

— HOW TO SURVIVE —  
A R M A G E D D O N

JOHN C. BRUNT



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## CHAPTER 1 UPSIDE DOWN

A couple years ago I spent a few days in New York City. As I walked the crowded streets, people constantly handed me things. Most were advertisements of some sort for all kinds of different products. But second on the list were pamphlets about the end of the world. Lots of would-be prophets seem to be talking and thinking about what will happen then, and apparently quite a few have written down their thoughts to try to convince the rest of us.

For example, in Times Square a woman handed me two pamphlets about the end of the world and the events of the last days. One was all about the number 666. It charged that right now our government, along with those of other nations, is trying to create a cashless society by making a computer chip that it will seek to implant in all of us. The chip is the mark of the beast, and all who receive it will go to hell. According to the pamphlet it is vitally necessary that we understand the details of the conspiracy or we will be fooled into accepting it.

The second pamphlet was all about what some call the rapture. It presented the view that soon there will be a day on which all of God's people will simply disappear from the earth. God will snatch them up to heaven, but the rest of the world will go on functioning as before. However, a time of terrible tribula-

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tion will break out soon afterward and will last for seven years; then Jesus will return to the earth.

From Times Square I walked down 42nd Street to Grand Central Station. There someone handed me still another pamphlet. It argued that when Jesus said that no one would know the day or hour of His coming (Matthew 24:36), that was true only until 1988. At that date God began revealing the exact time of His return to true believers. If you were going to be ready for that day, you would need to know the outline of the final events presented in the tract—or so the authors claimed.

I don't have to travel to New York, however, to be deluged with material about scenarios of last-day events and the end of the world. A few weeks ago, outside my own church in Grand Terrace, California, someone handed me a DVD and told me that I needed to watch it. I played some of it, but not the whole four hours. It said that the close of probation, in preparation for the second coming of Jesus Christ, had begun on September 11, 2001, when terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center in New York. Again, the speaker on it urged that in order to be prepared for the end of the world and be saved, I must know about the events that it portrayed in detail.

End-time scenarios seem to pop up everywhere. I walked into my supermarket and found a big display of books for sale that tell about last-day events. What is a person to do? Is it really important to know about how the world is going to end, or even to think about such things? Why not just go on living each day and not worry about the future of the world?

At one time many people simply believed that

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earth's history would go on forever. One of the leading New Testament theologians of the twentieth century, writing about 80 years ago, labeled the picture of the return of Jesus given in the New Testament a myth. He said the New Testament eschatology (that word means the study of last things and the end of the world) never took place as the writers expected, and now we know that it never will.

“We can no longer look for the return of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven or hope that the faithful will meet him in the air. . . .

“It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles. . . .

“The mythical eschatology is untenable for the simple reason that the parousia [coming] of Christ never took place as the New Testament expected. History did not come to an end, and, as every schoolboy knows, it will continue to run its course.”\*

Today, however, not every schoolboy knows that history will continue to run its course. Scientists and political leaders seriously consider how our world will end. Some scientists worry that global warming could bring human history to an end. Others are concerned that we might eventually suffocate in a sea of polluted air. Political scientists consider the possibility that we might destroy human life through nuclear war. Somehow the view that everyone knows the world will just keep going on forever is losing its popularity. This in itself may be a sign that God is preparing the earth for its grand climax.

Of course, people still make fun of the idea of the

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end of the world. Cartoons mock would-be prophets who carry signs announcing its impending doom. I recently saw a satirical video that spoofed the debates about evolution and creation being taught in public schools. In this mock debate scientists and theologians argued about whether children should be taught the scientific or religious view of the end of the world in their public schools. The scientists wanted to instruct children that the world would end in the heat of global warming. The religious types sought to warn students that the world would perish in the fires of Armageddon. Not a terrific choice!

Is it possible that behind the satire and mocking is genuine fear about what will eventually happen to our world? Could it be that the various scenarios appearing in books, pamphlets, and DVDs actually grow out of something deep in the minds of lots of people?

If so, that still raises the dilemma of which account to listen to. They all seem to be different, and they all claim to be the right one. So whom do you believe? It's tempting to throw your hands in the air and forget them all.

I personally have some discomfort with most end-time scenarios. First, all of them seem to say that you have to know and understand *their* ordering of events if you are going to be prepared for the end of the world. For many Christian scenarios it means figuring out just how the tribulation, plagues, the giving of the mark of the beast, the emergence of the antichrist, the close of probation, and a number of other events all fit together. But the proposed sequences with their often contradictory outlines can't all be right.

A second problem I have with them is the general

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sense of fear and foreboding they share. The spirit is one of constant nail-biting. And it's true not only of pessimistic secular people who worry about pollution and nuclear war. Many religious people fear the end, because they see it in the outworking of a harsh and vengeful God.

Third, so many of the scenarios try to figure out prophetic dates and times in an attempt to decipher the future and date the end of time. Perhaps the whole endeavor of charting all the events that will lead up to the end of the world is a misguided effort. Instead, I want to turn the whole subject of last-day events upside down. I believe there is good news about the end of the world. Furthermore, while I feel that we can know what is coming in the future, I have concluded that most of the end-time scenarios you read about in pamphlets have missed the point.

You see, the Bible presents the story of Jesus, and this story includes not only what Jesus did while He was here on earth—it also abounds with promises He made about the future as well. In the next chapter we look at one of those promises. It will show us the most vital piece of information that we need to know about the future and the end of the world. This one bit of information takes away the fear and replaces it with joy and hope. And it challenges the whole idea of most of the end-time charts and scenarios that confront us in the streets, on the DVDs, and even in many churches.

Let's move on to chapter 2 and see what this good news is all about.

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\* Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 3, 4.