



Time to Choose

by the Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou, Th.D.

There can be no question about it. The predicted eschatological Great Apostasy is already upon us. If there was any time for an urgent need of the gift of the discerning of spirits, it is now.

To discern the spirits is to be enabled supernaturally to distinguish between the workings of the Holy Spirit and the signs of the unclean, evil spirits.

But Satan wants you, dear reader, to be deceived in thinking that such discerning of spirits is judging other people. He is whispering to many of us: “*Judge not that you may not be judged.*” You are not really judging others. You are rather detecting what sort of spirit is being manifested in the conduct and activity of the other person. You are trying to verify whether it is the Holy Spirit or a demon spirit. This is a basic requirement of every believer who claims the name of Jesus.

As a matter of fact, Jesus teaches: “*Judge not according to appearance, but judge the righteous judgement.*” If the Holy Spirit dwells on the inside of us, then we are capable of keeping ourselves free from deception and delusion. We are enabled by the Holy Spirit to unmask those who want to deceive us.

God is exposing false foundations thanks to the new sweep of His Holy Spirit. This is the day of God’s visitation. This is the day of His manifestation. We are witnessing a major intervention of God’s sovereign grace.

Is the Orthodox Church ready to receive the new spiritual impulse from the Holy Spirit renewal for her

revitalization? Is the Church prepared to capitalize on this new release of Holy Spirit power?

God is pouring out of His Spirit upon all flesh in this last hour to renew His people. He is responding to the Church that is crying for a ministry of restoration.

Your eternity is at stake. It will determine by what decision you make in this life. It will be decided by what choice you make now. God did not create and destine you for a grave. He made you to live forever.

God wants the best for you. He loves you and wants you to be a partaker of His divine nature. He hands out to you the promise of setting you one day in a place of glory in His presence.

Whether you like it or not, you have to decide which Orthodoxy you will choose: The Orthodoxy of dead forms or the Orthodoxy of the quickening Spirit. If you are contented with religious formalism, I must caution you that you are placing your immortal soul in peril. Your disobedience makes yourself part of the fulfillment of prophecy: “*In the last days perilous times will come... man will hold to the form of religion, denying the power thereof.*”

We have to meet God’s conditions in order to gain the best He has for us both in this age and in eternity. If we fail in this, we will lose all

and gain the worse: the unquenchable flames of hell.

Everything good you can think of comes from God, the Father of lights: health, life, joy, peace and prosperity. God always desires to bless man. On the other hand, everything evil and bad you can think of originates with Satan. His purpose is to always harm man and ultimately to destroy him.

Some people wonder, if there is a God, why do a vast number of people perish in famines, in earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and tornados. But God is not the source of these evils or any evils that befall man. It is Satan who causes them.

We must never blame God for the evil that afflicts man, whether individually or collectively. God always gives life, health, joy and security. He only gives and imparts of His own nature to man, but only when man meets His conditions. The Book of Job shows us that whatever Satan does he does only by God’s concession. Satan never gives. He has nothing to give. He can only take away from man what God has given him. He cannot create anything. All he can do is counterfeit what God has created.

Jesus tells us about Satan: “*he cometh not but to steal and to kill and to destroy, But I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly.*” But Satan cannot take anything away from us, unless we give him that right. He cannot touch us and rob us of what we enjoy, unless we break any of God’s ordinances and fall into disobedience. In such a case, God simply surrenders us to Satan. He accuses us to God and claims us from God. He knows his legal rights. Someone called Satan the best lawyer.

But the moment we repent of our sin and receive God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ, then Satan has to release us. He no longer has any right on us and no power over us. Because of the Blood of Jesus the repentant sinner is set free from Satan and is reinstated to a right relationship with God.

Choosing: Christ or Satan?

Our decision must be clear-cut. God will not accept any wavering between the one and the other. Any ambivalence in His eyes is the same as choosing death and cursing. It also reveals compromise which God condemns. Wanting the best of both worlds brings us under the curse and death which follows.

After Moses died, Joshua similarly challenged the children of Israel to make a choice and to decide whom they would follow. God or the false gods of their idolatrous neighbors.

"Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served, that were on the other side of the flood or the gods of the Amorites in whose lands you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

Whom do you choose to serve this day? The one, True God and Jesus Christ Whom He has sent, or the false gods in your life that claim your loyalty? Of course, you might not worship idols as your gods, but whatever has top priority in your life that claims your primary attention and loyalty is your god. It is your substitute for Jesus Christ. It could be another man or woman. It could be a priest or bishop or archbishop or patriarch. It could be money, your profession, power or glory. It could be your husband or wife.

At a later date, the prophet Elijah likewise challenged the Israelites to decide which god they were to worship, because they had back-

slidden and slipped into accepting strange gods. They had to make up their mind. They could not recognize both, the True God and the false gods. *"How long are you between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him. But if Baal, then follow him"* (1 Kings 18:21).

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai and was faced with the shocking picture of the Israelites worshipping the golden calf, he challenged them with these words: *"Who is on the Lord's side? Let him come unto me. And the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him"* (Exodus 32:26).

On Whose Side?

Are you on the Lord's side? Have you decided to go all the way with Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord? Or are you straddling the fence? Remember that imperfect obedience is disobedience which brings you under God's judgement and curse. Especially in these last days God will not put up with those who are spiritually lukewarm. He warns us today as He warned the Laodiceans: *"I know thy works, that thou are neither cold nor hot. So then because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth"* (Rev. 3:15).

The Lord expects us to be either hot or cold. He wants to know where we stand. Are we standing with Satan? Is it Christ or Antichrist? In this last hour evil is intensifying and faith, also, is intensifying. The darkness is getting darker and the light is getting brighter. Either you are coming closer to Christ or to Satan. It's in the very nature of the age in which we are living. It is an eschatological sign. In other words, "The time is at hand" (Rev. 22:10). The time of the return of the Savior is fast approaching. You will be getting spiritually better or spiritually worse. This is

the way St. John states it: *"He that is unjust, let him be unjust still. And he that is filthy, let him be filthy still. And he that is righteous, let him be righteous still. And he that is holy, let him be holy still"* (Rev. 22:11).

You cannot stand in the same state. You will be growing and changing for the better or for the worse. Satanic influence is flooding the world as never before in the history of mankind. Jesus Himself foretold that in the consummation of the age: *"iniquity shall multiply for the love of many shall wax cold."*

In the New Covenant we are called upon to choose between Christ and the Antichrist, between Christ and Satan. Again, it is a choice between life and death, since Jesus is the "life" and Satan the "murderer from the beginning." The contrast is getting sharper as time goes on.

Proclaiming the Gospel

So it is not simply increasing the sermons or more frequent preaching that answers the need. It is not the messages of more theologically qualified theologians that have to be heard. More eloquent speakers who are gifted in the natural are not the solution. Usually they touch the mind but not the heart.

I am referring to the power of the Holy Spirit in preaching. It is a dimension of that warrants more of our careful attention and serious consideration if we are to make preaching more than part of the Church ritual.

Get into an intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Don't get to know your Savior second hand. Get into a personal, direct relationship with Jesus. Beware of abstract teachings that are irrelevant to your personal needs. Wake Up! There's still time to spare yourself. Get off the fence and come over on God's side today.

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Escaping God's Wrath

by Joseph Abbate

About 15 years ago Father Stephanou had shared something with me during a Bible study. It was quite profound to the point that I had done further study on the matter.

Not to be confused with the teaching of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture, a Pre-Wrath preservation of God's saints would occur sometime during the last half of the 7 year Great Tribulation period. Many of these early writings describe a time of persecution and war during the time of Antichrist's short-lived rise to power. Yet, there is a difference between Satan's wrath and God's wrath. These writings indicate that sometime during the end-times, God would miraculously protect His saints by preserving them or even taking His elect out of harm's way before His wrath would be poured out.

We have demonstrations in the Bible concerning God's judgement being unleashed, such as during the plagues of Egypt, in which He punished Pharaoh, while at the same time, protected Moses and the children of Israel. Another earth-changing event was the deluge of water which destroyed the antediluvian world, while Noah and his family were spared from God's wrath.

