

The Gun Lap

by Mike Ford

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I live in Georgia, where, last month, people were standing in line for up to three hours in a futile attempt to win the Power Ball lottery (with a pot nearing \$300 million), won ultimately by a West Virginian. Yes, even though we are in the midst of a slow economy, things continue to hum along, and times are pretty good.

Does the return of Christ seem distant to us?

A few years back, I took my son Cody to get his driver's license. We arrived 30 minutes before the Highway Patrol office opened, and a dozen people already stood in line. Since not all needed a driving test, Cody eventually moved up to third in line. He finally took his test, which lasted less than 5 minutes, at 11:15, over two hours after the office opened. In just over two hours, the three uniformed officers tested exactly two people!

By this time, there were maybe 30 people in line. Many took a day off of work, brought folding chairs, umbrellas, books, and food. No one seemed particularly upset, they shrugged their shoulders at the ineptitude and laziness, as if to say, "Whaddya gonna do?"

The same kind of reaction occurs on a much larger scale. As the "War on Terrorism" grinds away, our liberties here at home seem to be dwindling fast with no guarantees that we will ever get them back. What does the general public do? A collective shrug and a sigh of "Whaddya gonna do?" No time to worry about these small disruptions—the newest release is out at Blockbuster.

Does the return of Christ seem far off to us?

Sooner or Later?

One reason given for the changes over the years in the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) was, "We wanted to make it easier on the people." Doing away with most of the major doctrines may have given those who went along a perceived respite, but "Nothing worthwhile comes easy," so the modern proverb says.

A proverb is simply a popular saying, a maxim, truism, or adage. A proverb commonly tossed about by the Jews about 2,600 years ago ran, "The days are prolonged, and every vision fails" (Ezekiel 12: 22). When the prophet Ezekiel wrote this, he was in captivity in Babylon. The city of Jerusalem had not yet fallen, and the Jews who remained in Judea did not seem to think it would. The prophecies of Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and others were slow in being fulfilled, or so it seemed. Scoffing at these men and their inspired words had been going on for so long that it had become a proverb.

Sure, some of the nation was in captivity and the armies of Babylon were threatening the remainder, but "Whaddya gonna do? This is Jerusalem we're talking about here, God's chosen city! Get real, we will be fine, and anyway, life goes on." In response, God tells Ezekiel:

"Tell them therefore, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "I will lay this proverb to rest, and they shall no more use it as a proverb in Israel." But say to them, "The days are at hand, and the fulfillment of every vision. For no more shall there be any false vision or flattering divination within the house of Israel. For I am the LORD. I speak, and the word which I speak will come to pass; it will no more be postponed; for in your days, O rebellious house, I will say the word and perform it," says the Lord GOD.'" (Ezekiel 12:23-25)

Jerusalem fell just a short time later. Because "sentence against an evil work [was] not executed speedily" (Ecclesiastes 8:11), the people deluded themselves into believing prophesied events would not occur at all or would happen so far in the future as to be of no concern.

Are we so different today? The mainstream press reminds us frequently that the U.S.—even in a slowdown—has the world's strongest economy, yet it produces little of tangible value. However, someone cooks my burger, and I cut his grass. America no longer has an economy based in manufacturing but in service. The cars we produce are only assembled here from components manufactured in other countries. We import much more than we export. American debt is sky high, and the stock market acts manic-depressive. It is a house of cards, liable to collapse at the first strong gust of a financial storm. Yet, fragile though it may be, the house of cards still stands.

Are we like the ancient Israelites, who made sport of the prophets, failing to believe that destruction was near? What do we think when we hear a message about the coming Tribulation? Do sermons about prophecy make us uncomfortable?

Field Day

Herbert W. Armstrong often spoke of the church as being on the "gun lap." Some may not be totally familiar with this metaphor lifted from track and field competition. I was an eager student of the sport when I went to Ambassador College. Because church youth could not participate in the "name" sports in high school (basketball and football) due to Friday night games, many of them gravitated to track, making the annual Field Day a big event. Students would participate in various races, against both each other and the school records.

The last events of the day were usually the mile events: the mile run, sometimes a two-mile run, and finally, the mile relay. These races comprised four laps around the quarter-mile track. Many times, scores were close, and the team that won the long distance events might well win the meet. Runners would be giving their all for these races.

In the mile run, as the lead runner completed his third lap, an official would fire a starter's pistol, notifying everyone that one lap remained. The firing of this shot would always set the crowd off, yelling wildly for their favorite, and of course, the runners would reach down for that last bit of energy in an effort to win. The gun lap is only a quarter of a mile. The finish line is in sight, and the runner knows exactly how far he has to go to get there. He can expend everything he has, knowing that he can collapse on the other side of that line, his race completed.

