

Apostasy

by

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Chapter 1

The Seventieth Week

“And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week,”
Daniel 9:27a

The newscaster on the television droned monotonously in the background as Joshua Pono prepared his lunch, a ritual he performed every morning before heading for work. But today would be different. He stopped spreading the mayonnaise on the slice of bread, walked slowly toward the television and increased the volume.

“This news just in from Jerusalem. We have learned that President Richard Darcy and Prime Minister Abraham Gurit of Israel will sign a Treaty today that will ensure Israel’s security from hostile attacks by neighboring nations. The Treaty will initially be for a period of 7 years and will help Israel finalize her peace arrangements with the Palestinians in the occupied territories, as well as aid the Palestinians in establishing their own independent state.”

Joshua stood stunned, oblivious to the reporter who, by now, had moved on to other news. His eyes stared at the television screen, but his mind raced back several years to an almost identical scenario when he had stood staring at television images of the New York City skyline on a previous morning. He remembered being confused that morning, not sure what he was seeing, or even which city. At first Joshua had thought it was Boston because of the waterfront, but when the reality of the missing World Trade Center towers hit him, he experienced the same visceral impact that struck him this morning. He knew he was witnessing another benchmark event that would forever imprint in his mind where he was and what he was doing when the news broke.

The clock brought him back to the task at hand and he muttered under his breath as he quickly threw his lunch and newspaper into his briefcase. His mind was still on the news report when he eased his Toyota out of the driveway. Joshua forced himself to focus on his driving as he negotiated the traffic to the highway that would take him to his job as a paralegal in a small law firm.

But once on the highway, his thoughts again drifted back to the news report, and events of the past several years. September 11, 2001. That was the event that seemed to start everything, culminating in today's announcement. The subsequent terrorist attacks on Washington D.C., Los Angeles and again in New York City maintained the momentum of government actions leading up to the Treaty between the United States and Israel.

Internationally, the Iraqi war only polarized the Middle Eastern nations against America. The passions of the Islamic terrorists were inflamed, resulting in more bombings on American soil. But it seemed to also intensify America's efforts to solve the Palestinian crisis by carving out a portion of the "occupied territory" to establish a Palestinian State. The only way Israel could be induced to participate was if America would guarantee her security should the surrounding Islamic nations attack. Today's Treaty was to ensure the security of Israel as well as the establishment of a Palestinian State.

Domestically, the government had moved quickly after the terrorist attack on Washington D.C. First, there was the restriction on immigration, especially those arriving from the Middle East, as well as the implementation of a strict monitoring program on those allowed entry. This included the ominous and controversial microchip that was implanted in every foreign immigrant enabling the Department of Home Security (DHS) agents to monitor their every move. Not surprisingly, except for the American Civil Liberties Union and several other human rights groups, there was little opposition to this program.

Then came the Universal Identification Card (UIC) which was implemented worldwide. The security checks at the airports following 9/11 had become so aggravating for both passengers and airlines that a UIC was designed combining a person's driver's license, identification card, social security card, medical insurance card, debit and credit cards, as well as a global positioning satellite (GPS) chip. The debit and credit card feature was included after all cash was declared illegal after a flood of counterfeit currency, produced by terrorist groups and designed to crash the American economy, entered the country .

The GPS chip, which allowed the DHS to continuously monitor every person's location, was added under the guise of being essential for emergency rescue or recovery in the event of further attacks. The growing instances of child kidnappings that swept the country a few years ago encouraged the use of GPS bracelets, and the youth raised them to fad status when they made them a fashion accessory. However, it took two more terrorist attacks before all 50 states came on board with the UIC, and now it was mandatory for every citizen.

Joshua had felt uncomfortable when he received his a year ago, but without it, he would be unable to even enter the building where he worked. Most buildings, including every public facility, were equipped with Sentry, a worldwide computerized security system that allowed selective entry only after checking a person's identity through the UIC. The information on a person's card was matched with a variety of biometrics patterns, such as fingerprint, retinal scans or face recognition. Using one or more of these patterns almost guaranteed a person's identity. The UIC was especially

useful when flying anywhere. Since its introduction, the lines at airport security checkpoints had all but evaporated and safeguards greatly enhanced.

Joshua shook his head as he thought back to the morning the World Trade Center towers collapsed. He had been anticipating such an event for twenty years ever since committing his life to Jesus Christ while a junior in high school. From the beginning, Bible prophecies concerning the return of Christ interested Joshua. Although much of the allegorical images in the book of Revelation confused him, he was captivated by the “mark of the beast”, the unexplained imprint on the forehead or the right hand that would be forced upon every citizen of the world, and without which no one could buy or sell anything. After much thought, Joshua was convinced that such a “mark” could only be implemented after a catastrophic event that would reduce the influence of civil libertarians and allow such an invasion of privacy. He believed that 9/11 was such an event and the UIC just a precursor for such a “mark”.

As it turned out, the UIC proved advantageous not only for the DHS, but for the Internal Revenue Service as well. The military actions against worldwide terrorism carried a hefty price tag beyond the cost of human lives. Every tax dollar counted! And what better way than an electronic financial system which exposed the incomes and expenses of every citizen to the penny! Not only could the DHS monitor and track the spending and earning activities of its citizens (looking for terrorists and any terrorist connections), but the IRS could ensure that everyone contributed their fair share to the campaign against international and domestic terrorism. No cheating and definitely no avoiding paying every cent owed to the IRS!

The question in many people’s minds was *who* the Government considered a “terrorist”! Joshua had never been a fan of the ACLU, but he found himself championing their cause more and more as his anxiety over the Government’s ever increasing power to scrutinize its citizens and monitor their activities grew. With the growing need for security, there seemed to be no stopping the Government’s requests for ever increasing surveillance powers, especially after the nuclear attack which annihilated a portion of the Capital. That act, though not unanticipated, left the Nation dazed, and proved the impetus for President Darcy’s election less than a year ago. Prior to the attack, the establishment of a Palestinian state was vehemently opposed by the Jewish and Christian coalition, but their protests were drowned out by the subsequent call for national security and safety. Joshua had wondered how the President would accomplish his agenda for a Palestinian State considering Israel’s adamant stand against it. But he had underestimated the President’s skills, and even now, shook his head in disbelief at the morning’s happenings.

Joshua turned into the parking lot at the law office, stepped out of his car and gazed at the sky above him. It was perfectly clear and radiated a deep blue, but Joshua knew that storm clouds were already on the horizon. He slammed the car door shut and walked toward the office building.

Chapter 2

The Dilemma

“Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.”

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2

The morning passed routinely for Joshua. As the senior paralegal, he supervised the work of three others who were busy drawing up legal documents to be reviewed and approved by the firm’s cofounders, Jim Akers and Laura McMichaels. Jim and Laura had met in law school and found it convenient and profitable to work together. In a very short time, they had hired a staff around them, including four paralegals and two secretaries. Much of their work dealt with civil court cases, but their lives, as with most lawyers, were very ordinary, unlike the plastic characters on television.

Joshua had spent the first 10 years of his working life in the Philippines, ministering to the young people in the barrios of the sprawling capital city of Manila. A visiting missionary had presented slides of the living conditions of these people in Joshua’s church when he was still in high school, and as he sat mesmerized by the other worldly images, there was birthed in him a desire to help. Forget that he did not even know where the Philippines was on the map, but on that evening many years ago, he asked God to send him there.

After graduating from Bible College, Joshua was accepted by the Mission Board of his denomination and sent to assist in the outreach ministry in the twin metropolis of Manila and Quezon City. He would always look back on those years as the highlight of his life when he felt most alive, living and working side by side with the poorest people in the city. Maybe this was because the people there always seemed to appreciate anything he did for them, or because, despite the squalid conditions of their living quarters, there was a simple joy, especially among the children, that he didn’t find in America.

