

We are living on borrowed time

by Dr. David R. Reagan

Many people believe there is nothing that can be known about the timing of the Lord's return because Jesus said He would return like a "thief in the night" (Matthew 24:42-44).

But Paul makes it clear in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 that Jesus' statement does not apply to believers: "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief..." He then proceeds to explain why: "for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober." Paul is referring, of course, to the light of the Holy Spirit who indwells all true believers and who can enlighten us through our study of Scripture to know the season of the Lord's return (1 John 2:27).

God's Attitude

As a matter of fact, God is obligated by His character to warn the world of the imminent return of His Son. The reason is that Jesus is returning in great wrath to "judge and wage war" (Revelation 19:11), and God never pours out His wrath without warning.

God does not wish that any should perish, but that all should be brought to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). Therefore, God always warns before He executes His wrath. He warned the world through Noah for 120 years. He warned Sodom and Gomorrah through Abraham. He sent Jonah to warn the pagan city of Ninevah, and He sent Nahum to the same city 150 years later.

Likewise, God is warning the world today that His Son is about to return. He is calling the world to repentance. The message of the hour to unbelievers can be summed up in these words: "Flee from the wrath that is to come by fleeing into the loving arms of Jesus now." Jesus came the first time as an expression of God's love; He came to die for the sins of Mankind. But when He returns, He will come

in vengeance to pour out the wrath of God on those who have rejected God's love and grace.

The soon return of Jesus also carries with it a message for believers. Lukewarm Christians and carnal Christians are being called to commit their lives to holiness: "The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Romans 13:12-14).

God's Method of Warning

God is alerting believers of the soon return of His Son through what are called "signs of the times." These are prophecies concerning world events that we are told to watch for, prophecies that will identify the season of the Lord's return.

The Bible is full of these signs. There are about 500 prophecies in the Old Testament that relate to the Second Coming of the Messiah. In the New Testament, one out of every 25 verses is concerned with the return of Jesus.

In fact, there are so many signs that it is difficult to grasp all of them. The best way I have found to do this is to put them in categories:

1. The Signs of Nature

We are told to watch for earthquakes, famine, pestilence, and signs in the heavens (see Matthew 24:7 and Luke 21:11).

This is the least respected category of signs for several reasons. For one thing, many people simply shrug their shoulders and say, "There have always been natural calamities, so what else is new?" Note that Jesus says these signs will be like "birth pangs" (Matthew 24:8) — that is, they will increase in frequency and intensity as the time draws near for His return. In other words, there will be more

intense earthquakes and more frequent ones. That is exactly what is happening today.

Another reason these signs are given little respect is because most Christians are so rationalistic that they do not really believe in the supernatural, and they therefore find it difficult to believe that God speaks to the world through signs of nature. Yet, the Bible teaches this principle from start to finish.

God dealt with the world's sin through a great flood in the days of Noah (Genesis 6). He called the nation of Judah to repentance through a terrible locust invasion (Joel 1). In like manner, He called for the nation of Israel to repent by sending drought, wind storms, mildew, locusts, famine and pestilence (Amos 4:6-10). The prophet Haggai pointed to a drought as evidence that God was calling the people to get their priorities in order (Haggai 1:10-11).

The New Testament begins with a special light in the heavens marking the birth of the Messiah (Matthew 2:2). On the day that Jesus was crucified, there was three hours of darkness and an earthquake (Matthew 27:45-51). And when Jesus returns, the earth will experience the greatest earthquake in its history as every mountain is lowered, every valley is raised, and every island is moved (Revelation 16:17-21).

God has always spoken through signs of nature, and He continues to do so today. We had better pay close attention to them.

2. The Signs of Society

Jesus said that society will become increasingly lawless and immoral as the time approaches for His return. In fact, He said it would become as evil as it was in the days of Noah (Matthew 24:12,37-39).

Paul paints a chilling picture of end time society in 2 Timothy 3:1-5. He says it will be characterized by three loves — the love of self (Humanism), the love of money (Materialism), and the love of pleasure (Hedonism). He then points out that the payoff of this carnal lifestyle will be what the philosophers call Nihilism

— that is, a society wallowing in despair. Men's minds will become depraved (Romans 1:28), and people will call evil good and good evil (Isaiah 5:20).

We are seeing these prophecies fulfilled before our eyes today as we watch our society reject its Christian heritage and descend into a hellish pit of lawlessness, immorality, and despair. Even worse, we are exporting our nihilism around the world through our immoral and violent movies and television programs.

