LETTER TO THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST

CHRIST’S TEACHING OF THE GREAT TRIBULATION AND HIS COMING

13 Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. 14 For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever.

THESSALONIANS 4:13-17.

51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’

1CORINTHIANS 15:51-54.

29 Immediately after the distress of those days “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” 30 ‘Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great
And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. 

In what is known as the “Olivet discourse”, in the above passage, Jesus taught his disciples the future events leading up to His Second Coming at the end of times. He had already previously taught them a lot about the coming kingdom of God and the end of the times, and here on the Mount of Olives, His disciples had made further enquiries about His return and the inauguration of His kingdom: “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Christ gave them four basic signs of His Coming and added to each a warning about the associated danger. As the first sign Christ depicted “disasters in the world”, i.e., wars, earthquakes and famines in Mt.24:4-8, as the second sign, “apostasy in the church” as a result of global opposition against the followers of Christ and the prevailing deception within the church in 24:9-14, as the third sign, “the abomination that causes desolation”, whose term was actually quoted from the book of Daniel where the prophet Daniel referred to a human conqueror who would utter blasphemous words and provoke great distress among God’s people in 24:15-28, and as the fourth sign, “darkness in the sky”, in that the whole natural sources of light will disappear in 24:29-31.

Concerning the timing of the third sign, two important factors should be pointed out; first, that at the end of the ‘Great Tribulation’ Christ has not yet come despite numerous rumours and second, that Christians have not gone out of earth yet apart from a great multitude of martyrs. However, this crisis would be soon over, and will be immediately followed by the fourth and the last unmistakable sign. While natural light will be utterly extinguished, the supernatural brilliant light will appear and the glory of the Son of God will be seen by all people on earth. The believers of Christ who have waited so long for His arrival, ‘parousia’ in the Greek word will instantly be changed into resurrection bodies at the sound of a trumpet and will experience their first extraordinarily free flight to the Holy Land escorted by God’s holy angels so that all the Lord’s people from all four corners of the earth will be gathered together to be with the Lord forever. This glorious meeting of His faithful followers with the Lord in the air is generally known as “the Rapture”, which is taken from the Latin word; ‘RAPTO, RAPTERE’ meaning to be “snatched up”. Paul used the same word in his epistle to the Thessalonians as ‘caught up’, whose passage has been quoted in the beginning. Christ also foretold His disciples of such a dramatic phenomenon of the rapture in His Olivet discourses; ‘As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left’ (24:37-41, Lines added). After this the believers in Christ will be resurrected to be forever united with the Lord, while unbelievers will be left behind on earth for the last battle in history, the so called battle of ‘Harmageddon’. The battle of an international military force under the devil’s command against Christ and His followers who have now been gathered together with their returned Lord will be immediately over by the sword of the Lord’s mouth, i.e., The Word of God.

I believe that the events leading up to and after Jesus’s Second Coming could be summarised as described above after putting together all the information given in the entire Bible, although I can only present very few references due to very limited space. Nevertheless, there are amazingly many different interpretations concerning the end times and the timing of several events relating to each other. In the Book of Revelation there are understood to be about fifty six separate events foretold, half of which are written in symbolic picture form and the rest in plain language. Since more than 1900 years have elapsed since the Book of Revelation was written in the first century
CE, a problem has arisen that what would have been the future to the original writer and readers in the first century CE may not necessarily represent the future to the present readers and so, we need to interpret prophetic events according to our understanding of the past 1900 year history. This is a reason why there are so many different opinions. Today there are four well-established views in the school of interpretation; 1. preterist, 2. historicist, 3. futurist, and 4. idealist.

“Preterist view” argues that the predictions were fulfilled during the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and the book was written to the first century believers in Christ for the preparation for their future peril, and it can be applied to them in the first few centuries CE.

“Historicist view” argues that the predictions cover the entire church age between the First and the Second Comings of Christ, and it can be applied to all the centuries CE. Within this view there are two distinct opinions; “linear historicist” view and “cyclical historicist” view. The former believes that the central part of the Book of Revelation goes in one straight line of events, while the latter believes that the book covers the whole of church history and it has been repeated again and again more than once. Accordingly it is also called the “progressive parallelism” view.

“Futurist view” argues that the central part of the predictions should be applied to the last few years leading up to the Lord’s Second Coming and it can be applied only to the last years of the last centuries CE. Accordingly, this book’s fulfillment is still future for us today. The climax of the book would be the ‘Great Tribulation’ of God’s people under wicked world leaders; antichrist and false-prophet during three and a half years. In this view, while its focus seems to be placed on the very last generation of God’s people and how this passage is most relevant to the last generation of Christians, there is yet another view within this “Futurist” view. It claims that the church will be caught up (raptured) before the Great Tribulation and even the last Christians needn’t know these last events on earth because they are irrelevant to them. This new theology is the most popular teaching of our day and it is accepted by the majority of the “Futurist view” advocates.

