

## ARE WE IN THE END TIMES?

### The Signs of the End

Scripture reveals numerous signs which signal Christ's return (especially in Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, and 2 Thessalonians 2). Before considering these signs, it is important that their purpose be understood.

First, the signs of the end do not signify events which will happen only in the future. **The church of every generation can expect to witness their occurrence.** Wars, famines, earthquakes, and anti-Christian forces were present already in the first century A.D., and they continue today. To be sure, these signs will become more evident and intense immediately preceding Christ's return, but every generation was and is acting responsibly in expecting Christ's return in its own lifetime. Watchfulness, not laziness or apathy fostered by the mistaken notion that Christ's return must be far off in the future, must characterize the church's constant posture (Matt. 24:33, 42-44; Luke 21 :28; 1 Thess. 5:6).

Second, the signs of the end **are not intended to provide Christians a means by which they may calculate the exact time of Christ's second coming.** In fact, the New Testament warns against all such efforts at date setting (Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32; 1 Thess. 5:1-3; 2 Pet. 3:10). The signs of the end presented in Scripture assure the Christian that Christ will surely return.

Third, observing the signs has a positive significance for life in the present. They serve as a reminder of God's call to watchfulness, holy living, and service to Christ (Matthew 25; Rom. 13:11-14; 2 Thessalonians 2-3; James 5:7-11; 2 Pet. 3:11-18).

Finally, the signs of the end do not belong necessarily to the category of the extraordinary or spectacular. The exhortations to be watchful, given by Jesus and the apostles, presuppose that the signs will be a part of the ordinary course of history and therefore that discernment is necessary. Such discernment is also required, of course, in the case of the extraordinary; counterfeit "signs and wonders" are indeed possible (2 Thess. 2:9; Matt. 24:24).

## What are the individual "signs?"

1. The sign evidencing the grace of God: the proclamation of the Gospel to all nations
2. The signs indicating divine judgment
  - a. wars
  - b. earthquakes
  - c. famines and pestilences
  - d. signs in the heavens
3. The signs indicating opposition to God
  - a. tribulation
  - b. apostasy
  - c. Antichrist

The most important sign of the end is **the missionary preaching of the Gospel to all nations** (Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10). It gives to the present age its primary purpose and significance (Matt. 28:19-20). The period between Christ's two advents is preeminently the missionary age, the time when God graciously calls all people to be saved, a time foretold by the Old Testament prophets (e.g., Is. 2:1-4; 42:6-7; 49:6; 52:10; Amos 9:11-12). This sign, therefore, means that the church will carry out an ambitious program of outreach to the Jew and to the Gentile.

As the church proclaims the Gospel to all nations, nothing shall prevail against it, not even the gates of hell (Matt. 16:16-19; Rev. 7:3; 11:3-6.) However, we must humbly admit that only God knows when this sign will have been completely fulfilled.

The next group of signs-**wars, earthquakes, famines, pestilences, and signs in the heavens**-indicates divine judgment (Is. 19:2; 2 Chron. 15:6; Matt. 24:6-8; Mark 13:7-8; Luke 21 :9-11,25-26; Joel 2:30-31). This does not mean, of course, that people who suffer from such disasters are necessarily targeted as the special objects of God's wrath (Luke 13:1-5). But disruptions of this kind in nature are reminders of the fact that the present fallen world is under God's curse (Gen. 3:17; Rom. 8:19-22). They are manifestations of God's wrath and signal the need for all sinners to repent (Luke 13:3,5; Rev. 9:20-21; 16:9).

Christians, however, are urged to regard these signs also as "birth pangs" of a new and better world (Rom. 8:22; Matt. 24:8; Rev. 21 :1-4) and to take comfort in the fact that God promises to protect and preserve them in the midst of this suffering (Rev. 3:10; 7:3-4).