Joshua felt at home walking the streets of the city, catching rides on the numerous and brilliantly decorated Jeeps that connected the barrios and towns comprising the metropolis. The smell of diesel fumes was ever in the air and it became linked, in a strange Pavlovian way, with memorable experiences. The street vendors selling the sweet sampagita flowers, the insane taxi cab drivers navigating the controlled chaos of the streets and the soulful call of the wandering seller of the national delicacy balut, a boiled egg containing a fully formed chick embryo, all added to the kaleidoscope of colors, sights and sounds.

Even on the occasional trips to Dagupan City in Pangasinan Province or the mountain retreat at Baguio City, Joshua opted for the “local” buses rather than the air conditioned tourist variety. Trips on the former were enlivened by the presence of farm animals and the smells of the local foods the passengers brought with them. Scenes of expansive rice patties with young boys perched lazily on the backs of giant water buffaloes or carabao flew by the open windowed bus as it sped up the winding mountain roads in a suicidal dash.

But best of all, the people were open to the message of the Savior and received it gratefully and enthusiastically. Joshua had seen hundreds of Filipinos respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ over the ten years he lived among them. But word of his parents' declining health and his diminishing support base brought him back home.

His parents' health improved but, unfortunately, his support base did not. After spending several months speaking in various churches raising funds to return to the Philippines, it was apparent that there would not be enough. The common reason given was that the money was already designated for those going on short term mission trips. Joshua did not quite understand the logic of sending many short term missionaries at the expense of those willing to serve long term. But, he reasoned, if God permitted it, he would accept it.

He had tried serving as a youth minister, but found that his ten years in a third world country had created a cultural chasm several light years wide between him and America's youth. Realizing his inability to identify with the youth of his home country, Joshua applied to the local community college to train as a Paralegal. Interestingly, he found the process of legal research very similar to studying the Bible and displayed a natural proficiency in it, so much so that even Jim Akers and Laura McMichaels did not hesitate to depend on him to do research for some of their upcoming court cases.

The time spent researching the numerous cases and searching for applicable precedence more than made up for the more ordinary tasks of writing up legal documents for clients. Anyway, Joshua thought, his real calling was still teaching God's Word, and to that end he studied the Bible diligently for his personal growth as well as for the adult Sunday School he taught at his church.

The work day had gone quicker than usual and Joshua was surprised when it was time to head home. He checked with the other paralegals before they left, then with Jim and Laura, before he himself slipped out the door. He merged into the stream of cars heading towards his home and relaxed in the seat before turning on the radio. The news was being broadcast, causing Joshua to sit up slightly. He had forgotten about the morning's news report and reached for the volume knob. The reporter first read some local news, but Joshua listened attentively when the world news was reported.

First, there was a story on the Iraqi elections for a new president, then one on the upcoming European economic conference, and, finally, an update on the signing of the Treaty between the United States and Israel.

"President Richard Darcy applauded the new Treaty between America and Israel which he signed today in Jerusalem, Israel's capital. He said the Treaty would guarantee the security of the nation of Israel and the establishment of a Palestinian State, with hopes that a long lasting peace be finally realized between these two ancient people. In his words, "The children of Abraham are once again united as a family among the United Nations of the World."

"Prime Minister Abraham Gurit of Israel expressed his hope that his nation could now live in peace with all Islamic nations, if not forever, at least for the seven year period of the Treaty."

A curtain of despair closed around Joshua as he stared straight ahead at the car directly in front of his. What was it about the news report which caused him such concern? Joshua continued to stare at the line of cars before him. Then his eyes widened. He quickly pulled off the highway, reached for his cell phone, searched through the names and pressed the call button. After three rings, a voice on the other side answered.

“Pastor Mitchell?!” Joshua almost shouted. “It’s Joshua. Boy, am I glad to hear your voice!”

“Hi, Joshua. I thought you’d be calling,” Pastor Mitchell responded, his voice sounding unusually strained. “You’ve heard the news report haven’t you?”

Joshua was much calmer when he replied, “That’s right, Pastor. I heard it this morning and, again, right now, on my way home. And let me tell you, it really scared me ... until you picked up the phone.”

There was a moment of silence, until Pastor Mitchell finally said, “I know what you’re getting at. The same idea occurred to me, too.” Pastor Mitchell paused and then added, “What are you doing tonight, Joshua? Would you like come over to my house to discuss it?”

Joshua felt a soothing peace slowly replace the anxiety within him. Without hesitation, he replied, “Pastor, I’ll be there.” and pushed the end button on his cell. He sat for a moment, smiled slightly, put his car in gear and merged back into the rushing line of cars.

He pulled into his driveway, grabbed his briefcase and entered his apartment. A blinking red light drew his attention to his answering machine. Joshua pressed the new messages button and walked to the refrigerator as a female voice announced that he had 8 new messages. As he poured himself a glass of milk, the first message played.

“Hi Joshua, it’s me, Justin. Just wanted to know if you caught the news about the President signing a Treaty with Israel. Give me a call when you get home. Thanks.”

The machine let out a beep and played the next message.

“Hey Josh, this is Sharon. Have you heard about the Treaty our President signed with Israel today? I was just wondering what you thought about it. Give me a call when you can. I’m kind of shook up about it. Talk to you later.”

The sound of Sharon’s voice brought a smile to Joshua. Even in her late thirties, she was still very attractive with her athletic build and ready smile. When he first began attending the church, they had dated and he had even thought of marrying her. But though she did not feel the same way about him causing their relationship to ebb to the level of friends, she still held a special place in his heart.

The answering machine continued playing six more similar calls, all of them members of Joshua’s Sunday School class. He debated in his mind whether to return their calls immediately, and decided that would be the proper thing to do. But his message to

each person was the same. "Yes", he had heard the news, and "no", he was not sure what to think about it, but that he was meeting with Pastor Mitchell this evening to discuss it and would get back with them as soon as he had a better answer. This didn't really satisfy anyone, but it was the truth.

Joshua fixed himself a quick snack, checked his watch and decided that he had enough time to take a short nap before seeing Pastor Mitchell. Maybe when he awoke, Joshua thought to himself, all of this will have just been a bad dream. But he doubted it.

It took longer than usual, but when he finally drifted off to sleep, his rest was an uneasy one. Dreams that he would not remember assailed his subconscious, dreams of being chased and hunted down. The alarm was a welcome interruption as it jarred Joshua from his apocalyptic trance. He opened his eyes and stared around at the now darkened room, his conscious mind awakening and mercifully melting away the terrible visions.

The water he splashed on his face felt cold and refreshing, chasing away any lingering drowsiness. Now, wide awake, Joshua felt a growing confidence as he dressed for his meeting with Pastor Mitchell. He had a strong dislike for unanswered questions and was glad that those lurking in his mind would finally be resolved .

Joshua's car activated the security lights as he drove up the Mitchell's driveway. Pastor Mitchell's wife, Ruth, welcomed him at the door.

"Hi, Joshua. So nice to see you," she said with a warm smile. "Come on in. Pete's in the den waiting for you. Go right in."

"Thanks, Ruth," Joshua replied.

He made his way to the den and found Pastor Mitchell at a desk surrounded by his Bible and several reference books. Pastor Mitchell looked up and gave Joshua a wide smile.

"Come in and grab a chair," Pastor Mitchell said. He motioned for Joshua to sit beside him. Pastor Mitchell's friendly manner, and commitment to God's Word, was what had attracted Joshua to the Bible Church.

"So, Pastor, what's going on with this Treaty?" Joshua asked trying to sound buoyant and hoping to find a quick and easy answer.

Pastor Mitchell leaned back, raised his eyebrows and sighed. "Well, to be honest, I really don't know."

Joshua felt the anxiety inside of him beginning to rise again. He tried not to show any trace of it when he spoke. "But do you think this is the 'covenant' Daniel talked about which would start the seven year tribulation?"