3. The Spiritual Signs

There are both positive and negative spiritual signs that we are to watch for. The negative ones include the appearance of false christs and their cults (Matthew 24:5,11,24), the apostasy of the professing church (2 Thessalonians 2:3), an outbreak of Satanism (1 Timothy 4:1), and the persecution of faithful Christians (Matthew 24:9).

These negative spiritual signs began to appear in the mid-19th Century when Christian cults started forming. First came the Mormons, then the Jehovah's Witnesses, and then a great variety of spiritualist groups like the Church of Christ Scientists and the Unity Church.

The apostasy of the mainline Christian denominations began in the 1920's when the German school of higher criticism invaded American seminaries and undermined the authority of the Scriptures, teaching that the Bible is Man's search for God rather than God's revelation to Man.

During the 1960's Satanism exploded on the American scene and has since been exported worldwide through American movies, books, and television programs. Dabbling in the occult has become commonplace in the form of astrology, numerology, crystal gazing, transcendental meditation, and channeling. The whole trend has consummated in the appearance of the New Age Movement with its teaching that Man is God.

As society has secularized, true Christianity has come under increasing attack. Judeo-Christian values, once the foundation of Western Civilization, are now

openly mocked, and those who still adhere to them are castigated as "intolerant fundamentalists" by the media.

The positive spiritual signs include the proclamation of the Gospel to the whole world (Matthew 24:14), a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-32), and spiritual illumination to understand prophecies that have been "sealed up" until the end times (Daniel 12:4,9).

As with the negative signs, we are seeing these positive signs fulfilled in our day and time. Through the use of modern technology, the Gospel has been proclaimed throughout the world in this Century, and the Bible has been translated into all major languages.

The great end time pouring out of the Holy Spirit that was prophesied by the prophet Joel has also begun. Joel called it "the latter rain" (Joel 2:23), and he said it would occur after the Jews had returned to their land. The state of Israel was re-established in 1948. In 1949 God anointed two ministries that would have a worldwide impact — the ministries of Billy Graham and Oral Roberts. Then, in the 60's, came the Charismatic Movement which prompted renewal in worship and gave emphasis to the continuing validity of the gifts of the Spirit.

The acceleration in the understanding of Bible prophecy began in 1970 with the publication of Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. It seemed to open up to popular understanding many prophecies that had been "sealed up" until the end times (Daniel 12:4, 9). Remarkably, it became the number one best seller in the world — with the sole exception of the Bible — for the next ten years!

4. The Signs of Technology

The book of Daniel says that there will be an explosion of knowledge in the end times and that people will move about quickly (Daniel 12:4). There are many Bible prophecies that cannot be understood apart from modern technology. For example, how can the whole world look upon two bodies lying in the streets of Jerusalem (Revelation 11:8-9)? Modern television satellite technology makes it easy. How can the False Prophet build an image of the Anti-Christ that appears

to be alive (Revelation 13:15)? The answer, of course, is the science of robotics. How can the False Prophet require all people on earth to take the mark of the Anti-Christ in order to buy and sell (Revelation 13:16-17)? It would not be possible apart from computers and lasers.

Jesus said that the Tribulation will be so terrible that all life on earth would cease to exist if He did not cut the period short (Matthew 24:21-22). How could all life be threatened prior to the advent of nuclear weapons? Another reference to nuclear power is likely contained in Luke's statement that men in the end times will "faint from fear" because "the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Luke 21:26). That certainly sounds like a reference to the splitting of the atom.

5. The Signs of World Politics

The Bible prophesies that there will be a certain pattern of world politics that will characterize the end time geopolitical map.

The focus will be the re-established state of Israel (Zechariah 12:2-3). It will be besieged by a menacing nation from the "remote parts of the north," the nation of "Rosh" — or modern day Russia (Ezekiel 38:2,6). There will also be a threatening nation to the East that will be capable of sending an army of 200 million — namely, China (Revelation 9:13-16 and Revelation 16:12-13). A third source of danger to Israel will be the Arab nations that immediately surround it. They will covet the land and will try to take it from the Jews (Ezekiel 35:10 and 36:2).

Another key player on the world political scene in the end times will be a coalition of European nations that will form a confederation centered in the area of the old Roman empire (Daniel 2:41-44, Daniel 7:7,23-24, and Revelation 17:12-13). This confederation will serve as the political base for the rise of the Anti-Christ and the creation of his worldwide kingdom (Daniel 7:8).

Other international political signs include wars and rumors of wars (Matthew 24:6), civil wars (Matthew 24:7), and general international terrorism and lawlessness (Matthew 24:12).

