



STATEMENT DE250

88 Reasons What Went Wrong? by Dean C. Halverson

To many, “Edgar Whisenant” has recently become a household name. Whisenant, a former NASA rocket engineer turned prophecy teacher, became famous through a booklet that included two of his works: *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could be in 1998* and *On Borrowed Time*.¹ In this booklet, Whisenant predicted that Jesus would return to rapture His church sometime during the Jewish holiday of Rosh-Hashanah in 1988, which was from sunset, September 11, to sunset, September 13. Before those dates, The World Bible Society, which published the booklet, printed 3.2 million copies² and distributed 200,000 of them to pastors throughout the United States.³

When the September prediction failed, Whisenant updated the time to October 3. Now that date, too, has fallen through. Whisenant nevertheless remains undaunted: “The evidence is all over the place that it is going to be in a few weeks anyway.”⁴

What has been the response to Whisenant’s predictions? Thousands took the booklet seriously, some even quitting their jobs to prepare for the rapture. Attendance increased in some churches.⁵ Many Christians shrugged the booklet off as being part of a fanatic fringe. Many others, though, while not accepting the specific predictions, praised the booklet for reminding them of the imminence of the Rapture. Norvell Olive, Executive Director of the World Bible Society, used just such a reason to justify publishing the booklet: “One cannot deny the complacency of so many, and nothing brings about the purification of His people more than the expectation of His eminent [sic] return.”⁶ Olive further makes the incredible estimate that 100,000 people have been converted as a result of the booklet.⁷ (We might also estimate that a great majority of these supposed converts will lose their faith if 1988 fails to bring the Rapture.)

However they responded, it sadly appeared that most Christians were unable to discern why Whisenant’s reasoning was biblically unsound. In the following pages we will see that Whisenant misinterprets several key verses that have bearing on whether or not we can predict the date of Jesus’ second coming, wrests biblical phrases out of their contexts, and builds his predictions on shaky assumptions about symbols and dates.

Whisenant is not alone in attempting to predict the dates of the end-time. Others have attempted it in the past,⁸ and more, no doubt, will attempt it in the future. While one purpose of this article is to evaluate Whisenant’s reasoning, another is to draw out some principles of biblical interpretation by which to discern such date-setting literature.

MISCONSTRUES MATTHEW 24:36, “NO ONE KNOWS...”

When the reader first heard of Whisenant’s *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988*, is not unlikely that one of the first thoughts that came to mind was, “But didn’t Jesus say, ‘No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father?’” (Matt. 24:36).⁹ What does Whisenant do with that verse? First he agrees that one cannot know the “day or hour,” but he then says that this “does not preclude or prevent the faithful from knowing the year, the month, and week of the Lord’s return.”¹⁰ Secondly, Whisenant says that Jesus’ use of the Greek word *oida* is significant.

Whisenant makes a lot out of the difference in Greek between the meaning of *oida* and *ginosko*. He says that *ginosko* connotes an objective knowledge; “In essence, the information or knowledge [gained through *ginosko*] is either available and understandable, or it is not.”¹¹ Whisenant continues to say that *oida*, on the other hand, when used in its positive sense connotes a subjective knowledge, a knowledge gained through intuition or instinct.

In Matthew 24:36, though, *oida* is used in its negative sense. Whisenant comments: “The negative use of ‘oida — cannot know’ means that the information or knowledge is unknowable or unattainable; it does mean that it takes an effort, investigation, or study in order to uncover and understand it. In other words, it is there to obtain...the...verses where Jesus used ‘oida,’ He was

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indicating that the knowledge would not come instinctively, but would require some effort to perceive and understand it.”¹² Whisenant is saying, in a confusing way, that since Jesus used the word *oida* instead of *ginosko*, He denies only the possibility of knowing intuitively the time of the Rapture; Jesus does not deny the possibility of gaining objective knowledge about the Rapture through research.

Three things can be said in response to Whisenant’s interpretation of Matthew 24:36. First, concerning the connotation of *oida*, the meanings of *ginosko* and *oida* are not as distinct as Whisenant claims. Merrill Tenney, for example, makes a distinction between the two words, but he also cautions that one should not draw too sharp a line. Moreover, the connotations that Tenney sees in *ginosko* and *oida* are completely opposite to those of Whisenant. Tenney writes that *oida* “implies knowledge of facts or knowledge by intellectual process.”¹³ It should also be noted that, while Whisenant has gleaned the meanings of *ginosko* and *oida* from Strong’s *Concordance* and *The Companion Bible*, he goes far beyond these two sources when he talks about the meaning of *oida* in its negative sense.