Joshua watched Pastor Mitchell as he stared at the open Bible in front of him. His brows furrowed and he seemed to be thinking through his answer carefully. Without looking up, he shook his head and said "I don't think so, Joshua." He paused and, still looking down, asked. "And do you know why?" Joshua wanted to say something, but decided to let Pastor Mitchell continue. Pastor Mitchell turned toward Joshua and, looking directly at him, solemnly said "Because we're still here."

Chapter 3

The Deception

"Let no one in any way deceive you,"
2 Thessalonians 2:3

He had finally said it. The thing that had troubled Joshua ever since he had heard the news that morning. The thing that caused eight of his Sunday School class members to call him. The terrifying and almost unthinkable idea that maybe the Rapture had already occurred and they were all left behind. That was the question Joshua needed to be answered.

"So, Pastor," Joshua finally said, "What you're saying is that the way we can be sure this is not the covenant spoken of by Daniel is the fact that the Rapture hasn't occurred. Is that right?"

"That's right, Joshua." Pastor Mitchell answered with an authoritative tone, yet knowing that his answer would not satisfy Joshua completely.

"But what if," Joshua ventured, "this *is* the beginning of the final week prophesied by Daniel and our interpretation regarding the timing of the Rapture is wrong? What if the Rapture occurs after the ..."

"Don't be absurd!" Pastor Mitchell interjected, his countenance turning dark for a brief moment. "Don't you remember the series of messages I preached on last year concerning the return of Christ?"

Joshua was surprised at Pastor Mitchell's outburst, but his need for a clear answer from Scripture overcame his fear of upsetting him further. "To be honest," Joshua answered, "I found the series kind of confusing. What I really need to know, Pastor, is this. Is there any Scripture that clearly shows that the Rapture will definitely take place before the seven year tribulation begins?"

Joshua watched as Pastor Mitchell placed a notepad between them and explained, "Honestly, there are *no* Scriptures that clearly and explicitly teach the Rapture will occur before Daniel's seventieth week."

Joshua was surprised at this statement, especially since he had always believed that Christ would return before the seven year tribulation period. He had always been

taught that in the churches he attended as well as at the Bible College he went to. He tried not to display his amazement and wondered if his face already betrayed his inner thoughts. It did.

"I know this surprises you, Joshua." Pastor Mitchell said, "but there are other doctrines of Scripture for which this is also true, foremost of which is the doctrine of the Trinity. Even though the word 'Trinity' can't be found in Scripture, nor can you find a single verse that states explicitly that there is only One God manifested in three distinct Persons, namely God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, still we believe this doctrine because it can be supported through various Scriptures that clearly teach it to be so." Pastor Mitchell paused to allow this truth to sink into Joshua's mind, and then continued, "In the same way, although there may not be one Scripture verse that clearly teaches the Pre-Tribulation Rapture viewpoint, there are many verses that indicate it to be true."

Joshua found himself nodding in agreement as Pastor Mitchell, now speaking with greater ease, continued. "Let me share three key principles from Scripture that support the Pre-Tribulation Rapture." Here, Pastor Mitchell began writing on the notepad to outline his points.

"First, the Seventy weeks of Daniel is a period designated for Israel and not for the Church.

"Second, Jesus told us that no one knows the day of His return except God the Father."

"And third, God promised that Christians would not experience His wrath."

Pastor Mitchell opened his Bible and said, "Let's go back to the first principle. 'The Seventy weeks of Daniel is for Israel, not the Church.' Take a look at Daniel 9:24-27."

24 "Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city,
to finish the transgression,
to make an end of sin,
to make atonement for iniquity,
to bring in everlasting righteousness,
to seal up vision and prophecy and
to anoint the most holy *place*.

25 "So you are to know and discern
that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem
until Messiah the Prince
there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks;
it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress.

26 "Then after the sixty-two weeks
the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and
the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the
sanctuary. And
its end *will come* with a flood;

even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined.
27 "And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week,
but in the middle of the week
he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and
on the wing of abominations *will come* one who makes desolate,
even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed,
is poured out on the one who makes desolate."

Pastor Mitchell continued, "To whom is this prophecy given and who is involved in it? Verse 24 is directed to 'your people', but who is Daniel's people? Israel, right? This passage reveals God's decree to once and for all deal with the problem of sin through His Messiah, to fulfill all prophecy and to restore Israel as a righteous and holy people. The Church is not involved in this at all! That is why we are gone when God's final seven year countdown begins!"

"Joshua, notice how the Seventy weeks are broken into two basic groups. First, 69 weeks of years in verses 25 & 26, which is 69×7 or 483 years, and second, 1 week or the final 7 years in verse 27, for a total of 490 years. In 1894, Sir Robert Anderson, the chief inspector for Scotland yard, published this book." Pastor Mitchell held up a book entitled 'The Coming Prince' and continued, "In it, he determined that the prophetic year is made up of twelve 30 day months for a total of 360 days. Here, you can read his analysis." said Pastor Mitchell as he handed the book to Joshua. Then he continued.

"Daniel says that the first 69 weeks, or 483 years, begins with the decree to rebuild Jerusalem and culminates in the Messiah being "cut off" or killed. These were future events for Daniel when he received this prophecy, but for us, they're already fulfilled."

"Now get this. The decree to rebuild Jerusalem was issued in 445 BC by King Artaxerxes of the Medo-Persian empire. In that year, he authorized Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls and gates. It's all recorded in the book of Nehemiah chapter 2 and is part of historical record. Now, incredibly, if you add the 483 prophetic years to 445 BC, you arrive at 32 AD on the very day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem! The people of Israel were actually told the exact day their Messiah would come! But apparently, nobody did their homework. Amazing, huh?"

Joshua sat stunned at the preciseness of Daniel's prophecy.

Pastor Mitchell continued, "The final seven years are yet to begin. But the period between the 69 weeks and the final seventieth week, a period of about 2000 years so far, is the Church Age. The Church Age started immediately after the death and resurrection of Christ and will end immediately before the start of the final seven years when the Church is Raptured! We're in that period right now, Joshua. That's why I know the Treaty with Israel is not the covenant spoken about in Daniel."

"Pastor," Joshua asked, "If the Bible foretold Christ's first coming to the very day, isn't it possible that It has also revealed the time of His second coming?"

"In fact, Joshua," Pastor Mitchell answered, "that brings us to the second principle. Jesus said in Matthew 24:36, as well as in other places, that no one knows the day or the

hour of His return. That's why He tells us to 'watch' and to be 'alert' because He will come on a day when we will least expect Him, 'like a thief in the night'. Theologians call this Imminence. In other words, Jesus could return tonight. We can't know for sure until it happens. The only way the Rapture could be imminent is if it occurs before the Tribulation period, before any warnings are given."

Joshua furrowed his brow as he tried to digest what Pastor Mitchell had just shared. Finally he spoke up, "But Pastor, didn't Jesus give us certain signs that we should look out for before His second coming? I seem to remember something about earthquakes and famines, wars and rumors of war, and something about the abomination of desolation, whatever that is."

"That's right, Joshua." Pastor Mitchell replied. "But don't forget, the Rapture is separate from Jesus' second coming. Jesus' second coming is at the end of the seven year tribulation. Those signs point to that coming and not to the Rapture, which occurs before the seven years."

Pastor Mitchell drew a horizontal timeline on the notepad and labeled it "The 7 Year Tribulation". He divided it right in the middle and wrote in "The Abomination of Desolation". To the left of the line he wrote "Rapture" and then, at the start of the line, 'Confirms a Covenant'. At the right of the line he wrote 'Armageddon' and then, 'The Second Coming of Christ'.

