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WHEN HOPE SINKS



I'm a Chicago Bulls basketball fan. My hopes were formed during the Michael Jordan era. We "hoped" for a championship every year and usually got it—until Michael retired the second time. Some of us who saw him come back once from retirement hoped for a "second coming." But when Air Jordan closed his locker the final time, our hopes plummeted to the earth. We Bulls' fans have been working hard at not getting our hopes up anymore. (You'd think that would be easy in a city where the Chicago Cubs have perfected the art of smashing hope.)

"Don't get your hopes up." That's what we say to each other as a warning against inflationary expectation. The higher our hopes climb, the harder they fall. It's dangerous to risk a fall of humpty-dumpty proportions. Few people specialize in putting shattered hope back together again.

Have you ever heard someone predict the second coming of Jesus? Have you ever read a book that connected the dots between world events and the biblical text of the Revelation of Jesus to John? I suggest that people who interpret the Book of the Revelation as a time line of the end are manipulating our hopes. They tell us

- the Antichrist is here

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- the blocks of the new Temple are already cut
- Armageddon is just around the corner
- the mark of the beast is a computer chip installed under our skin

They speak of these things as warnings to the unprepared and good news to the ready-to-be-raptured. Yet, for the life of me, these predictions don't get my hopes up anymore. I guess I'm old enough now to know some history.

It is December 31, 999, the eve of the new millennium a thousand years ago. The people believe that at the stroke of midnight, evil will sweep the earth. Chaos and madness will halt civilization as they know it. Pope Sylvester II will lead the last mass of human history. Desperation, anxiety, pandemonium, and fear flood streets and hearts. Why? Because Rev. 20:7-8 says, "When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out." The idea of the devil on unrestricted parole is bad news. The only good news in sight is the hope of Christ's return. But on January 1, 1000, the sun came up and life went on as usual. And all the people knew they shouldn't have gotten their hopes up.

It is the year 1843. A New England farmer/preacher, William Miller, has cracked the code of the Revelation—sort of. He's figured out when Christ will return. Using the Jewish calendar and apocalyptic writings (Daniel and the Revelation), he has narrowed his prediction to the very day. Over 100,000 people believe him. Hope skyrockets. They sell all their possessions and go up on a hill to await the Rapture. They wait—all day, all night. The sun came up the next morning, and life went on as usual. And all the people knew they shouldn't have gotten their hopes up.

It is the year 1988. We are given "88 Reasons Why Je-

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sus Will Return in '88." Church attendance soars. Pastors never have to beg for help in the nursery. People are hedging their bets—just in case. Believers update their spiritual résumés in preparation for judgment. The author of "88 Reasons" is a scientist/mathematician. Maybe a guy with a calculator will succeed where Greek and Hebrew scholars have failed. The year 1988 came and went. And we all knew we shouldn't have gotten our hopes up.

Hope is like a rubber balloon. It will inflate and deflate only so many times before losing its elasticity. And I think most of us have just about reached the limit with end-time scenarios. That's why people tell me they don't read the Revelation anymore. It's confusing. It's scary. It's depressing. They've been inflated and deflated too many times. Not knowing beats knowing and being wrong again. Chicken Little has lost his ability to convince us that the sky is falling.

Yet Chicken Little keeps citing the Revelation every time he wants to instill fear in us. His bizarre claims divert us from a solid hope.

So what are some recent "bizarre claims"? How about Barney the Dinosaur as the Antichrist? No kidding. Or what about the blocks for the New Jerusalem Temple being cut, numbered, and stored in the basements of K-Marts all across the United States? Can you imagine a blue-light special on Temple cornerstones if this one doesn't pan out?

Some of this is laughable. But when I see sane followers of Jesus building their hopes on half-baked predictions, I stop laughing. In fact, I get angry, not at the sincere believer, but at the person whose convincing charisma holds the listener captive.

To manipulate believers by instilling dread and fear is

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less than loving. When this happens, hope meets a fate of titanic proportions.

Why are we so gullible? Why did people buy it in 999, 1843, and 1988, and why do we take the hook today? What does this speculative hunger say about us?

I suspect our gullibility is at least partly due to a desire for control. As citizens of the information age, we have knowledge at our fingertips. In this cybersea of facts, we think we can know everything—and that once we know it, we can control it. We can manage the raw data to our benefit and make our lives turn out the way we want. So when someone promises to tell us what we don't know, like the expiration date of the world or the identity of the Antichrist, we listen. We are driven to gullibility by the essence of sin—the desire to be in control of our own lives.

When I survey the current theories, novels, movies, and TV evangelists, I see a frightening pattern. Bad news is the best seller: the planet is going up in flames or down in a nuclear accident or to pieces when the asteroids hit or whatever scheme the scriptwriters of 24 cook up. We seem to be primed to believe the worst. And in most of the popular scenarios, God is the one blowing the creation to bits.

Yet when I read the Revelation, I don't find God "the exterminator." Humans are the ones who threaten to destroy the planet with bombs, chemicals, and ecological violence. It strikes me that we ought not to make God responsible for the evil we ourselves are doing. When we blame Him for calamity, hope sinks, along with trust.

So what are we to do with the Revelation of Jesus to John? If it isn't a chronological timetable of the end-time or a code to be cracked with a calculator or a rap sheet on the Antichrist or a description of the mark of the beast, what is it?

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Can I tell you what I think? I think it is a story—several stories, in fact, about God. The Revelation of Jesus to John is the story of the God

- who is making everything new
- who will not quit until He finishes what He started
- who is intent on bringing us to completion
- who outlasts and undoes anything evil can do
- who stands in our past, present, and future as hope personified

In the following pages, I'd like to share these stories with you. And my deepest prayer is that in reading them, you will get your hopes up.