

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 2 October 2022. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced, and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Time Is Running Out for the Church Age

During my years in secondary school, I had a couple teachers who, every now and then, would give my class “group projects” to do for a grade. If you’ve ever done a group project before, you know how it works: the class would be divided into groups, with about five or six students apiece. Each group had to work together to come up with a topic; and then they had to decide among themselves who would take charge of the different facets of the project. The students would receive a corporate grade for what they did together. As a *group*, they had to give their report, and present their work, to the teacher.

Now, I remember a day when my history teacher, Mr. Marks, had to leave the room for the better part of the class time; but before he left, he instructed the groups to assemble in different corners of the room, and to work on a particular stage of the project. He didn’t say how long he would be gone; but he expected us to work until he returned. Well, you can probably guess what happened. As the hour waned, many of the students began to goof around. They chatted about anything and everything except the project; and pretty soon, there was a dull roar of laughter and chatter in the room. In my own group, several of the kids were starting to goof off, as well; but I, for one, was concerned about what we would have to present to Mr. Marks when he returned. Some of the people in my group were irritated with me for being so studious; but I managed to motivate them to keep working on the project.

Well, after a while had passed, Mr. Marks suddenly appeared in the doorway; and when he spoke, the room went silent. He clapped his hands and, with a tone of irony, said, “All right, clock-watchers; time to show your work.” The groups sheepishly presented their work; and most of them had very little to show. (Needless to say, they had *not* been “clock-watchers.” They hadn’t been minding the time at all!) My group did much better; but it wouldn’t have been that way if I, and maybe one other student, hadn’t urged the others to keep working!

Of course, group projects weren’t the only kind of grade that we received. Normally, we were graded for our own work. I remember another time when Mr. Marks left the room for a short while to answer a call from the school office; and he instructed us to study a couple pages in our textbook while he was gone. Soon after he left, the room was filled with chatter. Of course, you know what happened next: Mr. Marks suddenly appeared in the doorway. And he was *not* happy. He told us to get out a piece of paper; and he gave us a one-question test! It would be either a zero or a one hundred percent! He asked us to name the man who had established Herrnhut in Moravia in the 1700’s; and we had to spell it word-perfectly. The answer was “Nicolaus von Zinzendorf”; and I was the only one to get the question right. (My classmates loved me!) We had been given an unknown amount of time to work; but most were poorly prepared.

Brethren, just as Mr. Marks left us for a time, but returned, so our Lord has left us for a time; but He *will* return. Until then, He has given us work to do. He has commanded to go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature; to baptise people into the membership of local churches; and to teach church members to observe all things that He has commanded. How serious are you about that Great Commission? How serious are *we*, as a *church body*, about the Commission? Our time is limited; and souls are teetering on the precipice of eternity. Time is running out for the lost; time is running out for us who are saved; and time is running out for this church age. For all we know, the trumpet may sound today. Are you ready to give your report to the Lord? Are we, as a church, ready to give our report to the Lord? Can we, as a church, say that together, we have “occupied” until His return?

These are the questions that I will pose to you today, as we finish our last message in preparation for our missions conference. The title of this message is *Time Is Running Out for the Church Age*.

Read Mark 13:33-37.

I. There is a definite time for the end of this church age.

Three days before Jesus' crucifixion, as the disciples were looking at the magnificent buildings of the Temple, and marvelling at them, Jesus made a startling prophecy: "***Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.***" Undoubtedly, the disciples were shocked by this statement. Surely such a terrible event as the destruction of the Temple could spell only one thing: the end of the world as they knew it! Peter, James, and John took Jesus aside privately, and asked Him, "***Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?***" By the way, the Greek word for "***world***" is *aeon*, which means "age." The disciples were asking, "When will this present age end? And what will be the sign of its end?"

Jesus' answer to their question was somewhat lengthy; but the words that we just read in **Mark 13** were the "bottom line" of His answer. Jesus gave them many details about the things that will happen in the days before His return; but the bottom line is that *we do not know* when Jesus will return. It's hidden from us. Therefore, we must "***watch,***" and be ready.