Then he explained, "The signs you referred to point to the 'Second Coming of Christ' here." Pastor Mitchell indicated the end of the 7 Year Tribulation. He continued, "The Abomination of Desolation" will occur midway through the Tribulation when the Antichrist stops the sacrifices in the Temple. As far as wars, earthquakes and famines, these will probably begin to increase greatly during the Tribulation period culminating at Armageddon when Christ will return with all of the saints, to defeat the Antichrist and set up His Millennial Kingdom."

"Notice that the Rapture occurs before any of these events," Pastor Mitchell said, "making it unnecessary for any signs to appear before the Rapture occurs. This is why the Rapture is imminent. Our only hope is to be ready when He comes for us. That is why Christ warns us to be alert and to watch for his coming."

Joshua wanted to pursue this further, but somehow felt Pastor Mitchell wouldn't be open to more questions.

Pastor Mitchell moved on to the final principle supporting the Pre-Tribulation Rapture and explained, "The third reason we'll be Raptured before the seven year tribulation is that God has promised in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 that His Church would not experience His wrath. The tribulation period will be a time of great suffering from which God will spare us."

Pastor Mitchell sat back, looked at Joshua and said, "You know, I'm glad you came tonight. Going through these principles has really been good for me, and I hope for you, too, Joshua. What do you think?"

Joshua looked through the principles written on the notepad. "Pastor", he finally said. "Do you mind if I take this? I'd like to study these verses further."

"Of course not." Pastor Mitchell replied sitting up and pushing the notepad toward Joshua. "And don't forget Sir Robert Anderson's book. I think you'll find it interesting." Pastor Mitchell looked down at his Bible, and nodding said, "You know what, Joshua? I think I'll preach on this on Sunday." He looked up at Joshua and smiled, "I'm sure there'll be a lot of attentive ears this time."

Ruth Mitchell came into the room with the fragrance of fresh brewed coffee which she was carrying on a tray. "Thought you boys would like some coffee to keep you awake," she smiled.

Joshua thanked her and contentedly sipped from his cup as he and Pastor Mitchell continued their conversation for another two hours. When he finally looked at his watch, he was surprised to see how late it was. "Well, I'd better be going, Pastor" he said getting up from the chair. "Thanks so much for your time, and for sharing this with me. It's really been helpful." Joshua felt a little guilty saying this because in truth, he was still unsure about all that Pastor Mitchell had shared. But at least he had a starting point to begin his search for answers, and for this he was grateful.

As he pulled out of the Mitchell's driveway and drove down the street, he remembered the phone calls from the members of his Sunday School class. He knew he couldn't share with them what he had just learned with the same conviction as Pastor Mitchell. Why couldn't he be as convinced as Pastor Mitchell? What was it that made him question the veracity of what he had just heard? It was logical, it seemed Scriptural and it was accepted by many, if not most Christians that he knew. But there was something wrong, something missing. Joshua thought to himself, "Maybe I'll get lucky and the Rapture will happen tonight." But he heard himself mutter sarcastically, "Right!"

Chapter 4

The Growing Darkness

"And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on the right hand, or on their forehead,"

Revelation 13:16

Joshua kept a watchful eye on the news, keeping track of any and every story that had any relevance to Bible prophecy. He thought back to that evening meeting he had with Pastor Mitchell, now more than three years ago. That meeting had started Joshua on an intellectual quest to determine for himself the certainty of what Pastor Mitchell had shared concerning the Rapture and Christ's return. As for Pastor Mitchell, he remained steady in his belief. Just as he intended, he had preached on what they had discussed the following Sunday, and the people in the congregation were greatly encouraged by that exposition of God's Word. They had come to trust the teaching of Pastor Mitchell and it was comforting for many of them to know that no matter how much the world changed, God's Word remained the same.

Joshua remembered his conversation with Sharon after the service when he had asked her what she thought about the sermon. He was not surprised when she told him that Pastor Mitchell had simply confirmed what she was thinking. But Joshua ventured to ask her what if Pastor Mitchell was mistaken and that they were in fact in the tribulation period. He remembered being surprised when she responded almost angrily that that was very improbable. If Pastor Mitchell was mistaken, she had reasoned, then hundreds, and even thousands of Pastors and Theologians were also mistaken. She had shot back a question of her own when she asked him what the probability of that was. Joshua remembered being tempted to share his doubts and concerns, but felt intimidated to challenge the testimony of people who were far more knowledgeable than he was in the Bible. He had concluded that the only way to truly confirm prophecy was after it had been fulfilled.

Since the implementation of the UIC, there was a greater resumption to normal life as it was before 9/11, if you can call the numerous security procedures and checks "normal". For more effective security, the cards were enhanced to transmit "essential information" that enabled the Home Security Agents to scan crowds of people from a distance to determine the identities and backgrounds of every person. As it was at the inception of the UIC, the human rights groups were ignored on the basis of national safety and security. There was no question that security had increased, not only from "terrorism", but also from other things that were deemed to be threatening.

As predicted, illegal drug, alcohol, and tobacco use declined due to the absence of cash to purchase them, and the ever intrusive monitoring of our purchases. Interestingly, even fast food chains altered their menus to include low fat and even no fat items. People's buying habits changed, even though they had nothing to do with the threat of terrorism. The insurance companies saw to that. When our purchases became public record, all of the insurance companies made a beeline to the files to determine the demographics of their policy holders. The result was the formation of a sliding scale insurance premium that rewarded those who conformed to a paradigm which labeled them low risk. By this system of reward and punishment, the population's behaviors were modified a la B. F. Skinner. Health advocates applauded the change, but others wondered where this kind of behavior manipulation would end.

About two years ago, a new UIC was developed. The card had evolved into a tiny microchip that was imbedded subcutaneously in the right hand. The Home Security department assured everyone that the new Universal Identification Chip was necessary to counter efforts by terrorist groups to produce counterfeit cards. The move to replace the card with a chip was still being debated in Congress, but many people were already implanting the new Chip conceding that it was inevitable.

The reaction in the church was seismic. There was a growing anxiety among church members and the discussions, instead of easing the concerns of people, seemed to fuel the rising panic. The seven year Treaty signed more than three years ago had already created an atmosphere of unease. But with this new development, many church members were feeling anxious once again about the possibility that this was indeed the tribulation period. They flocked to Pastor Mitchell for comfort and were told, as they had been three years prior, that, no, they were not living in the tribulation period. This time, however, Joshua did not sense the anxiety level subside as it had previously. The

Treaty and the UIC were too close to prophetic signs for comfort. One thing everyone agreed on was to not receive the new microchip. After all, if this was the fulfillment of the “mark of the beast” then surely the Rapture must be just around the corner. Everyone had to hang on for just a little while longer. At least that is what they hoped.

President Richard Darcy had been reelected to a second term in a landslide. It would have been difficult for anyone to oust the President from office considering his incredible accomplishments on the domestic as well as the international front.

His leadership in the Home Security issue resulted in four years devoid of terrorist incidents. It was not an exaggeration to say that the President had almost single-handedly willed the country forward through strong opposition to embrace a program that demonstrably ensured the safety of its citizens. His initiatives had resulted in an expanding economy, and more, a rising morale among the citizens.

For sure, personal rights were curtailed, but “desperate times demanded desperate measures” and the President’s “measures” seemed always to be the right ones.

But his domestic accomplishments paled in the light of his international successes. The Middle East had seen relative calm under President Darcy’s leadership in international affairs. The Treaty between Israel and America, and the resulting Palestinian State, brought relative stability to the region, a stability enforced by armies from several nations.

A major concession obtained from the Palestinians was the building of a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. It was nothing short of a miracle, and many in Israel even considered the President a type of Messiah who had saved their nation from destruction. The Temple, which was built adjacent to the Dome of the Rock, revived the temple worship and sacrificial system practiced in historic Israel. The original Ark of the Covenant had been recovered and there was an entire week of national celebration when it was placed in the new Temple.

