

Matthew 24:1-14 “Signs of the Near Coming of Christ”

Intro. In the 16th chapter of Matthew, we read that the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus seeking a sign from heaven to prove that He was the Messiah. Jesus rebuked them for their inability or unwillingness to discern the signs of the times. After all, Jesus had fulfilled many of the Old Testament predictions regarding the coming Messiah. But many of Israel’s leaders refused to consider the significance of those fulfilled predictions. Many in Israel did not recognize the signs of the times.

What about you? Do you know how to recognize the signs of the times? We are living in a day when the signs are not pointing to the first coming of Jesus but to the second coming of Jesus. Do you know what signs point to the Second Coming of Jesus? Well, I want you to know what signs or events are clearly saying, “Jesus is coming, Jesus is coming.” Jesus Himself tells us in our text what events will lead up to His return as Judge and King. In fact, He said in v.25, “See, I have told you beforehand.” And Paul said in 1 Thess. 5:4, “But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.” The return of Christ will be like a thief in the night to *unbelievers*, but believers who know the signs of the times will not be surprised by the return of Christ. Why? It is because we should know the signs of the times.

It is not my purpose to persuade you to believe that Jesus is coming immediately or very soon. I am certainly not going to set dates. Instead, I just want you to know the signs of the Second Coming and understand what they mean. And these signs give us hope that the return of Christ may not tarry much longer. Seeing these signs will help us persevere through the difficult days in which we are living. It’s like a distance runner who is wore out, but he sees a sign that indicates that the race is almost finished. That gives him the drive he needs to push forward, and not give up.

Now first of all, I want you to understand the background leading up to this passage. Jesus has been teaching at the temple in Jerusalem. And at some point¹ the disciples pointed out to Jesus the magnificence of the temple. It was made of white marble and gold, and at this time it was very large and very beautiful. It was one of the wonders of the ancient world. But Christ again affirmed in v.2 that it would be destroyed. That was just about unthinkable to the Jews. They could not imagine that God or the Jewish people would allow it to happen.

Soon after that, Jesus and His disciples went out to the Mount of Olives on the eastern side of Jerusalem. They could easily see the Temple from there. And so the disciples asked Jesus in v.3, “Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” In their mind, the destruction of the temple and the return of Christ would take place about the same time. Like the disciples, we are all interested in the future. Well here in this text Jesus predicted the future, and much of what He said has already been fulfilled. His prediction about the destruction of the temple in v.2 certainly came to pass. And much of what else He said in this text has been fulfilled. So I have absolute confidence that the other prophecies will be fulfilled, including the Second Coming of Jesus. But we see here that He will not return without warning. There are many signs that will indicate that His return is drawing near. So let’s learn about these

¹ Some believe that they actually pointed to the temple from the Mount of Olives. Note in v.1 that they had “departed from the temple.”

signs. I believe that will affect how you read and listen to the news. Let us not be in darkness about the signs of the times, but let us be filled with hope as we see these signs fulfilled before our eyes. Understanding future prophecy should affect how we live for Christ today.

Now first of all, Jesus tells us about:

I. THE EARLY SIGNS

I believe the following signs in vv. 5-8 preceded the destruction of the temple way back in 70 A.D. Yet one feature of prophecy is the reality of dual fulfillments (Jer. 31:15 → Mt. 2:17, 18; Isaiah 7:14 → Mt. 1:23), or “prophetic foreshortening,” where a near event serves as a symbol or prophetic type of an event far into the future. So I believe these early signs will also precede the final period of conflict before the Second Coming. But the mere fact that these things happen is no indication that the return of Christ is imminent. These are just early signs. They remind us that we are getting closer to His return. First of all, Jesus predicted the rise of:

A. False Messiahs – Jesus said in v. 5, “For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many.” I believe that was true not many years after Jesus ascended to heaven. They were quite a few in Israel who claimed to be the Messiah.²

In our own day someone has calculated that over 1,100 have arisen since around 1930 who claim to be a Messiah or Savior to the world.³ According to the June 23, 2004 edition of the *Washington Post*, more than a dozen lawmakers attended a congressional reception honoring the Rev. Sun Myung Moon in which he declared himself the Messiah. And Rep. Danny K. Davis (D-Ill.) wore white gloves and carried a pillow holding an ornate crown that was placed on Moon’s head.⁴ Well, Moon died in 2012 and he didn’t rise from the dead!