The third group of signs indicates opposition to God and His kingdom: **tribulation, apostasy, and Antichrist**. As with the other signs, the sign of tribulation applies to the entire period between Christ's two comings. Just as Old Testament Israel experienced suffering and distress throughout its history, so the church can expect no less. Jesus saw trouble ahead for His people (Matt. 5:10-12; John 15:18-20; 16:33). Because of the continued opposition of the world to the kingdom of God, Christians can expect to suffer persecution in various forms throughout this age and are called to endure in faith until the end (Matt. 24:9; Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:12-19).

However, the Scriptures also teach that **tribulation for the church will intensify toward the end**. The Old Testament predicts heightened persecution against God's people prior to the end (Dan. 12:1; Ezekiel 38-39; Zech. 14:1-2). Jesus speaks of a "great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be" (Matt. 24:21), immediately after which He will return (Matt. 24:29-31; Mark 13:14-27; Luke 21:20-28).

The Revelation to John also describes this final persecution against the church, although in symbolical language (9:13-19; 11:7-10; 16:12-16; 19:19; 20:7-9). This is Satan's "little season," when he gathers the anti-Christian world in an attempt to destroy the church and prevent it from freely preaching the Gospel to all nations (Rev. 20:7-9; Ezekiel 38-39). Satan's final assault is symbolically called the battle of Armageddon, the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew *har megiddo*—"hill of Megiddo," an expression that may allude to the famous battles which took place there in the Old Testament. But in view of the nature of apocalyptic language, these verses should not be interpreted literally as if they referred to a world war in the Middle East. Nor is this great tribulation to be understood as lasting 3-1/2 or 7 years, since the numbers in Daniel and Revelation are also symbolic. When Satan's "little season" has begun or is to begin cannot be computed exactly. Since opposition to the Christian church is widespread in our day, however, **there is every reason to believe that we are already in this period of time**.

The purpose of the sign of tribulation, too, is to exhort Christians to "look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28; Matt. 24:33; Mark 13:29). Tribulation is also God's means of refining the church and "proving" the Christian (1 Pet. 1:6-7; 4:12; Zech. 13:9; Dan. 12:10). This judgment which overtakes the church is the last preliminary to Judgment Day (1 Pet. 4:17), and as such it warns the members of the church that to seek to escape suffering by renouncing the faith is fatally senseless; they will escape present suffering only to find certain doom.

**Another sign of the end which indicates opposition to God is the sign of apostasy or "falling away."** The apostasies of the New Testament era were foreshadowed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament records a history of increasing apostasy which ultimately led to the destruction of both the northern and southern kingdoms. The history of the

Christian church is also marked by a continuing apostasy throughout the period between Christ's two advents (Matt. 24:10-12; Heb. 6:6; 10:29; 2 Pet. 2:20-22; 1 John 2:19; Gal. 6:12-13). However, the New Testament also predicts a final apostasy or rebellion. Jesus speaks of false Christs and false prophets leading many astray (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22). The apostle Paul teaches that the second advent of Christ will not come "unless the rebellion [apostasy] comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed" (2 Thess. 2:3). Since this sign is called a falling away or apostasy and the "man of lawlessness" takes his seat in the visible church (i.e., "the temple of God," v. 4), we may assume that those who fall away will be associated with the Christian church. This final, climactic apostasy, like the sign of tribulation, will be an intensification and culmination of a rebellion which began already in Paul's day (2 Thess. 2:7).

**Finally, opposition to God is marked by the sign of the Antichrist.** The term Antichrist is found in John's epistles (1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7) and signifies both a substitute Christ (Greek anti means "in place of") and an opponent of Christ. The New Testament predicts that the church throughout its history will witness many antichrists (Matt. 24:5,23-24; Mark 13:6,21-22; Luke 21:8; 1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7). All false teachers who teach contrary to Christ's Word are opponents of Christ and, insofar as they do so, are anti-Christ. However, the Scriptures also teach that there is one climactic "Antichrist" (Dan. 7:8,11,20-21,24-25; 11:36--45; 2 Thessalonians 2; 1 John 2:18; 4:3; Revelation 17-18). The Antichrist's satanic counterthrust to God's kingdom can also be expected to intensify towards the end.