The only negative in all of this was the annual feast at Passover when numerous sacrifices were offered, sparking violent reactions from Islamic extremists. Many Israelis were killed during the last Passover feast, and a threat of an even greater attack had been issued for this year’s observance. The threat caused President Darcy great concern over the upcoming feast.

But what was disturbing to Joshua was a growing movement to eliminate all groups that exhibited any perceived threat or intolerance toward specific social values or persons. President Darcy had taken up this cause with an almost evangelical zeal. He preached a gospel of unity and tolerance, and crusaded for worldwide environmental concern.

The movement was actually first observed in the last decade of the Twentieth century and was then labeled ‘Political Correctness’. Since then, it had evolved into a very severe form that, ironically, promoted tolerance through intolerance. But it was believed to be a justified intolerance. Groups that were deemed by the government as threatening or intolerant, found themselves banned and their members imprisoned.

It was as though laws no longer mattered except the principles that “might makes right” and “the end justifies the means”. Joshua knew there would be an inevitable collision between this movement and the Church. He knew it would confront everyone who claimed to be a Christian with a grave decision: To either follow Christ and risk imprisonment or to follow the President and risk God’s judgment. The cost of being a Christian was about to go up.

Chapter 5

Sons of Light

“But you brethren, are not in darkness,
that the day should overtake you like a thief;”

1 Thessalonians 5:4

Joshua was not surprised when he awoke one morning and heard the news. He probably would be getting calls again from his Sunday School class members, but this time, there would be no chance of reassuring them. He thought of calling Pastor Mitchell but decided against it. There would be time enough to talk with him. He set his answering machine to pick up in two rings and turned his cell phone’s ringer off. He knew there would be numerous messages to return by day’s end.

As he did every morning, Joshua prepared his lunch, threw everything in his brief case, made sure he had his UIC card and took off for work. After merging onto the highway, he allowed his mind to go into autopilot for the ride to his office.

He thought back three and a half years to a very similar morning. He smiled slightly as he remembered the anxiety which had nearly paralyzed him. This time, however, he was amazed at the calm which filled him. This time, he was not caught unawares. He had prepared himself for, and even anticipated, this morning’s news.

The turning point had been his meeting with Pastor Mitchell. He had studied the verses and had researched what the Bible said regarding the Rapture and Christ’s return. And he had come to a very different conclusion than what Pastor Mitchell and many others had come to.

He remembered going home that night after the meeting and reading over and over again the passages which Pastor Mitchell had shared. At first, there was nothing that seemed to contradict anything he had learned before. And then he saw it. In Jesus’ Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24:30-31.

30 and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and
then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and
they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of the sky
with power and great glory.

31 And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and
they will gather together his elect from the four winds,
from one end of the sky to the other.

Joshua stared at the verses and reread them again and again. He remembered a related passage about the Rapture and turned to 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. There he read,

16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout,
with the voice of the archangel, and
with the trumpet of God; and
the dead in Christ shall rise first.

17 Then we who are alive and remain
shall be caught up together with them in the clouds
to meet the Lord in the air, and
thus shall we always be with the Lord.

Was this the same event? Was the apostle Paul expanding on what Jesus had taught in His Olivet Discourse? There *were* the similarities.

In both passages, Jesus appears in the sky. Both also describe a trumpet. When Paul says Jesus will come with a "shout", is he describing Jesus commanding His angels to gather His elect? When Jesus says He will gather His elect from the "four winds, from one end of the sky to the other", is He describing the Rapture where the dead and living in Christ rise and meet the "Lord in the air"? The image of Believers, dead and alive, rising simultaneously from every corner of the Earth and rendezvousing at the single point of the ascended Christ sent chills through Joshua. "What a beautiful way of describing it!" Joshua thought as he reread Jesus' words, "from one end of the sky to the other."

"But when will this be?" Joshua asked himself. He turned back to Matthew 24. There, right in the text, he found certain clues. First, in verses 1-3.

1 Jesus came out from the temple and was going away
when His disciples came up
to point out the temple buildings to Him.

2 And He said to them,
"Do you not see all these things?
Truly I say to you,
not one stone here will be left upon another,
which will not be torn down."

3 As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives,
the disciples came to Him privately, saying,
"Tell us, when will these things happen, and
what *will be* the sign of Your coming,
and of the end of the age?"

Joshua observed that the disciples were asking Jesus to tell them when the Temple would be torn down, and what will be the sign marking His return and of the end of the age.

He read verses 4-31. Then, working backwards from verses 30 & 31, Joshua noted the preceding events to the return of Christ. There would be:

1. Astronomical Disturbances.

29 "But immediately after the tribulation of those days
the sun will be darkened, and
the moon will not give its light, and
the stars will fall from the sky, and
the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

2. Tribulations

9 "Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and
will kill you, and
you will be hated by all nations because of My name.

10 "At that time many will fall away and
will betray one another and
hate one another....

21 For then there will be a great tribulation,
such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now,
nor ever will....

29 "But immediately after the tribulation of those days
the sun will be darkened, and
the moon will not give its light, and
the stars will fall from the sky, and
the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

3. False Christs and Prophets

4 And Jesus answered and said to them,
"See to it that no one misleads you.

5 "For many will come in My name, saying,
'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many....

11 "Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many....

23 "Then if anyone says to you,
'Behold, here is the Christ,' or 'There *He is*,'
do not believe *him*.

24 "For false Christs and false prophets will arise and
will show great signs and wonders,
so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.

25 "Behold,
I have told you in advance.

26 "So if they say to you,
'Behold, He is in the wilderness,'
do not go out, *or*,
'Behold, He is in the inner rooms,'
do not believe *them*.

4. Turmoil in Judea.

16 "then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains;
17 "Whoever is on the housetop
 must not go down to get the things out that are in his house.
18 "Whoever is in the field
 must not turn back to get his cloak.
19 "But woe to those who are pregnant and
 to those who are nursing babies in those days!
20 "But pray that your flight will not be in the winter,
 or on a Sabbath.
21 "For then there will be a great tribulation,
 such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now,
 nor ever will.
22 "Unless those days had been cut short,
 no life would have been saved;
 but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short."

5. The "Abomination of Desolation".

15 "Therefore when you see the Abomination of Desolation
 which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet,
 standing in the holy place (let the reader understand),

6. The Gospel Preached to the Whole World.

14 "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world
 as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come."

7. A Falling Away.

10 "At that time many will fall away and
 will betray one another and
 hate one another.

8. Wars, Famines and Earth Quakes.

6 "You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars.
 See that you are not frightened,
 for *those things* must take place,
 but *that* is not yet the end.
7 "For nation will rise against nation, and
 kingdom against kingdom, and
 in various places there will be famines and earthquakes.
8 "But all these things are *merely* the beginning of birth pangs.

He glanced through the list and sighed "Whoa." It didn't look good. Maybe he was misreading the text? Maybe it wasn't meant for the Believer? Maybe it was meant only

for the time of the disciples and for the nation of Israel? But upon examining the text again, he found references to the “elect” in verses 22, 24 & 31.

- 22 "Unless those days had been cut short,
no life would have been saved;
but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short."
24 "For false Christs and false prophets will arise and
will show great signs and wonders,
so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.
31 "And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and
they will gather together His elect from the four winds,
from one end of the sky to the other.

And then Jesus’ statement in verse 9 that all nations will hate those who are called by His Name. Joshua knew that the only time this could occur would have to be now when “all nations” have been told about Christ and are aware of those who are called according to His Name.

“No”, Joshua reasoned, “Though many of these prophecies were fulfilled during the time of the early expansion of the Christian faith and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD, they clearly apply to our day as well!”

