

Signs Of Christ's Early Return

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THE CHART clearly indicated that Jesus would return to earth on August 17, 1973. Elaborate graphs, connected with Scripture references, plotted each detail leading up to the grand climax. It looked impressive, but the day came and went without the appearance of Jesus.

Jesus will definitely return to earth in majestic glory. The Bible repeatedly assures us of this fact. But when will He come-a year from now? Five years? Ten years? No one knows for sure. Jesus Himself declared, "Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." (Matthew 24:36, RSV). Only God the Father, according to Jesus, knows the exact time.

But Jesus also said, "Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect (Matthew 24:44, RSV). We cannot know the exact time, but we can know when His coming is near and be continually ready for that event. Jesus has given us signs to help us know when He is about to come.

We walk along the footpath in early September with our coat buttoned up to our chin; perhaps we even have our gloves on, and the chilly breeze feels as though it is blowing directly from the Antarctic. It seems that winter will never end. And then we see a blaze of golden wattle and a tree with swelling, green buds. The air is still cold and the mountains still have vestiges of the most recent snowfall, but we feel warmer because the buds tell us that spring is just around the corner.

Did you know that Jesus knew that same feeling? He used to wish for springtime, too, and He used this same experience to illustrate His second coming. "From the fig tree learn its lesson." He tells us. "As soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates." (Matthew 24:32, 33, RSV).

The signs Jesus gave to identify the time for His second coming are as plain as the physical signs of spring. And these signs tell us that we should expect Jesus to appear at any time! Right now the signs are happening all around us!

Listen to what God says the world will be like just before Jesus comes. It sounds like a modern summary of current newspapers, yet it was written hundreds of years ago!

"But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding a form of religion but denying the power of it- (2 Timothy 3:13, RSV).

Obviously when Jesus comes, the world will be in a state of unrest, turmoil, and evil, far surpassing anything in the past. The picture given here is of a world in which each person lives solely for himself, material possessions are all-important, and human relationships between family members as well as strangers are stretched to the breaking-point. Far more than we like to realize, our world today fits this picture.

Crime has become such an issue in recent years that we can believe God when He declares, "Men will be lovers of self, . . . fierce, haters of good." Because of the radical increase in crime, people have had to change the way they live. Thirty years ago (or less) people were not afraid to walk city streets at night. Today we think twice about driving a car in some areas either night or day, and to walk almost anywhere in a large city at night is to invite violence. This is true of cities all over the world.

Many of us can remember living in houses which had no locks on the doors, not to mention burglar alarms, chains, peepholes, chemical sprays, and tape recordings of growling, snarling dogs to be left on while the occupant is away.

Dr. Arnold Barnett, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, announces on the basis of his studies that a baby born today in one of America's fifty largest cities runs a greater risk of being murdered at some time in its life, than an American soldier did of being killed in combat during World War II!

We read of the million or more teenagers who run away from home each year in the Western world, and we remember that God said disobedience to parents would be a characteristic of the last days. Hundreds of thousands of people in Australia are estimated to be problem drinkers. The figure reminds us that God mentions “profligates ... [and] lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.” Divorce courts claim one out of every four marriages (three out of four in some areas). Continuing inflation, alarming pollution, moral decay, and ever-increasing complexity show us that conditions today are precisely as God predicted they would be just before the return of Jesus.

Of course crime and dishonesty and other problems have plagued us ever since Cain killed Abel. Do these things really indicate the end of time and the return of Jesus? Did you know that God anticipated this very question? Listen to His words:

“First of all you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation.’” (2 Peter 3:3, 4, RSV).

The truth of the matter is that things are not continuing as they always have. Sin has caused the same problems ever since it entered the world, but never on such a worldwide, all-pervasive scale as at the present. The world we live in today is unique; never has any generation had to wrestle with such an accumulation of insurmountable problems. Never before have men held in their hands the technical potential of world nuclear destruction. In Revelation 11:18 God speaks of coming in judgment to “destroy them which destroy the earth.” That was impossible until a few years ago.

Today the world is a single community in a way it has never been before. Sophisticated communication systems link every part of the globe with every other part. Events happening on one side of the earth can be known and even seen in a matter of seconds on the other side thousands of miles away. Because of this the potential for world good (and evil) is much greater than it has ever been before.

Things are not as they have always been. Unique world conditions spell out the soon coming of Jesus! This is the only solution to the problems we face.

Jesus Himself listed certain specific signs which would tell us when His coming is near. We find these events recorded in Matthew 24 and its parallel chapters, Mark 13 and Luke 21. Here He points out signs in the four separate areas of politics, nature, social relationships, and religion.

Jesus said that violence between nations would characterize political relationships in the last days. “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. . . . For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (Matthew 24:6, 7, RSV).

It is true that war has never been a stranger to men throughout the history of earth. But Jesus' words seem to indicate a condition in which war between nations is the accepted way of life. War has been raging somewhere in the world every moment of every day since World War II began, until we have learned to look at international violence as normal. Political leaders live with the constant concern of war as the world hangs under the shadow of the nuclear missile and global annihilation. In fact, we have a very peculiar situation today—a situation foretold by the Word of God. We see a continuing concern for peace in the midst of a world engulfed in violence of every sort. Statesmen meet at the United Nations seeking a way to peace. People in every class all over the world hope for peace, and yet violence increases.