For nearly two thousand years now, we have been living in a period of history called "the church age." During this age, God has been calling out a people for His name from among all nations; and He has been placing Jewish and Gentile believers together into a local body called "the assembly," or "the church." The church age began 2,000 years ago, when a man named **John the Baptist** appeared in the wilderness of Judaea, and began to preach to the people. He announced that the Messiah had appeared, in the Person of **Jesus of Nazareth**; and he urged them to repent of their sin, and believe on Jesus, in order to be saved from God's wrath. He also urged them to be baptised after their salvation, in order to declare publicly that they had repented of their sin, and believed on Jesus. A few years later, after Jesus had died on the cross and risen from the grave, His disciples finally understood that that this baptism that they had all received was a *symbol* of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. To this day, we are continuing what John began. We continue to preach the Gospel of salvation. We continue to baptise believers into the local church. We continue to teach people all things that Christ has commanded; and we continue to send forth labourers to establish churches in other places.

The church is God's plan for this age; and this plan has been in place for so long, that we can hardly imagine anything else. However, for the first 4,000 years of history, the church did not exist. It was a secret in the mind of God. Not even the wisest, godliest believers in Old Testament times saw the church age coming. When John the Baptist came on the scene, the church was totally new, unique, and startling. However, the church will not go on forever. The church age is coming to a close, quickly! It had a beginning, in the wilderness of Judaea, with the preaching and baptising of John the Baptist; and it *will* have a definite end!

To understand where we are in history, let's go back to the book of **Daniel**, and examine an Old Testament prophecy which gives us a small hint about the church age that was coming.

Read Daniel 9:1-3, 20-27.

God gave this prophecy to His servant Daniel in the year **535 B.C.**—in the very year when King Cyrus gave the Jews permission to return to their land. Daniel understood that Israel had finally reached the end of their seventy-year captivity in Babylon. But now, God had a new revelation for Daniel, which blew his mind. Through the angel Gabriel, God told Daniel that *another* “seventy year” period was coming upon Israel—except that *this* seventy years would be seventy “**weeks**” of years (in other words, 70 x 7, or 490 years)! He said that this 490-year period would begin on the day when a future Persian king would make the decree to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. This decree was, in fact, made by King Artaxerxes in 445 B.C. *That* is when the prophetic clock for this 490-year period began to tick.

Now, God said that the first **69** “weeks” (or **483 years**) of this period would come to an end *just before* the Messiah was “cut off,” or killed; and that is exactly what happened! Four hundred eighty-three years *to the day* after King Artaxerxes made that decree to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, Jesus the Messiah rode into Jerusalem on a donkey; and a few days later, He was “cut off” on the cross of Calvary, just as God had revealed to Daniel.

So, then, what about that *last* “week of years”—that last seven years that God has determined for the nation of Israel? Has it happened yet? No. Right now, we are in a period of time *between* that 69th and 70th week. The *church age* is that unknown period of time. It’s as though God has hit a giant “pause button” in His dealings with Israel. Because Israel rejected her own Messiah, God has set Israel aside (for now), and is accomplishing His plan through His churches. Let’s see what Jesus said about this in **Matthew 21**.

Read Matthew 21:33-46.

The religious leaders usually didn’t have a clue what Jesus’ parables meant; but this time, it wasn’t hard for them to figure out what Jesus was saying. The “**householder**” was God the Father. The “**husbandmen**” (or “vineyard workers”) were the nation of Israel. The “**servants**” who were murdered by the vineyard workers were the prophets of old, whom God had sent to the people of Israel, to warn them to turn from their evil ways. The “**son**” who was killed by the vineyard workers was the Lord Jesus Himself, whom the priests were plotting to kill at that very moment. The priests knew *exactly* what Jesus was saying. They also understood Jesus’ statement about the “**stone**.” Jesus was claiming to be the foundation “**stone**” of the nation of Israel, whom they, as a nation, had rejected. And they *definitely* understood what Jesus meant when He said that the kingdom of God would be taken from them, and given to a “**nation**” (literally, a “people”) bearing the fruit thereof! Jesus was saying that God was going to set Israel aside, and that He was going to use another “people” to accomplish His will. This “people” whom God is using today are all those who place their faith in Jesus Christ, and have been “**born again**” into God’s spiritual Kingdom!