Then his eyes focused on one specific event. The Abomination of Desolation. He remembered the timeline sketch that Pastor Mitchell had drawn which included that event. Here was an event whose time could be determined, and might even give a clue to the timing of Christ’s return. Joshua pulled out the drawing and saw that Pastor Mitchell had placed the Abomination of Desolation in the middle of the seven year Tribulation. “But how did he determine that?” Joshua wondered. He remembered the passage from Daniel 9 and quickly found it in his Bible. “There it is,” he whispered. “**Daniel 9:27.**”

- 27 "And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week,
but in the middle of the week
he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and
on the wing of abominations *will come* one who makes desolate,
even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed,
is poured out on the one who makes desolate."

“Yes, it does say the middle of the week,” Joshua thought to himself. “But that seems to refer to the stopping of the sacrifices.” Joshua decided to research further and, using Scripture references in the margin, located another passage in Daniel that spoke about the Abomination of Desolation. He found it in **Daniel 12:11**.

- 11 "From the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished and
the abomination of desolation is set up,
there will be 1,290 days."

Joshua stared at the verse and reread it. He couldn’t believe what he was reading. Daniel was being given further information regarding the abolishment of the sacrifice,

which occurred in the middle of the week according to Daniel 9:27, and the Abomination of Desolation. There would actually be a period of 1290 days between the two events!

“Now what did Pastor say about days and months and years?”, Joshua asked himself. He remembered the book by Sir Robert Anderson. A prophetic month was made up of 12 X 30 day months or 360 days. Joshua did the arithmetic. “So the period of 1290 days between the two events comes out to 43 months or 3 years and 7 months.” Joshua concluded. But something didn’t seem right. “Wait a minute,” Joshua realized. “That’s one extra month over three and one half years. That puts the Abomination of Desolation at the end of the seven year period!”

Joshua made the correction on the timeline sketch. Then he reasoned, “If this is true, then the Rapture won’t occur until after the seven year tribulation!” Joshua stared at the timeline and tried to absorb what he had just done. “If the Rapture comes after the seven year period,” Joshua contemplated, “then it might very well be that the seven year Treaty President Darcy signed with Israel is the ‘covenant’ spoken of in Daniel 9:27.” Joshua hesitated, afraid to take the next logical step in his thinking. But he had to. “Then,” he finally concluded, “we might be in the tribulation period already.”

He closed his Bible and his eyes, and prayed.

But were there other verses that supported his finding? Joshua began to search for other passages that would provide any indication of the time of the Rapture. His search led him to **2 Thessalonians 2:1-4**.

- 1 Now we request you, brethren,
with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and
our gathering together to Him,
- 2 that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or
be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us,
to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.
- 3 Let no one in any way deceive you,
for *it will not come* unless the apostasy comes first, and
the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,
- 4 who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or
object of worship,
so that he takes his seat in the temple of God,
displaying himself as being God.

Joshua read the first verse and was certain the “coming of the Lord and our gathering together to Him” was a reference to the Rapture. The wording and ideas were very similar to those Paul used in 1 Thessalonians 5:15-17.

But what did the second verse mean? Was the phrase “the day of the Lord” another reference to the Rapture? He looked back at 1 Thessalonians again to see if Paul had used the same phrase there, and smiled when he found that he did. There it was in **1 Thessalonians 5:2**.

2 For you yourselves know full well
that the day of the Lord will come
just like a thief in the night.

Joshua noted that this verse immediately follows Paul's description of the Rapture in chapter 4, which seemed to support the idea that the 'day of the Lord' refers to the day Christ comes back to gather those who belong to Him. The use of the phrase "like a thief in the night" also supported his conclusion, remembering how Pastor Mitchell and others had used this same phrase to describe the Rapture. "So when Paul uses the phrase 'day of the Lord' in his second letter to the Thessalonians," Joshua reasoned, "in all probability, he must be referring to the Rapture!"

"Therefore, the Christians in Thessalonica must have been 'shaken' by the thought that the Rapture had already come and they had missed it!", Joshua laughed to himself, remembering that he, too, had had the same thought and reaction. It was somehow comforting to know that people hadn't changed in two thousand years.

But what is Paul's point here? In verse 3, he is ironically comforting them by telling them that the Rapture could not have occurred because it cannot occur until the "apostasy comes" and the "man of lawlessness is revealed". Joshua remembered how sobering it was when he had looked up the meaning of 'apostasy' and discovered it meant the "abandoning of one's religious faith". The Rapture would not occur until there was an abandoning of the faith, presumably by Christians.

But who was the "man of lawlessness"? He found the answer in the unthinkable description of verse 4. "This must be the Abomination of Desolation," Joshua thought to himself, "and the 'man of lawlessness' must be the AntiChrist!"

Joshua referred back to his list of events that needed to occur before the Rapture and located the apostasy, a "falling away and betraying of one another", as well as the "Abomination of Desolation". He was now more convinced that his conclusions were correct.

But what about Pastor Mitchell's three principles supporting the Pre-Tribulation Rapture? Each would have to be answered. Joshua checked the notepad again and located the principles Pastor Mitchell had written down.

The first principle: The Seventy weeks of Daniel is a period designated for Israel and not for the Church. "

When Pastor Mitchell had first shared this, Joshua remembered thinking that if the Church would be absent during the period of the Seventy weeks of Daniel, then why wasn't the opposite true? Why wasn't Israel absent during the Church Age. In fact, Israel was present from the time the Church began at Pentecost until 70 AD when the Romans demolished the Temple and ended the Jewish sacrificial system. Then, in 1948, Israel was miraculously resurrected as a nation through a United Nations mandate and has existed as an independent state since. So, if Israel can exist during the Church Age,

why shouldn't it be equally possible for the Church to be on the Earth during the Seventieth week of Daniel?

The second principle: Jesus told us that no one knows the day of His return except God the Father.

Joshua opened his Bible, looked up **Matthew 24:36** and read,

36 "But of that day and hour no one knows,
not even the angels of heaven,
nor the Son,
but the Father alone."

It certainly did seem to be saying that no one would know the day or the hour of His return. "But," Joshua wondered, "did Jesus mean we would never ever know?" Joshua decided to read on.

37 "For the coming of the Son of Man
will be just like the days of Noah.
38 "For as in those days before the flood
they were eating and drinking,
marrying and giving in marriage,
until the day that Noah entered the ark,
39 and they did not understand
until the flood came and took them all away;
so will the coming of the Son of Man be.

Joshua noted that Jesus said His coming will be "just like" the days of Noah. But what was the point of comparison? From the following verses, it was clear that Jesus was comparing His coming to the fact that people in Noah's days didn't know the flood was coming until it arrived. By then, it was too late!

"So, the people who didn't know the day or the hour of the flood were the unbelievers who did not listen to what God had told Noah. But", Joshua wondered. "did Noah know?". He decided to study the flood and turned to Genesis 6 & 7. He scanned the story of the flood looking for any clues as to whether Noah knew when the flood would come. He found the following verses.

Genesis 6:

13 Then God said to Noah,
"The end of all flesh has come before Me;
for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and
behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth.
14 "Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood;
you shall make the ark with rooms, and
shall cover it inside and out with pitch.
then...
17 "Behold, I, even I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth,

to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life,
from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall
perish.

- 18 "But I will establish My covenant with you; and
you shall enter the ark--
you and your sons and your wife, and
your sons' wives with you."

Joshua observed that God initially told Noah He was about to send a flood, but did not reveal when it would come. Joshua searched on.

Genesis 6 & 7

22 Thus Noah did;

according to all that God had commanded him,
so he did.

1 Then the LORD said to Noah,

"Enter the ark,

you and all your household,

for you *alone* I have seen *to be* righteous before Me in this time.

2 "You shall take with you of every clean animal by sevens,

a male and his female; and

of the animals that are not clean two,

a male and his female;

3 also of the birds of the sky, by sevens, male and female,

to keep offspring alive on the face of all the earth.