6. The Signs of Israel

The signs related to the state of Israel are prolific and very important.

The most frequently repeated prophecy in the Old Testament is the prediction that the Jewish people will be regathered from the "four corners of the earth" in the end times (Isaiah 11:10-12). The Bible states that a consequence of this regathering will be the re-establishment of the state of Israel (Isaiah 66:7-8). The Scriptures say that once the Jews are back in their land, the land itself will experience a miracle of reclamation (Isaiah 35). The desert will bloom and people will exclaim, "This desolate land has become like the garden of Eden" (Ezekiel 36:35).

Another end time miracle will be the revival of the Hebrew language (Zephaniah 3:9). Most people are not aware of the fact that when the Jews were dispersed from their land in 70 A.D., they ceased to speak the Hebrew language. The Jews who settled in Europe developed a new language called Yiddish — a combination of German and Hebrew. The Jews who migrated to the Mediterranean basin created a language called Ladino — a combination of Hebrew and Spanish.

Other significant signs of Israel that we are told to watch for in the end times include the re-occupation of Jerusalem (Luke 21:24), the resurgence of Israeli military strength (Zechariah 12:6), and the re-focusing of world politics on Israel (Zechariah 12:3).

All these signs have been fulfilled in this century. The nation has been re-established, the land has been reclaimed, the ancient language has been revived, the Jews are back in Jerusalem, and Israel is the focal point of world politics.

Jesus says in Luke 21:28 that when these signs begin to happen, we should "straighten up and lift up our heads" because "our redemption is drawing near."

The Key Signs

The most important signs are the ones that relate to Israel because God uses the Jews throughout the Scriptures as His prophetic time clock. By this I mean that very often when the Lord is revealing an important event that will take place in the future, He will point to the Jewish people and state that when a certain thing happens to them, the important event will also occur.

A good example of this principle can be found in Daniel 9 in the famous "Seventy Weeks of Years" prophecy. The prophet tells us to watch for a decree to be issued that will authorize the rebuilding of Jerusalem. He then says that the Messiah will come sixty-nine weeks of years (483 years) after that decree is issued to the Jewish people.

There are two key prophecies which relate the return of Jesus to events that have occurred in Jewish history since 1948. These two events clearly established the period in which we are now living as the season of the Lord's return.

The State of Israel

The first is the re-establishment of the state of Israel which occurred on May 14, 1948. Jesus singled out this event as the one that would signal His soon return.

His prophecy is contained in the fig tree parable (Matthew 24:32-35) which He presented in His Olivet Discourse. The day before He delivered this speech, He had put a curse on a barren fig tree, causing it to wither (Matthew 21:28-29). This was a symbolic prophecy that God would soon pour out His wrath upon the Jewish people because of their spiritual barrenness in rejecting His Son.

The next day Jesus reminded His disciples of the fig tree. He said to watch for it to bloom again. In other words, He said watch for the rebirth of Israel. He indicated that when the fig tree blooms again, He would be at the gates of Heaven, ready to return (Matthew 24:33).

Equally significant, He added an interesting observation: "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34). What generation? The generation that sees the fig tree blossom.

We are that generation. The fig tree has blossomed. Jesus is at the gates.

The City of Jerusalem

The second key event was prophesied by Jesus in the same speech, as recorded by Luke: "[The Jews] will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21:24).

The first half of this prophecy was fulfilled in 70 A.D., forty years after Jesus spoke the words. In that year the Romans under Titus conquered Jerusalem and dispersed the Jews among the nations. Jerusalem remained under Gentile occupation for 1,897 years — until June 7, 1967, when Israel won the city back during the Six Day War.

The Jewish re-occupation of the city of Jerusalem is proof positive that we are living in the season of the Lord's return. Jesus said it would mark the end of the Gentile Age.

A Call to Action

There is no way to escape the conclusion that we are living on borrowed time. The signs of the times are upon us, and they are shouting for our attention.

Are you ready? If Jesus were to return today, would He be your "Blessed Hope" (Titus 2:11-14) or would He be your "Holy Terror" (Revelation 6:12-17)? If you have never received Him as your Lord and Savior, now is the time to act. Repent of your sins, and call upon the name of the Lord that you might be saved (Acts 2:14-39).

And if you are a Christian, are you living as if Jesus might return any minute? Have you committed your life to holiness? Are you praying for the lost and witnessing the Lord when you have an opportunity?

Are you yearning for the Lord's return? Can you say with Paul that you are a candidate for a "crown of righteousness" because you have lived your life "in the love of His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8)?