Right now, God is using His churches to spread the Gospel throughout the world, so that people might believe on Jesus, and be saved. However, the church age will end one day; and when it does, the “clock will start ticking” for *Israel* again. Once again, God will be dealing with the nation of Israel. During that last seven years—that “70th week of Daniel” (which the Bible calls “**the Tribulation**”)—the Jews will awaken spiritually, and realise that Jesus is their Messiah. One hundred forty-four thousand Jewish men will preach the Gospel throughout the world; and multitudes will believe on Jesus, and be saved. However, it will be a horrible time of judgment on the world, such as has never been seen before.

Read Mark 13:5-33.

In the very middle of the seven-year Tribulation period, a wicked man called the Antichrist (the one that Daniel called “*the prince that shall come*”) will set up an image of himself in the Temple in Jerusalem (which will have been rebuilt); and he will demand that everyone on earth worship his image, and take his mark (666) in his right hand, or his forehead. People who do not take the mark will not be able to buy or sell; and they will be executed. (The Bible tells us about this in **Revelation 13**.) This act of setting up the image in the Temple is what Daniel and Jesus called “*the abomination of desolation*.” From this point onward, God’s judgments on the world will intensify even more. The last 3 ½ years of the Tribulation will be so horrible, that if God did not cut the time short, no one on earth would be left alive. However, at the end of those seven years, the Lord Jesus will descend to the earth in the clouds, with all His resurrected saints, and will destroy the Antichrist and all his followers at the Battle of Armageddon. He will then set up a Kingdom of righteousness here on earth for 1,000 years. Christ will rule from Jerusalem; and all nations will serve and worship Him.

This is the prophetic “road map” of history, brethren! We are now in that “interim” between the 69th and 70th week of years; and that 70th week (the seven-year Tribulation period) could start at any moment. The Temple and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed long ago, in A.D. 70, by the Romans, and the nation of Israel was desolated; and there is no other prophecy that *must* be fulfilled before this church age ends, and the seven-year Tribulation period begins. It could happen at any moment—in the twinkling of an eye. The event that will mark the end of this church age is what we call the Rapture—the “catching up” of Christ’s people to Heaven!

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

This event is what we are waiting for, brethren! *This event* is our “Blessed Hope.” All the promises of salvation will culminate in this event. On the day of the Rapture, we will be caught up out of this world, and will receive our sinless, resurrected, glorified bodies. Paul describes the quickness of this event in **1 Corinthians 15**: “*Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

Sometimes it seems that this event is a long way off. After all, we have been waiting for Christ’s appearing for 2,000 years now. Is Jesus really coming soon? The Bible *seems* to give conflicting answers to this question. For example, in **Matthew 25**, Jesus compared Himself to a master who went away to a far country, and left His servants in charge of his estate; and He said, “*After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them.*” Jesus clearly implied that it would be a *long time* before He would return. Yet, in **Revelation 22**, Jesus said, “*Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give to every man according as his work shall be.*” So, which is it? Is it a “*long time*” until Christ returns? Or is it “*quickly*”? The answer is, “Both”! From *our* perspective, it seems like a “*long time*.” However, from *God’s* perspective, Jesus is coming “*quickly*.” In God’s sight, 1,000 years is like a day, and a day like 1,000 years. Jesus *will* return quickly; and when He does, this church age will come to a sudden end. The work that began with John the Baptist will cease,

because the church will suddenly vanish from this world. *We will not be here anymore!* There will be no more time to accomplish our mission. This brings me to our second point.

II. **There is a mission to fulfil before the end of this church age.**

In times like these, it is easy for us to get excited about the return of the Lord. We who are saved, and who know God's Word, can see how things are shaping up for the Rapture, and for the horrible Tribulation period to follow. We are not overcome with fear as we behold the ominous world events that are unfolding, because we know how it will all end; and we know that no matter what persecution we may have to endure before the Rapture, we *will* spend eternity with God. We also know that *God*, not the Antichrist, will win! However, do we really understand what the soon return of the Lord means for us? It means that *time is running out to fulfil the Commission that Jesus gave us!* A few moments ago, I quoted **1 Corinthians 15**, in which Paul described that wonderful day of the resurrection, when death will be *“swallowed up in victory.”* However, I stopped short of quoting the last verse in that chapter. Paul wrapped up his description of the Resurrection Day by saying, *“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”*