By manipulating the connotation of *oida* in Matthew 24:36, Whisenant has turned the meaning of the verse on its head. Whereas Jesus is clearly saying that we cannot predict the time of His second coming, Whisenant has Him instead saying that with enough research we *can* predict the time, down to the very week. In his commentary on Matthew, William Hendriksen uses rather strong language to describe those who attempt to predict the Second Coming. He says that Jesus in Matthew 24:36 “proves the futility and sinfulness of every attempt on man’s part to predict the date when Jesus will return.”¹⁴

Secondly, in order to understand what Jesus meant when He said, “No one knows about that day or hour” (v. 36), it is helpful to look at the two analogies that He uses to illustrate His statement: the flood of Noah’s day (Matt. 24:37-41) and the coming of a thief (24:42-44). The point of both analogies is that the coming of the End will be both unexpected and unpredictable.

Concerning the unexpectedness of the flood, Whisenant counters that Noah was not surprised by the coming of the flood because God had told him exactly when it would come seven days ahead of time (Gen. 7:4). While that may be true, Whisenant is mistaken in assuming this fact is relevant to the interpretation of the flood analogy in Matthew 24:37-41. In other words, Whisenant is guilty of attempting to do too much with Jesus’ analogy. Just as it is a mistake to think there is a literal interpretation for every object in a parable, so is it a mistake to make Noah’s knowledge of the time of the flood an issue in Jesus’ analogy here. The subject of Jesus’ analogy is not Noah and how much he knew, but the spiritual blindness of the people of Noah’s day and how they went about their everyday routines until the very day of the flood, which did indeed come upon them unexpectedly.

Whisenant might respond by saying that Jesus’ analogy proves only that the End will come unexpectedly on those who are spiritually blind, but the spiritually alert (i.e., the Christians) will be able to know the time of His coming. If Jesus had used just the analogy of the flood to explain what He had meant when He said, “No one knows about the day or hour,” an argument such as Whisenant’s would not be without merit. It is wrong, however, because Jesus further explains what he had meant by the analogy of the thief. If Jesus’ point in the first analogy were to say that with enough research we could predict the coming of the Son of Man, then it would have been counterproductive for Him to add the analogy of the coming of the thief. No one is able to predict the coming of a thief. Jesus, moreover, concludes this analogy with *inclusive* wording: “So *you also* must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when *you* do not expect him.”¹⁵

In Reason #19 Whisenant again tries to make the point that the Lord will let His people know of His return shortly before He comes. Whisenant does this, though, by misplacing the emphasis of the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13). Whisenant writes:

I ask this question: would the shout that “The bridegroom cometh” by someone in the wedding party [be] in order to let the bride know a few minutes early so she can get ready — would his book or some similar event just before the end [be to] let the faithful church know or at least know the week, the month and the year a short time in advance to allow the bride to get ready to meet the bridegroom?¹⁶

When one interprets the parable correctly, though, one sees that Jesus was saying that the time to prepare is *before* the cry “The bridegroom cometh” rings out. The foolish virgins had no time to prepare *after* the cry. The purpose of Jesus’ statement in Matthew 24:36 and in the illustrating stories is to exhort everyone to always be prepared because “the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matt. 24:44). If God is going to forewarn the church concerning the year, month, and week of Jesus’ return, then it would not be a true statement to say that Jesus will come at an hour when we do not expect Him.

A third problem with Whisenant’s treatment of Matthew 24:36 is his inadequate interpretation of a verse that is critically related to it — Acts 1:7. We find this in his companion work, *On Borrowed Time*.