As it was in the Days of Noah

"But as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be" (Matt. 24:37). A consistent theme in these early writings often connect the "Days of Noah" or the "Days of Lot" with the end times. One of the most prominent early writers of the Church was St. Irenaeus. Being a disciple of Polycarp, who was himself a disciple of St. John the Apostle.

Irenaeus states: *"And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be". For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they shall overcome, they are crowned with incorruption... For Noah was six hundred years old when the deluge*

came upon the earth, sweeping away the rebellious world, for the sake of that most infamous generation which lived in the times of Noah. And Antichrist also sums up every error of devised idols since the flood, together with the slaying of the prophets and the cutting off of the just" (Against Heresies, chap. XXIX vs.1-2).

When St. Irenaeus, (who was writing in Greek) mentions the Church being suddenly caught up, he uses the word Arpaso (Rapture), then *"tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be"*, indicating the following event of God's wrath.

The Shepherd of Hermas, written around the same time as the Book of Revelation, the "Shepherd" may be defined as a Bishop of his day. Just as in some of the descriptions given in Revelation of the 4 different colored horses, Rev. 6: 1-8) or a "Beast which arises out from the Sea", (Rev. 13 :1). Hermas has a vision in which he escaped from a beast with 4 different colors. He is told: *"You have escaped a great tribulation because of your faith, and because you were not double-minded, even though you saw such a huge beast. Go, therefore, and declare to the Lord's elect His mighty works, and tell them that **this beast is a foreshadowing of the great tribulation that is coming.** So, if you prepare yourselves in advance and turn to the Lord with all your heart, **you will be able to escape it"**. (The Apostolic Fathers 2nd edition / Shepherd of Hermas pg. 212).*

A popular work of the 3rd Century, mentions this pre-wrath event: *"Now those upon whose forehead the name of Christ is written and upon whose hand is the seal (of God), both small and great, will be taken up upon their angels wings and lifted up before His wrath" (Apocalypse of Elijah chap. 5).*

Yet another apocalyptic writing which originated from Asia Minor, whose authorship was claimed to be that of St. Ephraem the Syrian, (Pseudo Ephraem) describes the same event: *"For God's saints and elect will be gathered to Him prior to the coming tribulation precisely so that they may not witness the confusion that will then*

overwhelm the entire world." (The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition pg. 184 Dr. Paul Alexander).

It is written: *"For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor shall ever be. And except those days shall be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: **but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened"** (Matt. 24:21-22). A similar theme is given in the writing of Ephraem. According to Dr. Alexander's analysis: *"It is probably no accident that Pseudo-Ephraem does not mention the shortening of time intervals for the Antichrist's persecution, for if prior to it the Elect are "taken to the Lord," i.e. participate at least in some measure in beatitude, there is no need for further mitigating action on their behalf. The Gathering of the Elect according to Pseudo-Ephraem is an alternative to the shortening of the time intervals" (The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition pg. 211).**

Professor Alexander had concluded that this writing had probably originated from an early date due to its historical themes. *"It divides mankind into Christians, heretics, Jews and pagans, a view difficult to imagine as having originated later than the 4th Century, by which time paganism had ceased to be a significant force" (pg. 218).*

Another prominent Church Father of the 4th Century, St. Cyril of Jerusalem places the time of the Rapture just prior to the Lord's return in glory. Though with Ephraem, the timing is less certain, since it places the Rapture just before God's wrath is unleashed, and in other areas just prior to the 2nd Coming of Christ. This is probably due to the belief in Pseudo-Ephraem that the timing of the Wrath of God and His Second Coming can be close in proximity to one another. Cyril urges that the event will also transpire so that the Elect are not confused with God's foes, as in the parable of the "Wheat and Tares".

"For that His elect may not be confused with His foes, He shall send forth His angels with a great trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four-winds. He de-

spised not Lot, who was but one; how then shall He despise many righteous? Come, ye blessed of my Father; will He say to them who shall then ride on chariots of clouds, and be assembled by angels... He who took the form of a servant despises not servants. Though thou be lying sick in bed, yet it is written, Then shall two be in one bed; the one shall be taken, and the other left” (St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Lecture 15 vs. 22).