4 "For after seven more days,

I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights; and

I will blot out from the face of the land every living thing that I

have made."

Joshua noticed that after Noah obeyed God and built the ark, God told him to enter the ark, together with his entire household and the animals. Then Joshua saw what he was searching for. God specifically told Noah when the flood would come. "After seven more days". God told Noah the specific day of the flood seven days in advance, giving him time to gather the animals as he was commanded. Then Joshua read on.

Genesis 7

10 It came about after the seven days,

that the water of the flood came upon the earth.

11 In the six hundredth year of Noah's life,

in the second month,

on the seventeenth day of the month,

on the same day all the fountains of the great deep burst open, and
the floodgates of the sky were opened.

12 The rain fell upon the earth for forty days and forty nights.

13 On the very same day Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth,

the sons of Noah, and

Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons with them, entered the ark,

Joshua observed that the flood did indeed come after seven days as God had promised. In fact, verse 11 stated the precise day the flood burst upon the Earth. He also noticed that on the very “same day” the flood came, Noah and his household entered the ark. They were saved just in time!

“Why was the Bible so emphatic that the day Noah entered the ark was the ‘very same day’ the flood came?” Joshua wondered. He couldn’t help but notice similarities between the story of Noah and the relationship between Christians and the seven year tribulation.

First, both Noah and Christians are told of an impending day of judgment that would come upon the earth, but not told exactly when.

Second, both Noah and Christians are given a task to accomplish, Noah’s being to build the ark, and Christians’, to make disciples of all nations.

Third, seven days prior to the flood, Noah is told the precise day destruction was about to come upon the Earth. Has Christ given us a signal seven years before His return? And finally, is the Bible telling us that the day Christ returns to gather His elect will actually be the very same day He comes to bring judgment on mankind, saving us “just in time”?

Joshua remembered Pastor Mitchell saying something about Christ warning us to be alert and watchful for His coming. “Why do we have to be alert and watchful?” Joshua thought to himself. “Is it because, if Believers are caught by surprise, they will miss the Rapture? Wouldn’t all Believers be Raptured whether they were watchful or not? And how do you watch for something that could happen at anytime? Wouldn’t that be like watching for a car accident to happen in front of you? No,” Joshua concluded, “Jesus was telling us to be watchful because there must be something He wanted us to be looking for! Could it be the making of a covenant that would signal the start of the seven year period?”

Joshua remembered a verse in 1 Thessalonians 5 that mentioned being alert to the Lord’s coming. He turned there.

4 “But you brethren, are not in darkness,
that the day should overtake you like a thief;”

“So the Rapture isn’t supposed to catch us by surprise ‘like a thief’ as many believe!” thought Joshua. “We’re to be ‘alert’ and ‘watchful’ for the signs that will signal Christ’s coming!”

Joshua felt himself energized as he went on to the third principle.

“God promised that Christians would not experience His wrath.” ...

Joshua knew that the prevalent view here was that present day Believers would be spared the persecutions, tortures and deaths that so called tribulation saints will experience. But he also knew that Believers from the very beginning have been

persecuted, tortured and killed. In fact, it was not too long ago that he had heard that more Christians were martyred in the Twentieth century than in all the centuries before it.

Was it only western Christians who believed the idea that they would be spared persecution and even death? And didn't Christ promise that in this world we would have tribulation? Perhaps "tribulation" and "wrath" were two very different things, the former referring to the trials Believers would surely experience in response to their testimony for Christ, and the latter having to do with God's judgment on nonbelievers. "No," Joshua told himself. "The third principle did not exempt Believers from living during the tribulation period and perhaps suffer and even be killed."

Joshua remembered glancing at his window after an entire night studying God's Word and seeing the first light of dawn push back the darkness that had surrounded him in his room. It was a metaphor of what had just taken place in his heart.

Joshua disengaged his cruise control as he turned off the highway and headed toward his office. He reached down to increase the volume of the radio as the critical news of the morning was rebroadcast. He heard again that ...

"Due to security concerns, President Darcy was successful in persuading Israel to halt their ritual of daily sacrifices until the threats from the Palestinians and the surrounding states could be resolved."

Chapter 6

Apostasy

"... for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first,"
2 Thessalonians 2:3a

When Joshua walked up to the entrance of the building, he was puzzled by a new device attached to the wall next to the card reader. He zipped his UIC card through the Sentry reader, placed his palm on the scanner and heard the heavy security door click open. He entered, making sure the door shut securely behind him, and headed for his office. As usual, he sat down at his desk and woke his flat screen terminal to scan any messages or work assignments from his supervising attorneys, Jim Akers and Laura McMichaels. His eyes fastened on a memo to all the staff.

"Due to recent International regulations, we have upgraded the Sentry security system. In two months, it will only read the new UIC imbedded microchip which you are being required by law to obtain in compliance with the Department of Home Security's mandate issued yesterday. For those of you who are afraid of needles, we can both vouch for the painless procedure. You won't even know you've been marked! And besides, it's far more convenient than the card! We appreciate you! Jim and Laura!"

Joshua didn't know how long he sat staring at the screen when he was startled from his trance.

"Hey, Joshua! Oh, I see you've seen our memo. I thought you were looking at your death warrant by the look on your face." It was Jim Akers.

"Oh, yeah ... hi Jim. No, I,uh... was just thinking about your memo. I was wondering what that new gadget outside was for," Joshua stammered out. "So, you've already got your chip?" he asked cautiously.

"Yup! Want to see it," Jim said not waiting for an answer and holding out the back of his right hand. "Here it is."

Joshua stared at Jim's hand, surprised that he couldn't see anything unusual. "I can't tell where it is," he finally said.

Jim was smiling as he said, "That's the beauty of it! It's practically invisible ... but it's there. Here, check this out." He took Joshua to the entry way and led them both outside. "Joshua, watch what happens when I come up to the door."

Joshua watched as Jim approached the door. Without having to slide a card through the reader, he simply placed his palm on the scanner and the door opened. "It reads the chip straight from my hand. No card to take out ... or lose. Great, huh?", Jim enthused.

"Yeah, it's great," Joshua answered without any of Jim's enthusiasm. "Hey Jim, did you catch the reason why we're all having to go with the chip?"

Jim answered, "I didn't read all of the regulations that came with this mandate, but I think it had something to do with lost, stolen and counterfeit UIC cards. You already know that all foreign visitors and legal aliens are required to have an imbedded chip. I guess the President's men figured, 'What the heck. Let's brand'em all!'," Jim added with a chuckle. Joshua wasn't laughing. Jim continued, "I don't know why they're going to this length, but I figured only people who had something to hide would be against it." Jim looked at Joshua as though trying to read his thoughts. "Joshua, you don't have anything to hide, ... do you?"

Joshua thought of telling Jim about the "mark of the beast", but decided it was too late to do that. He had been able to share his faith with Jim and Laura, but neither showed any interest in learning more. If Laura had also received the chip, then it was already too late for her, too. "No," Joshua finally said. "Not really."

He made his way back to his desk and got busy with the day's work. The day dragged on slowly as Joshua kept thinking about his morning conversation with Jim. He was glad when the time finally came to leave. He glanced at the new Sentry chip reader as he exited the building, amazed at how quickly things were falling into place.

As he expected, the red light on his answering machine flashed frantically to get his attention when he entered his apartment. He pressed the new messages button.

“Joshua, this is Pastor Mitchell. Give me a call when you get home. I think you know why already. Will talk to you later.”

beeeep

“Hey, Josh. This is Sharon. Could you call me as soon as you can? I really need to talk with you. Don’t forget, now. Bye.”

Several other messages recited similar requests. Joshua walked to the sofa, slipped to his knees and acknowledged that God was in control and prayed for His wisdom and strength.

When he rose and washed his face in the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror and saw a middle aged man in his forties looking back. He told the reflection, “We’ve nothing to fear. The battle’s won. It’s already been written in the Book.”