The gun lap is a great metaphor for the spiritual race we are in—with some notable differences. We cannot physically see a finish line, and we do not know how long this last lap will last. While a runner might pace himself early in a race, when the gun lap started, he went full out. Honestly, it is

very hard to have that kind of spiritual attitude all the time. We get tired, bogged down in the daily struggle. Trials beset us. Sometimes, it feels as if we are running in quicksand, making no headway, and slowly sinking. Yet, "Nothing worthwhile comes easy." We may not see a physical finish line up ahead of us, but we know what our prize will be. That is the great motivating factor: eternal life in the God Family!

Whaddya Gonna Do?

How do we keep from developing this "Whaddya gonna do" attitude and instead, "run [not walk] with endurance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1)? How do we avoid the "We've got more time" syndrome? The following three points will help to answer these questions.

First, *we must learn the lessons of history*. As Solomon says, "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). The apostle Peter reminds of this very thing in II Peter 3:1-4:

Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation."

The people mocked Ezekiel when he told them that captivity was coming. We have all heard this or that one predicting that we have five, ten, twenty, or more years before Christ's return. Some have probably even said, "Where is the promise of His coming?" or something similar. Of themselves, these things fulfill prophecy, proving that we are in the last days.

In I Timothy 4:1, Paul says, "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith." Have we not seen this very thing happen? The firm knowledge and belief that we are in the last days can help sustain us as we "run." Knowing that the gun has fired and the return of Christ is imminent should prod us to keep moving. We should also make a point of not allowing ourselves to become distracted by the naysayers—their opinions will have absolutely no effect on the fulfillment of prophecy.

Second, *we must not confuse our priorities*. There is nothing wrong with making a good living by hard work and improving one's situation in life. The apostle John says in III John 2, "Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers." However, he also writes, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (I John 2:15).

If our focus is truly on God, the financial blessings will come, and we can enjoy them. However, we must not make the pursuit of money a higher priority than it should be. We must continually examine ourselves, getting rid of anything that reeks of Laodiceanism (Revelation 3:17). We can always spot that attitude in someone else, it seems, but can we see it in ourselves? As the prophet Amos says to ancient Israel, "Woe to you who are at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1). His words apply equally well to us today.

Third, *we must live by faith*. Many of the changes that occurred in the WCG involved removing faith from our spiritual arsenal. If one's boss requires him to work on the Sabbath or risk termination,

he needs to exercise no faith if Sabbath observance is no longer required. No faith is needed to face the children's teachers to explain why they would be out of school for two weeks to attend a religious convention when the holy days are done away with! If one is once saved, always saved, no faith is necessary for obedience to God's commandments.

What about expecting Christ to return soon? Now, that requires faith! The prophet Habakkuk, serving God just before Ezekiel's time, foretold of Judah's fall, as the Chaldeans began their relentless advance toward them. He highlights the need for faith in times like these:

I [Habakkuk] will stand my watch and set myself on the rampart, and watch to see what He will say to me, and what I will answer when I am reproved. Then the LORD answered me and said: "Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith." (Habakkuk 2:1-4)

Notice in verse 1 that he is standing watch, as a watchman or shepherd should do. Part of the faith we need should be in our leadership. Many of us, having been burned by unfaithful men, have developed a distrust of the ministry. But we cannot run this race alone; we need coaching, motivation, and leadership. We have to put our faith in the men God has led us to follow.

"Write the vision and make it plain . . . that he may run who reads it" (verse 2) fits nicely with the gun-lap analogy, as it conveys a sense of urgency. The vision is plain to those God is working with. Do we have the faith that God is indeed working with us? Do we have faith to run with the message He has revealed?

In verse 3, God says there is an "appointed time" for these events. God has a timetable to which we are just not privy. Do we believe Him? "Though [the prophecy] tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come." We must fight against the urge to become impatient because it seems as if Christ "is delaying [H]is coming" (Matthew 24:48; compare Ezekiel 12:25).

Then in verse 4, Habakkuk brings it all down to living by faith—faith in God from God. *The Amplified Bible* renders the clause immediately before this as, "Look at the proud; his soul is not straight or right within him." These are people who look to their own understanding, who have forsaken God's laws, and they will not survive the coming time of trouble because they have no faith. The righteous—those who are upright because they live according to God's laws—will live. Christ, when He asks in Luke 18:8, "When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" implies that few faithful will be left.

So, what will it be? This is our gun lap! Do we coast along, shrugging our shoulders, sighing in fatigue and apathy—or pick up the pace with a renewed sense of urgency and faith? "Whaddya gonna do?"