The Bible predicted this very thing. “They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14). “For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction comes upon them” (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

Jesus described political conditions in the last days in these words: “There shall be upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; . . . men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth.” (Luke 21:25, 26). Jesus looked down the centuries to the political situation of the world in the last days and knew that His coming would be its only hope.

Jesus also pointed to the world of nature and indicated that a sharp increase in all types of calamities would announce His return. “There will be famines and earthquakes in various places (Matthew 24:7, RSV). “Upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves” (Luke 21:25, RSV).

According to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, the number of destructive earthquakes has steadily increased year after year. Counting only those earthquakes which destroyed lives or property, the association has recorded fifteen during the first century AD; 174 for the fifteenth century; 378 for the seventeenth century; and 2,119 for the nineteenth century! The rapid increase in destructive earthquakes alone, as well as other calamities of nature, proves the truth of Jesus' words and tells us His coming is near.

Jesus mentioned signs that would appear in the sun, moon, and stars. He declares, "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven" (Matthew 24:29).

The "days" Jesus is talking about are the 1260 years of religious persecution predicted by Daniel. (See verse 15 and Daniel 7:23-27; 8:11) This period ended in 1798, ushering in the last days and the specific, startling signs Jesus mentions here occurred just as He said they would.

On May 19, 1780, the sun mysteriously became dark, continuing that way for fourteen hours over much of North America. Scientists have yet to explain it. "The causes for these phenomena are unknown. They certainly were not the result of eclipses" (The Guide to Knowledge, or Repertory of Facts, edited by Robert Sears, page 428).

The same night the moon, which should have been full, did not come out. Finally at two o'clock in the morning it appeared with a dull, copper-red shine which looked like blood. Joel 2:31 had predicted this! November 13, 1833, the stars which Jesus had said would -fall from heaven," did just that in the greatest meteoric shower ever recorded. People from Canada to the West Indies, and from California to ships out in the Atlantic Ocean watched for over four hours as millions of stars fell-in profusion. The world had never seen anything like it, and it certainly never has since. Time fulfilled the Savior's words precisely.

Jesus said that just prior to His return "iniquity shall abound" (Matthew 24:12). Social relationships will be largely based on the sinful tendencies of people's hearts. In fact, Jesus compared the moral rottenness of ancient Sodom to conditions in the last days. Sodom was so corrupt, especially in sensual indulgence, that God had to destroy it. Even today Sodom is another way of saying "moral decay and degeneracy." But our society has surely equaled anything in that wicked city.

Sex today has become a commercial product packaged and sold from newsstands, TV screens, movies, nightclubs, books, and magazines. Even clergymen condone and encourage any type of sexual relationship as long as it is "meaningful." God's Word declares, "As it was in the days of Lot; . . . even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed" (Luke 17:28-30).

Just as the inhabitants of Sodom grew accustomed to moral degradation until it no longer seemed so terrible, so we have been conditioned until we can scarcely realize how near we are to the end of all things!

Jesus foretold what the religious world would be like just before His coming: "When the Son of man comes, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

Other Bible verses declare that these days would be a time of turning away from Bible truth while an empty form of religion remained. In keeping with this, studies show that the number of people claiming church membership in the United States keeps rising, while the number of Americans who feel that religion is losing its influence on American life rose from 14 percent to 57 percent in ten years!

Christianity faces some of its greatest challenges from within, as clergymen themselves in growing numbers dismiss much of the Bible as myth. Some have even replaced the Bible teaching of a literal, personal return by Jesus with the teaching that His coming is a "spiritual" coming to each person in faith when he accepts Jesus into his life.

God declared through Paul, "Now the Spirit speaks expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to doctrines of devils" (1 Timothy 4:1).

Jesus gave us another sign in the religious scene, however. "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14).

This sign is being fulfilled right now! The gospel of Jesus Christ is being carried everywhere, calling on men to prepare for His coming. Modern inventions in communications are speeding the gospel in a way that has never been possible before. Jesus wants you to help in swelling the message to the ends of the earth so He can come quickly.

The Bible presents only two classes of people alive when Jesus returns from heaven-those who have lived for self without accepting the control of Jesus in their life, and those who have prepared for His coming by inviting Him into their heart. The first group is pictured in Revelation 6:14,17, RSV: "The sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?"

Their horror at being eternally lost can only be imagined! Isaiah paints a picture of another, smaller group who have been just as sinful, just as selfish and self-centered as those who are lost. But they meet Jesus in peace as He comes in splendor with all the angels. The difference is that they have asked Jesus to forgive their sins and cover them with His righteousness. Of this group Isaiah writes, "It will be said on the day, 'Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. Ibis is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.'" (Isaiah 25:9, RSV).

Won't you choose now to be in the group which welcomes Jesus with joy, knowing He has come to save you?

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