The Scriptures reveal the following distinguishing marks of the Antichrist:

1. Just as Antiochus Epiphanes profaned the temple, so the Antichrist takes his seat in the "temple of God," that is, in the Christian church (d. 2 Thess. 2:4; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21; 1 Tim. 3:15).
2. He is not Satan himself but operates "by the activity of Satan" (2 Thess. 2:9).
3. He ascribes to himself truly divine power and exhibits himself as God (Dan. 7:25; 11:36; 2 Thess. 2:4).
4. He is a pseudo-Christ, a satanic perversion of Christ. He has a "coming" to imitate the "coming" of Christ (2 Thess. 2:8-9). He performs "signs and wonders" (2 Thess. 2:9) to imitate the Christ who was "attested ... by God with mighty works and wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22). He represents a "mystery of lawlessness" (2 Thess. 2:7) to imitate the "mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3:4; Col. 4:3) and brings a "wicked deception," "strong delusion," and "what is false" to imitate and oppose the truth of the Gospel (2 Thess. 2:10--12). Thus, he denies Christ and persecutes Christians (1 John 2:22; 4:3; 2 John 7; Dan. 7:25).
5. He remains until Judgment Day when Christ will destroy him (Dan. 7:13-14,26; 2 Thess. 2:8).

## The Second Advent of Christ

The New Testament Scriptures teach that Christ will one day visibly return in glory. They refer to His second advent by using several different terms: "coming" or "presence," "appearance," "revelation," and "the day of the Lord." A study of the texts in which these terms occur reveals that **Christ's second advent is one event at the end of history**. The Scriptures teach the following concerning Christ's second and final coming:

1. **Christ will come visibly and all people will see Him** (Acts 1:11; Matt. 24:27,30; Luke 17:22-24; 21 :27,35; Mark 13:24-26; 14:62; Rev. 1:7).
2. **Christ will come in glory surrounded by the host of His angels** (Matt. 13:39-43,49; 16:27; 24:30-31; 25:31; 2 Thess. 1:7; Rev. 19:11-14; Titus 2:13; Jude 14, 24; 1 Pet. 4:13; Zech. 14:3).
3. **When Christ returns, a bodily resurrection of all the dead will take place. Believers will be raised to salvation and unbelievers to damnation** (John 5:27-29; 6:39-40,44,54; Rev. 20:11-15; 1 Cor. 15:12-57; Dan. 12:1-2). **All believers, both dead and living, will be "caught up" to "meet the Lord in the air"** (1 Thess. 4:13-17). Death will be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26,54-57; Rev. 20:14).
4. **When Christ returns, He will judge all people, both the living and the dead** (Matt. 25:31-46; John 5:27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom. 2:16; 2 Tim. 4:1,8; Jude 14-15; Rev. 20:11-15). **Believers will receive eternal salvation and unbelievers eternal damnation** (Matt. 25:31-46; 1 Pet. 1:4-5,7; 5:4; 1 John 3:2; Heb. 9:28; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Thess. 1:6-10). **Satan and the Antichrist will be destroyed** (2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 20:10).
5. **When Christ returns, "new heavens and a new earth" will be created** (2 Pet. 3:10-13). Nowhere, however, do the Scriptures teach that at His return Christ will establish a this-worldly, political kingdom or "millennium."

The date of Christ's second advent is unknown. Jesus Himself taught, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matt. 24:36; d. Matt. 24:42,44; 25:13; 1 Thessalonians 5; 2 Peter 3). The times or seasons fixed by the authority of the Father are "not for you to know" (Acts 1:7). This much can be said: the fact that God has delayed it now for two millennia is due to His patience and mercy, for "the Lord is not slow about His promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).