Back in August 2006⁵ they did an interview on the NBC Today show with a man named Jose Luis de Jesus Miranda, the pastor of a group called Growing in Grace. He actually claimed that he was Jesus Christ returned to earth. Well, he died in 2013, and he also didn’t rise from the dead either!

Jesus gives an important application in v.4, “Take heed that no one deceives you.” And in v.5 He warns that false Christs will “deceive many.” So we need discernment, especially in these last days! (Mt. 7:15-16; 1 Th. 5:21; 1 Jn. 4:1; Rev. 2:2). And the better you know the Word of God, and the better you know the signs of the times, the less likely it is that you will be deceived by the false messiahs and false prophets. The cults and false prophets prey on people who do not know their Bibles. And let me give you some advice. Don’t just listen to what they say, but also notice what they *don’t* talk about. Do they leave out sin, and the necessity of the cross of Jesus?

B. War – Jesus said in v.6, “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars....” Then in v.7 He said, “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom....” At that time, the Roman peace was widespread. They imposed peace through strength. But Christ said war would come; and it did. About 10 years before the destruction of Jerusalem, there was a significant increase in “wars and rumors of wars.” And wars have continued to this very day. Yet, at the

² The second century Jewish rebel Simon Bar Kokhba (meaning “son of a star”) was so named by Rabbi Akiba, proclaiming him the Messiah on the basis of the star from Jacob in Numbers 24:17 (Wilkins, p.773).

³ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: #1512* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979).

⁴ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A61932-2004Jun22.html>

⁵ 08/25/06, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=037HvQ1TyGM> (link not working because account terminated).

beginning of the last century, there was talk of bringing about world peace. WWI was supposed to be “the war to end all wars.” At least 10,000,000 died with that hope in mind. But it didn’t end war! War continued and intensified with WWII. Then we established the United Nations. That was supposed to help end war and establish peace. In fact, there is a statue at the United Nations with an inscription from the Bible, “Let Us Beat Our Swords into Ploughshares.”⁶ Yet the United Nations has been a failure. Since the establishment of the U.N., wars have continued in the Far East, Middle East, Africa, South and Central America, and we have been involved in a world-wide War on Terror for almost 20 years. Today Iran and North Korea are seeking to acquire nuclear weapons, and their leaders are crazy enough to use them! We could see nuclear war in our lifetime.

Revelation 6 speaks of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, and to the second horsemen it was said, “it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another; and there was given to him a great sword.” The word translated “sword” does not refer to the battle sword of military conflict, but the large knife, which was used for hand-to-hand conflict.

Today, there is talk of peace, but don’t be deceived by such talk. 1 Thess. 5:3 says, “For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.” The fact is lasting peace will not come until Jesus Christ returns, who is the Prince of Peace. This does not mean that we should not work for peace. Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers....” But it does mean that any peace we achieve will only be temporary.

I should have you notice that the last of v.6 indicates that war, alone, is not a sign of the near coming of Christ. But I do believe that war may intensify a few years before the Second Coming, and I do believe that the bitterness of war could lead the world to look for a solution, which will open the door to the devil’s antichrist, who will offer a solution. According to the prophet Daniel (9:24ff), he will offer a Middle East peace plan to a world that is desperate for peace.

C. Famines (v.7b) – Jesus predicts that there will be mass starvation. These two signs go together, for famine often follows war (cf. Rev. 6:4, 6). War disrupts farming. After WWI, 27,000,000 people died of hunger. The wars in Africa have led to millions of deaths through starvation. In fact, approximately 14 million children under the age of 5 die of malnutrition each year due to war. Among many children of the world, hunger is the main cause of death.

War is not the only cause of famine. So when Jesus predicts famine, He is by implication predicting the other causes of famine. Weather related catastrophes, such as drought, excessive rains or floods, or hurricanes hurt food production, so don’t be surprised if you see crazy weather in the last days (cf. Luke 21:25b). Then insects and rodents cut into our food supply. In India, because of their religion, rats outnumber people 5 to 1. They say a rat may be your grandfather reincarnated. So the rats are left alone and eat up much of the available food. Plant diseases hurt food production as well. The problem of the world’s starving millions is aggravated by the fact that the densest populations are to be found in the world’s poorest countries. Finally, the UN has warned of famines of “biblical proportions” as a result of Covid-19 and the [lockdown] measures to contain it, projecting the number of people in crisis level hunger will rise to 270 million before the end of the year, an 82% increase since 2019.⁷

⁶ <http://www.pubtheo.com/page.asp?pid=1067>

⁷ <https://www.oxfam.org/en/world-brink-hunger-pandemic-coronavirus-threatens-push-millions-starvation#>.