Brethren, we have work to do! The end of the harvest is coming, when we will not be able to labour for the Lord anymore. Every single day, *individual Christians* are reaching the end of their labours, when they pass through the veil of death, and enter the glories of Heaven; yet, there are always more labourers here on earth, who can carry on the harvest work. However, when the *Rapture* happens, *every believer on earth* will disappear! The harvest, *for the church*, will be over. Not one righteous person will be left on earth; and the world will suddenly be enveloped in a spiritual darkness such as it has never seen! In **Micah 7:2**, Micah described a time, in the last days, when *“The good man is perished out of the earth: and there is none upright among men: they all lie in wait for blood; they hunt every man his brother with a net.”* That word *“perished”* is translated from the word *‘avad*, which often means “to be destroyed,” or “to perish”; but it also can literally mean **“to vanish”!** When is this time when good men will *all* vanish from the earth, and when the whole world will suddenly become violent and fierce—so much so, that no one will be able to trust his closest friend, or brother? At the beginning of the Tribulation period!

Now, God will not allow the world to remain without a witness. Spiritual light *will* quickly reappear. God will raise up 144,000 Jewish evangelists during the Tribulation; and there will be two special witnesses who will preach in Jerusalem for the first 3 ½ years of the Tribulation. However, before you think that we Christians are “off the hook,” since God will raise up labourers during the Tribulation, please remember what Paul said in **2 Thessalonians 2:11-12**. He said that after the Holy Spirit is taken out of the world in the Rapture, *“God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”* The Antichrist will have a brilliant, satanically-inspired lie to explain away the disappearance of millions of Christians (probably involving the “aliens” narrative); and this lie will be so powerful, and so convincing, that most people will believe it, and will follow the Antichrist. Many *will* still be saved; but the overwhelming majority of people won't. Christian, if the Rapture should happen in our lifetimes, and if *your* unsaved loved ones miss the Rapture, they will fall under this “great delusion”; and it will be extremely difficult for them to resist it. If Hitler's speeches had a satanic charm which bedazzled people, the Antichrist's speeches will be 100 times worse! Most likely, *your* unsaved friends will not be able to resist the lie; and they will take the mark.

By the way, if you have not been saved, I urge you to repent and believe on Jesus *now!* Don't flatter yourself that if you miss the Rapture, you can always get saved during the Tribulation. Most likely, you will believe the lie, and take the mark; and your soul will be eternally, irrevocably damned. **Revelation 14:11** says, "***And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.***" Believe on Jesus today!

Brethren, we do not know when Jesus will appear in the clouds, in the Rapture. The angels do not know. Even Christ Himself, in His *human* nature, did not know the time of His return when He was here on earth. We know that Christ will return to earth exactly 7 years *after* the Rapture; but we don't know when the *Rapture* will be. We can know the "***times and the seasons,***" in that we know what *events* will lead up to, and surround, Christ's coming; but we don't know *when*. Jesus urged His disciples not to focus on the "calendar" aspect of His coming, but rather on the *responsibility* that He has given us between now and His return.

Read Acts 1:4-11.

If we could figure out the time of Christ's return, it would probably have a negative impact on how diligently we carry out Christ's commission. We would be like children who know that dad and mom won't return home until a certain time; and therefore, they goof off for a long time, and finally start to squeeze in their chores at the last minute. If the believers in the Apostles' day could have known that 2,000 years later believers would *still* be waiting for Christ's return, would they have been as zealous about carrying out the Great Commission? Or would they have said, "We have plenty of time"? Most likely, many would have done the latter; and the Gospel might have been squelched in its infancy. The imminency of Christ's return compels us to keep working, so that we won't be ashamed if Christ were to come today!

III. There will be an accounting for our work.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:9-16.

Why do give to support missionaries, and pray for our missionaries; and preach, sing, and pass out tracts on the street; and take the Gospel to people's doors; and give out tracts in the shops and neighbourhoods; and pour money, time, and effort into Holiday Bible Clubs, Christmas concerts, and other evangelistic outreaches; and share the Gospel in people's homes; and pray and fast for lost souls day and night? Why do we labour long, and endure mental anguish over people's souls? Because we know that there will be an accounting day.