He ate a quick snack and then called Pastor Mitchell. After 2 rings, he heard the familiar voice on the line.

“Joshua, thanks for calling. I suppose you know why I wanted to talk with you?”, Pastor Mitchell asked.

“I think so, Pastor,” Joshua answered. “I heard the news about the President stopping the sacrifices.”

“Well, it goes deeper than that,” Pastor Mitchell added. “Every church in this country is being asked to register with the International Council affirming their conformity to, what they’re calling, the Statements of Tolerance and Unity. On the list are controversial statements in support of abortion and homosexual marriage. But there is also a statement declaring all religions as equally valid ways to God.”

“Frankly, Joshua,” Pastor Mitchell concluded, “it looks like they’re going to shut down the church. There’s no way we’re going to sign that declaration.”

Joshua thought about the memo regarding the mandatory imbedded chip and shared this with Pastor Mitchell. He responded, “You know, Joshua, I think your hunch was right all along. I’m beginning to agree with you that we are indeed living in Daniel’s Seventieth Week. I thought I’d never have to say that to anyone.”

“Pastor,” Joshua volunteered, “after we met to discuss this issue several years ago, I checked out some of the verses you showed me to satisfy my own need for answers. God’s been showing me some things in His Word that supports that idea.”

“Say, Joshua,” Pastor Mitchell inquired, “How would you like to share those verses and thoughts this Sunday morning to help us better understand what’s happening. I think we need to hear it, for better or for worse.”

“Well, I’m not really a preacher,” Joshua answered, “but I’m willing to do it if you want me to,”.

“I do, and I’ll be praying for you, Joshua. And would you pray for Ruth? These last few days have been a terrible shock for us,” Pastor Mitchell added.

“I will, Pastor. May God be with you two.” Joshua replied as he ended the call.

Joshua paused, thinking about the preparations he would need to make in order to share on Sunday morning. Then he hit the speed dialer and called Sharon.

“Hi, Sharon. How’re you doing?” Joshua asked bracing himself for her answer.

“Actually, Josh,” she began, her voice strained, “I’m not doing that well. I’m scared. What’s happening, Josh? It’s not supposed to be like this. I trusted Pastor Mitchell, I trusted what the church taught me, and now I’m beginning to realize it wasn’t the truth. That’s how I’m doing!”

“Sharon,” Joshua firmly interrupted, “I just talked with Pastor Mitchell and we will be discussing all of this on Sunday. Promise me you’ll be there.”

Sharon hesitated. “I don’t know, Josh. I don’t know if I want to hear what I think will be said. It’s just bad news, that’s all, and I don’t want to hear any more.”

“But, Sharon,” Joshua insisted, “you need to be there. We need each other, especially at a time like this. No Christian can make it alone. Please be there!”

“All right,” Sharon finally conceded, “I’ll be there. Bye.”

Joshua hung up the phone and pictured Sharon in his mind. Her family were long time members of the church. She had been raised in the church and had found a good job, and was now engaged to Justin, another long time church member.

There were many people like them in the church, people who had been schooled in the fundamentals of the Christian faith ever since they could remember. Joshua wondered how they would respond to this coming Sunday’s lesson.

He replied to each of the remaining messages, encouraging them to be at Church on Sunday, until the message indicator displayed a zero. Then he gathered the notes he had made during his studies and began the process of organizing them into a lesson.

When Joshua arrived at the church on Sunday, he found himself scanning the growing crowd in the parking lot for Sharon. Just before the service began, Pastor Mitchell asked him to sit up front with him. They went over the morning agenda and prayed before the welcome was given.

Before calling Joshua up to the pulpit, Pastor Mitchell shared the news about the Statements of Tolerance and Unity and their potential affect on the life and existence of the congregation. A dejected crowd of faces greeted Joshua when he was finally introduced. Standing at the podium, he scanned the congregation, and again felt disappointment at the absence of Sharon. He shared with the congregation what he had discovered in his study of Scripture, pointing out the verses that seemed to support what everyone was afraid to admit. That they were now in the tribulation period and that the Rapture would not come until the end. He could see the growing despair in the congregation and dreaded being the bearer of this terrible news.

He concluded with a tribute of praise to God, knowing that their only hope of living victoriously would be to maintain a strong faith in their God. No matter what happened, God was still in control and His Son, Jesus Christ, ever present with them!

Pastor Mitchell led the congregation in prayer, asking everyone to again affirm their faith in the One True God and Jesus Christ His Son. When the final hymn was sung, there was an eerie silence as people adjourned and forwent the usual fellowship in the hall to get to their cars and leave. Pastor Mitchell counseled with those who remained in the pews, some weeping over the morning's happenings.

Joshua emerged from the sanctuary and surveyed the strangely empty parking lot. He got into his car and immediately drove to Sharon's house twenty minutes away. Turning into her driveway, he noticed Justin's car already there. He got out, looked around and walked to the front door.

Sharon opened the door, her eyes widening in slight surprise when she saw who was there. "Oh, Josh," she stammered. "I figured you'd eventually come. Come on in." She opened the door wider revealing her fiancé, Justin, sitting on the sofa.

"Hi, Justin!", Joshua greeted him. "Missed both of you in church today. What's up?"

Justin stood up and looked uncharacteristically nervous when he saw Joshua, but still got out a "Hey, Joshua".

For a brief moment they stood together uncomfortably until Joshua broke the silence. "You missed a very important service today. I just thought I'd come by and share what happened."

"Well, actually," Sharon announced, "we kind of know what happened. My parents called as soon as they got home. They seemed pretty depressed."

Joshua watched her fidget as she struggled to make conversation. He knew something wasn't right because she normally was the easiest person to talk with. Joshua ventured to ask, "So how are you doing now?"

At this, Justin and Sharon moved toward each other as he put his arm around her waist. Then he spoke, "She's okay, Joshua. We're both okay." His voice became steady and their eyes more resolute as if to prepare for an important announcement. He continued, "You see, yesterday we both had chips implanted. Sharon said she didn't want to suffer

and decided to do it, but she didn't want to do it alone. And since I can't imagine living without her, I decided it was best for me, too."

Joshua watched as Sharon anguished, "Josh, I trusted the church. I trusted Pastor Mitchell. And now I find out that they were lying to me. How can I go back there. I'm sorry, but I can't ... I won't let them lie to me again!"

The blood seemed to rush out of Joshua's face, and he was certain they noticed. He could see them emboldened by his show of vulnerability as they stepped toward him. "It's really not that bad, Joshua." Justin appealed, "Why don't you join us? They'll start arresting people who don't, you know. And they're even talking of executing people. There's no place you can run. There's no place to hide. And besides ... we know where every member in the church lives."

Joshua wasn't certain, but he thought he saw a smile flicker across Justin's face as he felt chills run down his arms and body. He took a step back, turned, and walked out of the house. The ride back to his apartment was a blur. He wondered how many church members would decide as Justin and Sharon had. How many would feel betrayed by what they had been taught and choose to abandon their faith.

When Joshua finally reached his apartment, he quickly entered and closed the door behind him. He leaned back on the door and shut his eyes. The visit had shaken him, and pained him to the very soul. He wondered if he could remain faithful in the storm that was now upon them. He knew he needed someone he could trust, someone who would be there for him. But who? Then he remembered the words of his best friend,

*"I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you." ...
"I am with you always, even to the end of the age."
(Hebrews 13:5; Matthew 28:20)*

Joshua opened his Bible. The words blurred as tears filled his eyes, rolled down his face and fell on the open page. And through those tears he read,

*"... according to my earnest expectation and hope,
that I will not be put to shame in anything,
but that with all boldness,
Christ will even now, as always,
be exalted in my body,
whether by life or by death.
For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."
(Philippians 1:20-21)*

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