

June 19, 2011  
 Amos 5:18-20 / I Thess. 5:1-11 / Luke 21:5-38  
 Signs That the End is Near

With all the recent hype regarding people setting dates for Jesus return / and Harold Camping's new prediction of October 21 looming on the horizon as another potential media frenzy / it made me leery to even think of preaching a sermon entitled, "Signs That The End Is Near."

I could just picture people driving by the church and reading the sign out front, and saying: "Oh no! Here we go again. Another date-setter."

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So before I even get into my message, let me say (and say very clearly):  
 I have no intention of setting any dates! None whatsoever!

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Yet I also need to say with equal clarity: I do believe Jesus IS coming back, and I believe His return is going to be a very REAL and VISIBLE return (not a secret and invisible one as Mr. Camping proclaimed regarding May 21st, or as the Jehovah's Witnesses said regarding 1914 and 1975.)

And though I refuse to set dates, I am called, by Jesus, to watch carefully for the signs of His approach, just as the Jews watched for the leafing of the fig tree to tell them that summer was near. Because I'm always aware (as Jesus warned) that it could happen anytime, even when we "**least expect it.**"

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In Matthew 24:42, Jesus says to all believers: "**Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will return.**"

And he repeats it one chapter later in The Parable of the Ten Virgins (who irresponsibly let the oil in their lamps waste away as they wait for the bridegroom to return). "**Therefore, keep watch because you do not know the day or the hour.**"

The Christian is always to be watchful / and alert to the possibility of Christ's imminent return, because He has promised that on one future day the heavens will be split asunder and He will return for His own!

And this passage makes it very clear that Jesus doesn't want His followers to be caught off guard when that day arrives. That's why He says to us twice in today's passage (v. 28 and 31): ***"When you see these things begin to take place, stand up, and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*** / And again, ***"Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near."***

And even if that time is NOT this year / or this decade / or even within our lifetime / it does nothing to negate the unalterable fact (as many people pointed out to me after the weekend of May 21st) that EVERYONE will, at the instant of their death (as Amos 4:12 puts it), ***"Meet their God"*** or Maker.

The believing will meet Him as their Savior and Friend and Advocate / but the unbelieving and the unrepentant will meet Him as their Judge, who being holy and righteous and just, must condemn them for their sins and sentence them to everlasting destruction (II Thess. 1:9).

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My question to you is: Will you meet Him as Savior, Friend and Advocate / or the holy and righteous Judge who must condemn you for your sins?

It's an issue every living person must address, whether Christ returns in their lifetime or not. For as Hebrews tells us, "It is appointed unto man, once to die, and then comes the judgment."

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So, open your Bibles and let's see what insights we can glean from Jesus concerning the "signs" that the end is near, just as that budding olive tree signaled that summer was near.

And as we do so, I'm going to divide the text up into its three relatively clear sections. The period close to the end (vv. 8-11) / the time prior to and immediately following the Temple's destruction (12-24) / followed by a return to those things that will occur just prior to the 2nd coming (25-36).

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So, let's look **FIRST** at vv. 8-11 and consider those things that will signal we are close to the end. **#1.**) In verse 8, Jesus says that many deceivers will go out ***"in His name"*** (most likely, having been Christians / or having claimed to be

Christians / or claiming to have come with a message from Him) and will say "**I am He,**" or "**the time is near,**" when obviously, they are not Him and the time is not near!

Why would they do it? It's the age old problem of the sinful ego. The sinful ego is not content to humbly bow in worship. / It wants to be admired, adored and worshipped like God. / That's why those who are not Him would claim to be Him -- and unfortunately come "**in His name,**" or from within the ranks of the visible church, claiming, at least initially, to be His followers.

Yung sung Moon of the Unification Church (son of a Korean minister) / Jim Jones of The People's Temple and Jonestown, Guyana / David Koresh of the Branch Davidian's in Waco Texas / Maria Devi Christos founder of the Great White Brotherhood / Sergei Torop founder of the Church of the Last Testament in Russia / and David Shayler former MI5 agent (or Secret Intelligence Service) who declared himself the Messiah on July 7, 2007.