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Because Acts 1:7 expands the time period beyond that of “day or hour” to “times or seasons,” Whisenant is compelled to reconcile his interpretation of Matthew 24:36 with it. When discussing Acts 1:7, he immediately focuses on the meaning of the phrase “times (*chronous*) or seasons (*kairous*)” and attempts to limit its extent. He writes,

The NAB [New American Bible]...puts these scriptures in a different light. Acts 1:7 in this version reads “the exact time is not yours to know.”... *The times and the seasons were not limitations in the original Greek manuscripts.*¹⁷ (emphasis his)

In a footnote to the above statement Whisenant adds,

There is a Greek phrase used in Acts 1:7 which means *specific*. The phrase “the times and the seasons” in this passage contains the “specific” mark of the original manuscripts which was left out of the King James translation. The New American Bible translation has retained this mark and the passage reads “the exact time is not yours to know.” This implies that there are only two limitations to our knowing when Jesus will return for the church: the day and the hour. We will, therefore, know the times and the seasons.¹⁸

Whisenant, therefore, approaches the interpretation of Acts 1:7 in the same way as he does Matthew 24:36: Jesus only denied the possibility of knowing the *specific* day and hour of His return, Jesus did not, says Whisenant, deny that we can know the time frame down to within a week and even to within a particular three-day period.

The biblical evidence, however, contradicts Whisenant. The supposed Greek “phrase” in Acts 1:7 which means “specific” (which Whisenant conveniently fails to identify) is nonexistent.

Perhaps Whisenant is referring in an imprecise way to the fact that the Greek *kairous* (“seasons”) is at times used in Scripture for a *point* in time (while at other times it means a period of time). In any case, this does not reconcile Acts 1:7 with Matthew 24:36, for Jesus also makes reference in Acts 1:7 to the Greek *chronous* (“times”). *Chronous* is consistently used in Scripture for a *period* of time, usually of *long* duration.

We see then that in Acts 1:7 Jesus is excluding from our knowledge *both* specific dates *and* indefinite periods. Thus, Acts 1:7 further confirms that when Jesus says in Matthew 24:36 that we can’t know the day or the hour of His return, He also means that we can’t know the month or the year of His return.

Acts 1:7 is significant also because of the word that Jesus uses for “to know.” When discussing Matthew 24:36, Whisenant himself said, “Had Jesus used [ginosko], there would have been no doubt that no one could know of that time, not even the angels, or Jesus.”²⁰ The point is that Jesus *does* use *ginosko* in Acts 1:7, and He uses it concerning an even more expansive time period than a day or an hour.

Whisenant makes a further effort to dodge the implications of Acts 1:7, arguing that the apostles’ question, “Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?,” “had nothing to do with the Rapture.”²⁰ Perhaps not, but Jesus’ answer does. He expands the topic to “the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority” (v. 7), which includes the end-times. Acts 1:7, then, deals a major blow to Whisenant’s assumption that we can predict the dates of the end-times.

DISREGARDS THE CONTEXT

We have already seen how Whisenant disregards the context when interpreting Matthew 24:36, but he does this again when interpreting phrases that he claims have eschatological (end-time) significance. The following example comes from Reason #9, which serves as the foundation for Reasons #10 and #11 — the cornerstones for his predictions: “If you need only one reason, then either reason #10 or #11 is it.”²¹ In Reason #9 Whisenant delineates his peculiar interpretations of two phrases found in John 4:35: “Four more months and then the harvest” and “For the fields are already white to harvest.” Whisenant writes:

Jesus’ comment, “White unto harvest,” could only apply to the time of Rosh-Hash-Ana and the latter harvest (the white linen of the bride’s wedding gown being made of white cotton, and the color white representing the righteousness of the saints) while Jesus’ comments, “Four more months and then the harvest,” could only apply to the Day of Atonement and the beginning of the 70th week of Daniel.²²

In other words, Whisenant claims that the phrase “white unto harvest” refers to the Rapture, and the phrase “Four more months and then the harvest” refers to the beginning of the period of the Tribulation, which is “the start of the harvest of the wicked at the end of this age.”²³

The biblical context of these phrases, however, does not support Whisenant's interpretation. The context of John 4:35 is the incident where Jesus has struck up a conversation with a Samaritan woman after the disciples had gone into town to buy food. In that conversation, Jesus explains to the woman that He gives "living water" and that He is the Messiah. When the disciples return, they are surprised to see Jesus talking with the woman, but they decide against saying anything about it. Instead, they encourage Jesus to eat some of the food they had bought while in town. Jesus replies, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest?' I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe [Greek: *leukai*; literally "white"] for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together" (vv. 34-36).