What we have just read about is our accounting day. The Judgment Seat of Christ will be for Christians, just after the Rapture. It will be the first order of business after we arrive in Heaven. This event is described in **Revelation 4**, as well. At the Judgment Seat, we will give an account to God not only as individuals, but as *churches!* The Great Commission *is* a "group project"; and the "groups" who have been given this project are local churches. Paul told the church of Corinth, "***For ye are the temple of God.***" That word "***ye***" is plural, folks! Every true church is the Temple of God in its locale; and every Christian has the duty to join a local church (through baptism), and to serve God in it. As a *church*, we will give account for what "building materials" we used to construct our spiritual building. Were they fleshly, worldly, self-centred building materials, which will "burn up," and have no value in Heaven? Or were they materials of eternal value, because they were done in the power of the Holy

Spirit, and for Christ's glory? As churches, and as individuals, we will be rewarded for what we did for Christ; but we will also suffer loss for what we did in our flesh.

Folks, time is running out. We do not have the luxury of slacking off now, since "the Rapture is almost here, anyway." For one thing, we don't *know* for certain that the Rapture will happen in our lifetimes. Secondly, God will reward *every* Christian and *every* church of *every* age on the same basis. It doesn't matter whether we entered into the harvest work early, or late, in the church age; we will be rewarded for *faithfulness* to God in our window of history.

Read Matthew 19:27 – 20:16.

We looked at this passage last week; and from it, we learned that God will reward Christians according to *how faithfully* they served God in the years of their Christian life, and not according to *how long* they served. For example, John the Baptist's public ministry was for only one year, at the most; but in contrast, the *Apostle* John served the Lord for nearly seventy long, hard, toilsome years. Yet, you may be sure that the reward that these two Johns receive will be much the same. Why? Because they both served the Lord faithfully and passionately. They were burning and shining lights; and God will reward them at a similar level. So it is with the church age as a whole. Will Christians living in this "eleventh hour" of the church age receive less reward than the Christians who lived in the Apostles' days? No! Not if we were faithful in our labours, that is. God will reward the first and the last on the same basis. Just before Jesus told this parable, He said: "***The first shall be last, and the last shall be first***"; and He *ended* His parable by saying, "***So the last shall be first, and the first last.***"

Brethren, we are, to all appearances, living in the "eleventh hour" of the church age. We are living in a day of tremendous apostasy and blasphemy. Men's hearts have been hardened against Christ by 2,000 years of an ever-growing false Christianity. Because of the wicked deeds of pernicious men who claim to be ministers of Christ, and because of the wars that have been waged in Jesus' name by apostate "Christian" religions, the way of truth is "***evil spoken of.***" For this reason, not many souls in our little window of history, and in our part of the world, are willing to come to Christ. Will we receive less reward because the fruits of our labours were meagre compared to the fruit in the Apostles' day? No! We will receive the same level of reward that our brethren in the early days of the church age received—if we serve God fervently, passionately, and with all our might, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Heaven, and in the 1,000-year Kingdom, we will receive rewards for our service to God in this short time on earth. We will receive crowns, which we will cast back at Jesus' feet as we say, "***Thou art worthy, O Lord.***" We will rule as kings over cities and nations. However, our greatest reward (other than Christ Himself) will be the souls that will spend eternity with us, because we took the Gospel to them. The Apostle Paul told the Christians in Thessalonica, "***For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy.***" Apart from being in the presence of Christ Himself, the greatest joy of Heaven will be that of spending eternity with souls whom we led to Christ. In **Luke 16**, Jesus said, "***Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.***" In other words, "Use the money that God gives you as a tool for righteousness. Don't use it for sinful pleasures, as worldly people do; use it to win people to the Lord, so that one day, the friends that you won to the Lord may spend eternity with you in Heaven!"

Conclusion: Brethren, there is a harvest of souls out there that will perish, unless we reach them. Time is running out. For one thing, every day is the “end of the world” for many people. Every day, souls are slipping into hell. For another thing, you and I have only so long to serve the Lord before *we* die (and it may be much sooner than we think). Also, *Jesus could come back* any day; and when He does, the labours of *all* Christians in this church age will be over. Night is almost upon us. We *must* labour for souls! Christian, are you doing all in your power to carry out the Great Commission? As we close this morning, I would also ask: **“Are you saved?”** If you have not repented of your sin and trusted Jesus, please do not put it off. You don’t know if you have a tomorrow; and you also don’t know if Jesus will come back today, and you will be left to face the great deception of the Antichrist. Please repent and believe on Jesus today! ***“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved”!***