They all claimed to be Jesus (and they won't be the last)! Why? Because it gives them a sense of being special to God / or having a unique insider relationship with God / or possessing secret knowledge no one else knows. / It gives them a sense of power and control and can make one very rich -- like Harold Camping -- whose holdings are worth an estimated 72 million dollars!

As the old saying goes (and false prophets know this well): "**Tell people their fortune, and make your own.**" There's a lot of money to be made in predicting the future / or giving people goose bumps.

And many such people, says Jesus, will come. Which is why He warns us ahead of time: "**Do not follow them!**" / Don't listen to them or support them. And by all means, don't follow them or worship them.

And likewise don't say: "*It could never happen to me.*" For as Jesus tells us in the in Matt. 24:24 such people can be extremely convincing! "**False prophets and false Christ's will appear,**" says Jesus, "**and perform great signs and miracles, so as to deceive even the elect -- if that be possible.**"

Then #2) In verse 9 Jesus says **"When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened."** Why should such things not frighten us into thinking the end is near? Historian Will Durant tells us, when he writes: **"War is one of the constants of history, and has not diminished with civilization or democracy. In the last 3,421 years of recorded history only 268 have seen no war."** And that doesn't count battles, wars or skirmishes that are unrecorded.

**"These things must happen first,"** says Jesus, **"but the end will not come right away."** When we see these things, says Jesus, it's not any type of guarantee that the end of the world is at hand -- though it ***IS*** easy to see how those caught in the middle of war -- with all its dive-bombing planes / and artillery / and incendiary bombs / and bloodshed / and horrors / and destruction going on all around them -- could be tempted to say that it is.

Then #3) Jesus says, **"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events, and great signs from heaven."** And I stress what Jesus says when he adds: **"In various places..."**

It is incorrect to assume that in the time just preceding the end, everything, everywhere, will be black and gloomy and filled with fighting and war and earthquakes and famines -- as some books and movies suggest.

Not at all! Even as the end is about to occur, says Jesus, such things will only be present, **"in VARIOUS places."** While some will be undergoing horrific things and seeing fearful events, others will not.

Some parts of the globe may have the sun blotted out by huge clouds of volcanic ash / with people running airborne volcanic bombs / and molten lava / and poisonous gases / and pyroclastic material.

While others (in other parts of the globe) will have the sun shining, and people laying on the beach getting a tan, as the waves gently splash upon the shore. It's what we saw in Luke 17, when Jesus said of the end that, **"It will be as in the days of Noah -- people were eating and drinking, marrying and being married, right up until the day Noah went into the ark."**

They will be **"buying and selling and planting and building, just as in Sodom and Gomorrah..."** / Life in some places will be just like normal / while in other places it will be unbearable.

We got a little picture of that just weeks ago with the Tornados. Some places got hammered / while other places just hours away would never have known about it were it not for the Evening News. So it will be in the end -- even hours or seconds before Christ returns.

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Then we come to our **SECOND** section, in verses 12-24, which, as I've already stated, was prophetic for those living in Jesus day, but are long past fulfilled when it comes to us, because they refer to the destruction of Jerusalem that would take place 37 years in the future for them, but took place 1941 years ago for us, in 70 A.D.

How do we know that Jesus has moved from talking about the end, to talking of something that would happen long before the end? He tells us so in v. 12 where he begins this section: **"But before all this..."** It's like He says: *"Now, before I go on with more about the end, let's step back in time and tell you about something that will happen in the not too distant future."*

In fact, something that will happen here in Israel (whereas the things we just looked at were not limited to Israel). **"They will persecute you,"** says Jesus, **"and deliver you to synagogues and prisons."**

In fact, if you read the Book of Acts, you will see this is exactly what Paul did to the early Christians in Israel, and those just outside her borders. And later, it's what others did to Paul after he was converted! Verses 12-19 couldn't be a more precise picture of what would happen to Paul and the early Christians in Acts 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 12, 18 & 21-26.