“Idealist view” argues that the Book of Revelation illustrates the universal truth in which ongoing battles between God and Satan, good and evil will ultimately experience divine victory through an overcoming church at any time and it can be applied to any century CE. Accordingly, this view discourages any correlation to particular historical events. Behind this approach is the Greek philosophy which separated the spiritual and physical, and also, eternity and time. As a result of its influence, events such as the Second Coming and the Day of the Judgment are to be regarded to be the present rather than future. For example, in this view anything substantial such as the ‘New Jerusalem’ is reduced to being simply a description of an idealised picture of the church.

There are also chiefly three different interpretations of a future millennium (a thousand year messianic reign), each of which can be further divided into two views; 1. A-Millennialism, 2. Post-Millennialism, 3. Pre-Millennialism. “A-Millennialism” view believes that the predictions are not literal but rather that the story contains moral or spiritual ‘truths’ in it. In this view Revelation 20 is usually dismissed along with the most of the book. Accordingly ‘the thousand years’ has no reference to any particular period of time. “Post-Millennialism” spiritualises the concept by transferring Christ’s physical and political rule on earth to heaven, and also transfers the future to the present, so that the millennium would be ruled on earth only through His body, the church. According to this view Christ’s Second Coming has already taken place and it also believes that He has been ruling the earth from heaven throughout the length of the church age. However, now that the church age has lasted almost two thousand years this view must reconsider the figure of the thousand years as a mere symbol. On the other hand, “Pre-Millennialism” takes Revelation 20 in its plain and simple sense and it believes that Christ will rule on earth with His followers for a thousand years after His Second Coming and before the Day of Judgment. This view has kept a continuous witness of small groups who intently studied
the Bible for themselves through the ages until another version of “Pre-Millennialism” started attracting many in 1830. Unfortunately today this “Dispensational Pre-Millennialism” is most familiar, and it looks as if it has completely displaced “Classical Pre-Millennialism”. While the former view takes revelation 20 in much the same way as the latter classical view, a big discrepancy occurs in the interpretation of the timing of ‘the Rapture’. The former argues that the church will be snatched away from the earth by “the secret rapture” before the Great Tribulation preceding the Lord’s Second Coming.

Concerning when the Rapture will take place there are three basic beliefs; 1. Pre-Tribulation 2. Mid-Tribulation 3. Post-tribulation. “Pre-Tribulation” belief holds that the Rapture will happen before the seven year Great Tribulation. “Mid-Tribulation” belief holds the Rapture at the middle of the Tribulation. “Post-tribulation” belief holds the Rapture at the end of the Tribulation and it regards the Rapture of the church and the Lord’s return as one event. The “Dispensational Pre-Millennialism” believes 1. or 2. above. After this view took rapid hold in Britain and then in America among the evangelical Christians, it is rather astonishing that today many prominent spiritual Christian leaders hold this relatively novel standing, despite the lack of scriptural proof. Continual examinations over this issue would be dealt with next month as well. Before finishing, it is worth briefly looking at Christ’s earlier teachings to understand His Millennium rule.

In His earlier teachings Christ referred to “two ages”; this age in which we now live and ‘the age to come’ which will come after the present age. When He returns and establishes His kingdom on earth, the latter age, i.e., ‘age of righteousness’ will begin, and His followers will take a role like heavenly angels as ‘children of the resurrection’. Christ explained the difference between the two ages by illustrating His followers’ situation in both ages: ‘The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection’ (Lk. 20: 34-36).

Christ also taught the “coming Kingdom of God” by several parables. One of them is the “parable of the Weeds”, about which Christ explained: ‘He answered, ‘The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. ‘As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father’ (Mt.13:37-43). In this parable Christ referred to the time when He would return to establish his kingdom on earth, which would coincide with the time when He will gather His righteous followers by letting His angels separate the unbelievers for punishment. Both this parable and Matthew 24:29-31 quoted in the beginning, which refers to the Lord’s Second Coming clearly depict the separation between the righteous and the evil, and the former would receive their resurrection bodies to enter His kingdom.

This month, a money gift of £**** has been sent to Frederic in Burundi to supply his financial needs; for his wife’s medical expenses and their accommodation and air tickets to Kenya. His wife has been ill since last November and she needed to be sent to some more fully equipped hospital to find out causes and better treatments. In January she underwent thorough check-ups and received appropriate medical attention in Nairobi, and now having safely returned home, she has completely got over the long lasting suffering. Praise the Lord! During their stay in Kenya, Frederic was reminded of how many suffering people he helped from their death while he was in Kenyan refugee camp as a refugee himself and the Lord’s faithful servant pastor. Urgently pray for Burundian’s never encountered tragedy caused by the latest disastrous central market fire in the capital of Burundi, Bujumbura on 27th Jan.