But notice that Jesus predicted that famine would occur “in various places.” Famine has never been worldwide or even continent-wide. Some experts believe that widespread famine is now a possibility. There are those who consider it legitimate to wonder whether the sign of famine is reaching its climax and pointing to the soon coming of Christ.

I want to thank each of you who contributed to our World Hunger offering. You can actually give to that offering any time.

D. Pestilence (Lk. 21:11) - Though our best and oldest Greek manuscripts do not contain this sign in Matthew and Mark, it *is* found in Luke’s account.⁸ Jesus predicted that disease would stalk the face of the earth, especially in the last days. The stress of war and famine certainly heightens the destruction of disease by lowering resistance to disease. About 35 years after Jesus spoke these words, 30,000 people died of disease in a single autumn in Rome. Plagues were epidemic in Europe during the Middle Ages. The Black Death of 1347-1348 claimed a quarter of Europe’s population.

But perhaps some in the medical community would have thought that this could not be a sign of the end. Some imagined that they could eradicate disease by the year 2,000. Certainly, great advances have been made, especially in some types of diseases like polio. However, I am sure that Jesus will be proven right. It seems that just when we get the upper hand of one disease, a new disease crops up with even greater fierceness, such as AIDS, which has claimed the lives of some 33 million. Then the Ebola virus came along, which dissolves its victims’ internal organs, and is highly infectious. All these pestilences are but the harbinger of terrible plagues to come. Sure enough, the worst one in our lifetime is now upon us, or they sure make it seem that way. 65 million have been infected by the coronavirus with 1.5 million deaths from COVID-19 so far. I’m afraid that some of the things we are doing, especially with young people, could weaken our immune systems and make the next one even deadlier! So though we should continue to fight disease, we realize that the only ultimate hope of victory over disease and death is the Lord Jesus Christ.

E. Earthquakes – Just like war, famine, and pestilence, there have always been earthquakes from the time of recorded history. There has never been any letup in earthquakes. However, there may be evidence that they have generally increased in frequency. Between 2004 and 2014, 18 earthquakes with magnitudes of 8.0 or more rattled the globe. That’s an increase of 265 percent over the average rate of the previous century, which saw 71 great quakes, according to a report to the annual meeting of the Geological Society of America in Vancouver. Wikipedia lists all the earthquakes with magnitudes of 7 or greater, or that caused deaths. From 2011-2015 there was an average of 31/year. From 2016-2019 there was an average of 41. One major geological fault runs through the Middle East. Many of America’s great cities are built on high-risk fault lines. At any time we could have earthquakes with death tolls that far surpass anything we have ever experienced before. I will not be surprised if some massive, deadly earthquakes precede the return of Christ.

Again, earthquakes alone are not a sure sign of the Second Coming. But it is noteworthy that no less than 5 earthquakes are mentioned in the Book of Revelation (6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; 16:18).

Jesus says something very significant in v. 8, “All these are the beginning of sorrows.” The word translated “sorrows” is literally “birth pangs,” an analogy found in Old Testament prophecy

⁸ War, famine, & pestilence are often mentioned together in the Old Testament (1 Kings 8:37; 2 Chr. 6:28; 20:9; Jer. 14:12; 21:7, 9; 24:10; 27:8, 13; 29:17-18; 32:24; 34:17; 38:2; 42:17, 22; 44:13; Ez. 5:12, 17; etc.)

(Isa. 13:6-11; 26:17-19; 66:7-11; Jer. 22:23; Micah 4:9-10; cf. 1 Thess. 5:5). When a woman is about to give birth, God gives some warning signs. Contractions will increase in frequency and severity. God designed it that way. That gives the nervous father time to get his wife to the hospital! Even so, I believe that we can expect these early signs to increase in frequency and severity in the years leading up to the return of Christ. And I believe that *all* of these signs will take place at the same time on a widespread scale.

F. Our Attitude Toward These Signs – Jesus said in v.6, “...See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.” Don’t be frightened or alarmed like Chicken Little. God says many times in His Word, “Fear not.” Why? Because He is in control, even when the world seems out of control.