The intent, then, of the two phrases, "white unto harvest" and "four more months and then the harvest," has nothing to do with people being ripe for judgment at the end of the age, but it has everything to do with people being ripe for evangelism. The phrase "four more months and then the harvest" was a common saying in Jesus' day that connoted the feeling that there was no hurry in getting to a particular task because one could not rush the growth of the crops.²⁴ Jesus, however, with the statement "They are ripe for harvest," spurs the disciples on to proclaiming the good news of eternal life now, for people are spiritually hungry enough to receive it. To apply these phrases to a future eschatology, as does Whisenant, is to wrench them from their original context and to misconstrue altogether the meaning that Jesus intended for them.

MISTAKENLY INTERPRETS A SYMBOL

In at least one instance Whisenant incorrectly interprets a biblical symbol, and then proceeds to build his predictions upon the shaky foundation of that faulty interpretation. The instance occurs in Reason #7 where Whisenant quotes Jesus' words in Matthew 24:32-33 as follows, "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things,...I [Jesus] tell you the truth, *this wicked generation (1948-1988) will certainly not pass until all these things have happened*" (ellipses and emphasis in original).²⁵ Whisenant interprets the above verse in the following way:

"This last generation spoken of above started on 14 May 1948, the day Israel became a nation. Israel is the time clock of God throughout history. Israel is the blooming fig tree, and the last generation will end 40 wicked gentile years later on 14 May 1988."²⁶

Contrary to Whisenant's interpretation, the context of Jesus' words in Matthew 24:32-33 gives no warrant to the idea that Jesus was using the figure of the fig tree as anything more than an illustration of how the Jews were able to tell when summer was near. Just as the blooming of the fig tree indicates that summer is approaching, so the previous signs that Jesus had mentioned (e.g., nations rising against nations, famines, earthquakes, and the preaching of the gospel to the entire world) are indications that the end is near.

In fact, Luke 21:29-30, a parallel passage, supports the idea that Jesus was not using the analogy of the fig tree for anything more than a way to illustrate how people can know when a particular time is near. Luke writes: "He told them this parable: 'Look at the fig tree *and all the trees*. When *they* sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near'" (Luke 21:29-30). In Luke, then, Jesus refers not just to the fig tree, but to all trees. This parallel verse is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with the fig-tree-equals-the-rebirth-of-Israel interpretation of Matthew 24:32-33. Whisenant charges ahead, though, and makes specific predictions about the date of the Rapture, apparently oblivious to the fact that his interpretation of the symbol of the fig tree lacks contextual support.

RELIES HEAVILY ON QUESTIONABLE DATES

Not only does Whisenant build his predictions on the questionable interpretation of biblical symbols, he also builds them on historical dates for which there is little consensus among either biblical scholars or archaeologists. For example, in Reason #14 he states that *The New Scofield Reference Bible* gives 602 B.C. as the date when Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the idol with the bead of gold.²⁷ Whisenant then makes the following extrapolation: "Therefore, 602 B.C. less [sic] the 70 years of the Babylonian captivity equals 532 B.C.; and 532 B.C. less 2,520 years equals 1988 as the end of the times of the gentiles. So here we have shown that Rosh-Hash-Ana 1988 is the exact end of the church age."²⁸ The NIV Study Bible, however, places Nebuchadnezzar's second year of reign during 604 B.C.;²⁹ and *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* says it was between April 603 and March 602 B.C.³⁰ It is possible, therefore, that 602 B.C. is an incorrect date from which to count. If it is indeed an incorrect date, then it would throw off Whisenant's calculations not only in Reason #14 but also in several other Reasons (#'s 19, 28, 35, 38, and 60).

In Reason #16 Whisenant makes a prediction based on the date of Adam's creation!

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The Chronological Bible gives Adam's creation by God as Friday, 3975 B.C., and states that Adam was created at approximately 30 years of age. So 3975 B.C. less 30 years equals 4005 B.C. as the year that Adam would have been born, had Adam been born of a woman. And from 4005 B.C. to 1995 A.D., is 6,000 years or six days with God, and the year that the seventh day (called the millennium [sic]) would be expected to start. So if the millennium [sic] would start in 1995, then the 70th week of Daniel would have to start seven years earlier in 1988 in order to be completed on time.³¹

Passing over the question of the validity of Whisenant's arguments here, can we in fact be so certain that Adam was created on a Friday in the year 3975 B.C. and that he was created at the age of 30? Even Edward Reese, the man who compiled and prepared *The Chronological Bible*, offers a disclaimer concerning the accuracy of its dates:

No two Bible scholars would be likely to arrange a Bible in exactly the same chronological order. There is not common agreement on the length of the judges, or the exact dates of the 483 years of Daniel 9:25. After consulting numerous works on Bible history and chronology, after careful analysis of every time frame in the Bible, and after many revisions, placement decisions were made in the best judgment of the arranger, *some necessarily arbitrary*.³² (emphasis added)

Good men's opinions will vary on most things, and certainly do in the field of Bible Chronology....May the dates and titles be kept in proper perspective. They are only aids.³³

Therefore, Edward Reese, the man behind *The Chronological Bible*, does not recommend using its dates as the basis for making exact predictions. Nevertheless, in almost half (41 times, according to my count) of his 88 Reasons, Whisenant assumes the exactitude of these dates as the starting point for calculating the date of the Rapture. (It is interesting to note that similar schemes of chronological reasoning led the Jehovah's Witnesses to their false predictions concerning the years 1914 and 1975.)

SEEKS KNOWLEDGE RESERVED FOR GOD ALONE

As we have seen, in order to make the Bible fit his particular prophetic scheme, Whisenant has misconstrued Matthew 24:36, pulled biblical phrases out of their original context, and taken for granted the interpretation of a biblical symbol and the identification of dates that are anything but certain. Whisenant has in essence misinterpreted and misused the Bible, and it is on that foundation alone that his predictions of the church's rapture are based.

Some may defend Whisenant by saying that he has made them more mindful of the imminency of Christ's return. Such a mindfulness certainly has merit. It is one thing, though, to be reminded that the end might come soon, it is quite another thing to make specific predictions about the date of the Rapture. Jesus Himself warned against speculating about the dates of the end-times (Matt. 24:36; Acts 1:7), and He stressed that only God knows exactly when the events of the future will transpire. The practice of speculating about the date of the Rapture is akin in spirit to that of the diviners and astrologers (Deut. 18:9-14; Isa. 47:12-14). It is akin in that they all seek after a knowledge that is reserved for God alone. In that respect it is interesting to note that Whisenant bases two of his Reasons (#'s 64 and 65) on the words of "America's famous psychic"³⁴ and another on the occultic practice of numerology (#61).

Concerning Whisenant's 88 Reasons and other prophetic schemes in the same vein, the reader would be well advised to view them with a "healthy dose" of skepticism. As Jesus said, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But...[to] be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:7-8). Our task is not to dwell at length on the particulars of the end-times, but to make ourselves ready at all times, and to help others become ready for Christ's return, which will happen in His time.

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NOTES

1 Edgar Whisenant, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988/On Borrowed Time*, (Nashville, TN: World Bible Society, 1988).

2 "Rapture Seer Hedges on Last Guess," *Christianity Today*, 21 October 1988, 43.

3 "Still Around," *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, 14 Sept. 1988, Part D.

4 "Rapture Seer," 43.

5 "Book Predicts End of World: Some Quit Jobs," *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, 31 Sept. 1988, Part A.

6 Quote appeared in a letter printed as the introduction to *On Borrowed Time*.

7 "Rapture Seer," 43.

8 See, for example, Kenneth R. Samples, "From Controversy to Crisis: An Updated Assessment of Seventh-day Adventism." CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, Summer 1988.

9 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version.

10 *Reasons*, 3.

11 *Ibid.*, 4.

12 *Ibid.*, 4-5.

13 Merrill Tenney, "The Gospel of John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 9:58.

14 William Hendriksen, *Matthew* (New Testament Commentary Ser.) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973). 869.

15 *Reasons*, 44.

16 *Ibid.*, 24.

17 *Borrowed*, 1.

18 *Ibid.*, 2.

19 *Ibid.*, 4.

20 *Borrowed*, 2.

21 *Reasons*, 19.

22 *Ibid.*, 17.

23 *Ibid.*, 21.

24 Leon Morris, *The Gospel of John*, the New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F.F. Bruce (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 279.

25 *Reasons*, 10.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*, 21.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Kenneth Baker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 1301.

30 Gleason L. Archer, Jr., "Daniel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 7:39.

31 *Reasons*, 22.

32 Edward Reese, *The Reese Chronological Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1977), from the page entitled "The Reese Chronological Bible."

33 *Ibid.*, from the page entitled "A Final Word About the Dating."

34 *Reasons*, 37.