they had on their agenda, which may have been to just sit down and have a beer. I do not know. But they wanted to get somewhere, and save just a few seconds.

As far as I was concerned, they were willing to gamble with the lives of all those other people who they assumed were going to stay in their own lane and make the moves (or the failure to make the moves) that they expected. It worked out that time for those people. But my question is, "Why even take the chance?"

The way I look at that is those people were obsessing with saving a little bit of time, and that obsession was willing to take gambles with their life and somebody else's life in order to obtain whatever little advantage they thought they were going to get out of that time they were saving. That is the way human nature is. It will gamble its and others' lives to accomplish what is right ahead of them. You see, there is the problem. Where are they looking? What is their aim in life?

I think in most cases you will find that the overwhelming majority of people are looking only just in front of them. We cannot afford to do this. We have to be looking in every situation at God and the Kingdom of God, and allow them to be what dictates to us what we are doing at the moment. Our General has already told us what He is interested in. We cannot be indifferent to that like the Laodicean is. We have got to hang on to what He says so that we do not get off the track and gamble with eternal life.

Let us turn now to Zephaniah 2:1-3. These are really interesting verses.

Zephaniah 2:1-2 Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O nation not desired: Before the decree bring forth, before the day pass as the chaff, before the fierce anger of the Lord come upon you, before the day of the Lord's anger come upon you.

This is talking about the Day of the Lord. If this is addressed to us, it is talking about the return of Christ—the Day of the Lord.

Zephaniah 2:3 Seek you the Lord, all you meek of the earth which have wrought his judgment: seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be you shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger.

These are very revealing verses. "The nation not desired" is Israel. Are you aware how

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the United States especially is hated all over the world? We are the nation not desired. It is only because everybody is jealous of our wealth, of our power; of the seeming liberty that we have to do so many things that others would like to do. But things have been given to us on a silver platter because of what Abraham did! We have not earned them. God gave them to us, and now we are squandering them all over the world, and behaving terribly. But we are the nation that is not desired, and we live in that nation that is not desired.

Verse 2 begins by clearly establishing the time-setting for God's counsel. He is saying, "Here is what I want you to do while there is still time before the destruction breaks forth over the horizon, before God's anger is unleashed on the world."

All of us very much want to escape the pressures of this ever-faster-moving world where there seems to be so much that is out of control. However, this is not the cut-and-dried affair that may appear right on the surface if we do not research carefully. We can already begin to see in verse 3 that it says that going to a place of safety is not cut and dry. "It **may** be you shall be hid."

If we look at Hebrews 11, at the hall of fame there, we find a mixed bag about those who were protected or unprotected. Enoch was whisked away from danger. Noah endured, but he was protected within a boat. Some died peacefully, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and David. But many of the prophets and all of the apostles except John, but including Paul, died violently. Of course we cannot forget God's own Son. We have to see ourselves within this picture.

God is going to do with us what is best for His purpose for us. He will always do the best, but we have to prepare, not knowing what He is going to choose to do. But He is giving us the indication here in verse 3 that if we do seek the Lord, then we have a much better chance to be handled with mercy when the time comes. He is giving us direction here. There is a way, and there is a better way. We should seek the Lord.

Verse one is really, in one way, the key to this whole thing. He says, "Gather yourselves together." This verse can be quite misleading without a good bit of research, because on the surface it appears to be telling us that we need to gather together in some chosen location. There are some commentaries that follow that line of reasoning, but that is not correct. I am going to quote to you from two different commentaries that have hit the nail right on the head regarding this. The first is from the *Keil-Delitzsch* commentary, and the second one is going to be from *Barnes Notes*.

Quote from the *Keil-Delitzsch* commentary:

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It originally means to gather stubble, then generally to gather or collect, e.g. branches of wood; in the hithpoel (a Hebrew grammatical form used here), to gather oneself together, applied to that spiritual gathering which leads to self-examination, and is the first condition of conversion.

Now *Barnes' Notes* makes it clearer.

The exact image is from gathering stubble or dry sticks, which are picked up one by one, with search and care. So must men deal with the dry and withered leaves of a past evil life. The English rendering however comes to the same meaning. We use 'collect oneself for bringing oneself, all one's thoughts, together, and so, having full possession of oneself.

In order to repent, a man must know himself thoroughly; and this can only be done by taking act by act, word by word, thought by thought, as far as he can, not in a confused heap or mass, as they lie in any man's conscience, but one by one, each picked up apart, and examined, and added to the sear unfruitful heap, plucking them as it were, and gathering them out of himself, that so they may be by the spirit of burning, the fire of God's spirit kindling repentance, be burned up, and not the sinner himself be fuel for the fire, with them.

This is tremendous instruction about what we need to be doing in the end-time. Here are our marching orders from our General: "It is time to gather your thoughts, to examine yourself, and repent while there is still time." That is what verse one is saying. He is saying, "Change your life. Do not allow yourself to get caught up in the spirit of the times, because they not only are intense, they are attractive to human nature, but destructive to God's purpose."

In Ephesians 5:16 Paul admonishes us to redeem the time, for the days are evil, and if we do not use this period of grace that we have been given by God with the correct focus, we might be blown away like so much chaff. In verse 3, this is why Zephaniah's counsel is to urge us, following repentance, to humbly seek righteousness by means of diligently seeking to submit to the Word of God.

Let us finish in Matthew 24:42.

Matthew 24:42 Watch therefore: for you know not what hour your Lord does

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come.

The word "watch" here means to be alert, like a guard or a centry would be in a position within a war. He is alert to what is going on around him, and so he is not watching world news necessarily, he is being alert not to just what is news, but alert to his spiritual condition, alert to what is going on in the world, alert as to whether he is obsessing on the wrong thing, alert to whether he is gambling his life away through sin.

Matthew 24:43-44 But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched [would have been alert], and would not have suffered [allowed] his house to be broken up. Therefore be you also ready: for in such an hour as you think not the Son of man comes.

That is pretty good indication right there that we are not going to know when Christ is going to come until pretty close to the end.

Matthew 24:45-51 Who then is a faithful and wise servant: whom his lord has made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he comes shall find so doing. Verily I say unto you, that he shall make him ruler over all his goods. But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delays his coming: and shall begin to smite his fellowservants, and to eat and drink with the drunken: The Lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looks not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, and shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: and there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In short, we cannot afford to allow ourselves to obsess and to gamble on something of lesser value toward God's program. Remember the lesson of the Laodiceans. They might otherwise be very competent people, but they are indifferent to the things Christ considers important at this time. They simply are not applying themselves to the elements of God's way that produces continued growth. Other things have attracted their attention, and that is what they spend their time and energies involved in, and they have put themselves in grave danger by allowing themselves to become distracted. We must watch. We must be alert to what really matters.