And starting in verse 20, what Jesus gives us is a precise description of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. In 70 A.D. the Roman armies, tired of Israel's constant uprisings, surrounded the city with its armies, and instead of attacking the city (and losing men), cut off all water and food to the city, and simply starved the population before ransacking the city.

The historian Josephus tells us that the roofs of the houses in Jerusalem were thronged with famished women with babes in their arms / and the alleys were filled with the corpses of the elderly.

Children swollen from starvation, **"roamed like phantoms through the marketplaces,"** he says, **"and collapsed wherever their doom overtook them."** Some of the things are even too gruesome to mention from the pulpit. (Which is why Jesus says elsewhere that people would wish the stones fell on them and made their deaths quick.)

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Yet, that's not all Josephus tells us. He also informs us that the Christian population, heeding the words of Jesus in this passage, did **"flee (the city) to the mountains,"** (quote) **"like swimmers deserting a sinking ship."**

Years later Eusebius wrote essentially the same thing: **"The people of the church in Jerusalem, having been commanded by an oracle given by revelation before the war, to those in the city [the oracle recorded here in Lk. 21 as well as Mt. 24] departed from the city to dwell in one of the cities of Perea which they called Pella [about 65 miles north of Jerusalem]. To it those who believed on Christ migrated"** (before the siege of the city began).

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Thus the words of Jesus in vv. 23-24 were fulfilled: **"There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."**

It was a trampling that would continue for another 1878 years (until 1948) when we might say: "The times of the Gentiles were (at least in part) fulfilled," by the restoration of Israel to the Jews.

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Which brings us to our **LAST** section (vv. 25-36), which return us to more "signs" that the end or Christ's return is near. What will they be? **1st)** In vv. 25-26 we find astronomical or cosmic signs! They will be, "Signs in the sun, the moon and the stars." Before Christ returns things will be stirred up, not just on earth, but in the heavens above. Or maybe, on the earth because of the things taking place in the heavens.

What things? Maybe things like radiation from solar flares / or the collision of asteroids with the earth / or geomagnetic disruptions / or the super-nova which occurs when a star runs out of fuel and it collapses / or a growing black hole which swallows up everything in its path.

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We will know the end is near when things start to go haywire in the heavens. It's not "**wars and rumors of wars,**" or occasional "**earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places.**" The things that signals the end is near is disruption of things in the heavens! It's then that we'll KNOW that the end is near! When THOSE THINGS begin to happen, says Jesus, "**stand up, and lift up your head, for your redemption is drawing near.**"

Which is surely why Jesus can say in the next verse: "**On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea.**"

Those cosmic events (as we now know) affect the gravitational forces of the earth / thus affecting the oceans / and its tides / and the weather patterns (possibly increasing the number and severity of droughts and famines and hurricanes and monsoons) -- and possibly even triggering earthquakes and seismic activity / and the tsunamis or tidal waves that they spawn.

"**Men will faint from terror,**" says Jesus in verse 26, "**apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.**" / "**At that time,**" Jesus continues, "**they (that is, those living in that day) will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and glory.**"

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Then 2nd) vv. 29-33 say, "**Look at the fig tree and all the trees.**" "**When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see THESE THINGS (this heavenly shaking that has its effects upon the earth), you can KNOW that the kingdom of God is near.**"

And then He follows that statement with the statement more people ask me about than almost any other statement in the Bible! He says, "**I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until ALL these things have happened.**"

And He's so emphatic about it that He follows that statement up by adding, **"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."**

In other words, it's absolutely unalterable truth.

So what does He mean? Because if we see it as referring to the generation of people that He was speaking to, then we would have to see Him as wrong (which is precisely what many have said to me) since we all know it didn't happen within their lifetime or generation (that is, by 75 or 80 A.D.).

The destruction of Jerusalem did happen within that time frame, just as He had said. But all the other things did not, and those other things are included in the phrase **"until ALL these things have happened."**

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So what does He mean when He says: **"This generation will not pass away before all these things have happened"**? Well obviously He didn't mean "within 40 years" from when He was speaking. Because if He did, then He was wrong.