But before the Rapture takes place there would be a great sign in heaven: “But what is the sign of His coming? Lest a hostile power dare to counterfeit it. And then shall appear; He says, the sign of the Son of Man in heaven, (Matt. 24:30). Now Christ’s own true sign is the Cross; a sign of a luminous Cross shall go before the King” (Lecture 15 vs. 22).

This sign is also mentioned in the writings of Ephraem: “at an hour unknown to the world and unknown to the enemy, the sign of the Son of Man (the Cross) will appear. The Lord will come forth with a large host and in great majesty, preceded by the sign of the Cross. An angel will blow his trumpet, which will announce: Arise, you who sleep, arise, come to meet Christ, because the hour of His judgment has come” (The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition pg. 140).

A compilation of works attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea had been translated and compiled by Roman Catholic clergy during the 1800s. However, most scholars agree that these writings are most likely those of Eusebius of Emesa (300-360 A.D), who had been a friend of Eusebius of Caesarea. “Indeed, as all perished then except those gathered with Noah in the ark, so also at His coming, the ungodly in the season of apostasy... shall perish... at the time of the deluge, it did not come and destroy all the inhabitants of the earth before Noah entered into the ark. Therefore, in the same way, at the consummation of the age, it says that the cataclysm of the destruction of the ungodly shall not happen before those men who are found of God at that time are gathered into the ark and saved according to the pattern of Noah... all the righteous and godly are to be separated from the ungodly and gathered

into the heavenly ark of God. For in this way when not even one righteous man will be found any more among mankind. And when all the ungodly have been made atheists by the Antichrist, and the whole apostasy, the wrath of God shall come upon the ungodly” (Eusebius / fragment of Luke 17:26, Migne-24.584-585).

Yet, it is St. Paul which indicates the timing of the event of the Rapture taking place during the sound of the “Last Trumpet” and the “voice of the archangel”. (1 Cor. 15:52). St. Paul describes this event of the Rapture as a “Mystery”. Is this mystery the same event described in Revelation when the last angel begins to sound? “But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as He has declared to His servants the prophets” (Rev. 10:7). The judgments described in Revelation, when the seven “trumpets are sounded” are not necessarily equal in length of time. Much time could lapse after the seventh trumpet is sounded, as well as many events taking place during that seventh trumpet event.

The Son of Man on the Clouds

Jesus told a parable known as the “Wheat and the Tares”, in which He describes an important event which would take place during the end times. A land owner which had planted wheat had been told by his servants during the time of harvest that an enemy had planted seeds of tares among the seeds of wheat. The land owner directed: “Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn” (Matt. 13:30).

The Gospel of Matthew describes another account of the return of Christ: “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth shall mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from

the four-winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matt. 24:30-31).

Notice the similarities described in the Book of Revelation: “And I looked, and behold a white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man, having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to him that sat on the cloud, Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe. And another angel came out from the altar, which had power over fire; and cried with a loud cry to him that had the sharp sickle, saying, Thrust in thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth; for her grapes are fully ripe. And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God” (Rev. 14:14-19).

So, just as in the accounts of the Gospel of Matthew, we see the Son of man in the clouds, the voice or cry of the angel, and 2 separate reaping’s, however, instead of “wheat and tares” we have “wheat and grapes” in the account of Revelation. Instead of “tares being burned”, we have an “angel with authority (**exousia**) over fire”, which “gathers the vine of the earth into the great winepress of the wrath of God”.

“And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God” (Rev. 15:1). So, after the “wheat is gathered and placed in the landowner’s barn” the “tares” or “grapes” are reserved for the Wrath of God which follows, which is specifically mentioned to take place after the order is given to the angels to pour out the last plagues, (Rev. 15:1) and (Rev. 16:1). Those who would be left on earth, (Matt, 24:40) at that time are also described as having received the “mark of the Beast” (Rev. 16:2). The object of this article was not to promote any specific eschatological position, only to point out that there was a school of thought in the early Church which held to a preservation of God’s saints and elect which would be spared from His wrath before Christ’s return in glory.