And although there are many suggestions as to what **"this generation"** refers to, the best explanation (in my opinion) is that it means the generation which will be alive at the time that these final signs start happening. The **"generation"** that is living when these things begin to occur, **"will not pass away until ALL the things I speak of have taken place."**

As Darrell Bock points out: **"Once the beginning of the end arrives with the cosmic signs of vv. 25-26, the Son of Man will return before that generation passes away... The same group that sees the start of the end will not pass away before they see its end."** I agree. That is the best way to understand it.

It's Jesus way of saying that even when these great and fearful events do actually begin, there may still be upwards of 40 years that pass by before the end comes and they actually see, **"the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory."**

You see, some people so overreact when they see just one of the signs spoken of here, that Jesus (I believe) is essentially saying this:

*Don't run around waving your arms in the air and wildly proclaiming I'm returning just because astronomers see a comet whose orbit will take it close to the earth (as people did with Halley's Comet in 1910)!*

*Don't proclaim it's the end of the world just because an earthquake in California occurs in conjunction with a volcanic eruption in Japan and a tsunami in Indonesia (even if they cause great damage)!*

*And don't sell everything you own and dig an underground bunker stocked with food, just because some planets line up and a major solar flare interferes with the earth's telecommunications (as it did on Dec. 6, 2006)!*

Jesus says, "**ALL THESE THINGS MUST COME TO PASS** (not just some of them), **before the end will come.**" For even when they start to happen, the generation which begins to see them may have to wait 30 to 40 years before they see Christ return.

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You see, Jesus is wisely giving us built in restraints that help us to see that we do need to look for the "signs," while never overreacting / or setting dates. We must always be aware and alert, but at the same time wait to see that **EVERYTHING HE SPEAKS OF TAKES PLACE** before we can **KNOW** and confidently proclaim, "***the kingdom of God is near***" (v. 31).

And even when the end does begin, the vague terms "near" or "this generation" (within the next 40 years) are the closest that Jesus (and thus all of his followers) should ever come to setting a "date"!

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You see, Jesus lays it all out so wisely and perfectly! Far from being wrong, what Jesus is doing is telling us exactly what signs will accompany His return / and yet at the same time doing all He can to ward off improper / fanatical / or extremist type responses / which always do great harm to people's faith / and hurt the testimony of the church.

Fanaticism (and the undiscerning emotionalism that always accompanies it) actually make people more susceptible to the deceptive traits and alluring charisma of false prophets and false Christ's!

So I tell you: Someday everything Jesus has said will come to pass. And it will be a frightening time to live. So heed His closing words:

**"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation"** (that is, the temptation to indulge in sensual pleasure because the end is coming. Dissipation being exact opposite of uprightness and godliness).

**"Don't be weighed down by... drunkenness"** (that is, excessive drinking to aimed at easing the pain and fear and dread associated with the cataclysmic end of the world).

Or **"the anxieties of life"** (the stress of simply trying to survive under very difficult conditions, when there is no food or water or social order), **"lest that day close in on you unexpectedly like a trap."**

Instead of falling apart (like everyone else) / and letting go of all self restraint and indulging in sin (dissipation) / or deadening the pain with drugs (drunkenness) / or succumbing to fear and anxiety / we are in faith, and in calm confidence, to **"stand up, and lift up our heads, knowing our redemption is drawing near!"**

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We are to **"watch,"** says Jesus (and He means for the signs of His return), **"and pray"** (that is, for the strength to endure) **"that we may be able to stand before the Son of Man on that day"** (and He means "stand" in the sense of one who perseveres to the very end trusting confidently in Christ).

**WATCH, PRAY and STAND FIRM in the faith!** Those are Jesus directives. Don't succumb to fear, fanaticism, anxiety, sin, or unbelief.

That's Jesus word to us regarding the end. It's going to be rough. But regardless of when it may come, or how hard it may be, face it with faith, wisdom, prayer and quiet confidence.

It's the climax of God's redemptive plan! That's why, when everyone else is cringing in fear, we can **"stand up, and lift up our heads,"** because for us it means that **"our redemption is near!"** It's finally come! For us, the end is the beginning of everything we've ever wanted or hoped for!