Furthermore, we are not to jump to conclusions about the return of Christ based on these signs alone. Again, Jesus said in v.8, “All these are the beginning of sorrows.” These are just early signs of the return of Christ, not imminent signs. I’m sure after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. many Christians thought that surely Jesus would return soon. Yet He did not. Jesus warned against jumping to conclusions regarding the timing of His return.

Next, Jesus speaks of:

II. TRIBULATION SIGNS

After stating that the signs in vv. 5-8 are only “the beginning of sorrows,” Christ says in v.9, “Then....” Thus, our text begins a new section. He moves from predicting the suffering of the world to the suffering of His people. He calls it a time of “tribulation,” a word that literally refers to a time of great pressure and stress or distress. In fact, the tribulation will intensify to the point of Great Tribulation right before the Second Coming of Christ. And so what I am about to share with you are more significant signs of the return of Christ. The first is:

A. Widespread Persecution – Jesus said in v. 9, “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake.” Remember, Jesus was answering a 2-fold question: when would the temple be destroyed, and when would He return. Well, the first major persecution on a widespread scale took place about 10 years before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem during the reign of Emperor Nero. And the Bible is clear, especially in Daniel and Revelation, that there will also be widespread persecution of believers right before the Second Coming of Christ.

Some commentators believe that Christ is speaking to the disciples as representatives of Israel, rather than as representatives of the Church. It is certainly true the Jews will be hated by many in the end times. The Nazis exterminated six million Jews under conditions of unbelievable barbarity. Right now both Jews and Christians are the objects of persecution by Islamic terrorists.

This sign is already coming to pass. 215 million Christians today live with serious persecution for their faith —threatened with prison, violence, and even death.⁹ 10,000 Christians were slaughtered in Indonesia in the early years of this century. In 2004 a Baptist lay pastor was beheaded in Bangladesh by Muslim extremists. In May of 2005 46 people were arrested by Saudi Arabian police just for being Christians. Christians in India are attacked both by Muslims and Hindus. Recently, ISIS has decimated the number of Christians in Syria and Iraq. China has been persecuting Christians to a greater degree than last few years.

⁹ World Watch in <https://www.newsbusters.org/blogs/culture/katie-yoder/2018/01/10/215>.

We need to pray for Christians who are being persecuted for their faith, especially in other parts of the world. And folks, I am seeing evidence that persecution of believers will increase in this country. Because we speak out against abortion, sexual immorality and sexual perversion, we are called haters. Yet the true haters, according to Jesus, will be those who persecute Christians.

B. Apostasy – Jesus asked in Luke 18:8, “...when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” The Apostle Paul also gave apostasy as a sign of the end times. He said in 1 Tim. 4:1, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith.” Doctrinal error will be the foundational problem of this defection. And according to prophecy, it will get worse and worse. The apostasy at the end will be so horrendous and widespread (“many”) as to require the definite article, “the” apostasy in 2 Thess. 2:3. The central committee moderator of the World Council of Churches declared in February 2006 that “The church is called to discern ... the presence of the Holy Spirit in other religions.”

In v. 10 Jesus warns of the mass apostasy that will follow persecution, “And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another.” When it becomes costly to be a professing Christian, many will become “offended.” They will back away from their profession, and even deny Christ. And Jesus says that such people “will betray one another, and will hate one another.” In March 2006 an Afghan man was turned in by his own family because he had converted to Christianity from Islam.¹⁰ When the antichrist starts hunting down the tribulation saints, he and his police will look for informants. And either willingly or under pressure, they will reveal the names of Christians that they know, even their own family members.

Then in v.11 Jesus warns, “Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many.” There were false prophets in the Old Testament and New Testament periods. There will also be false prophets in the last days. One thing they have in common is that they tell people what they want to hear. They make God their servant, and they do not preach against sin, but even say that God approves of their sinful lifestyles. They do not preach the cross of Christ is an atonement for sin. They usually either deny hell, or just don’t ever mention it.

This verse should not be limited to false-teachers within the traditional church. It includes false prophets who start and perpetuate false religions and cults. Many of the cult leaders claim to be Christian. Joseph Smith established Mormonism back in the 1830’s. The abandonment by the West of our Judeo-Christian heritage has opened the door for an explosion of cults. In fact, there are hundreds of cults and religions in America today. Back in 1978 cult leader Jim Jones led 914 of his followers to commit mass suicide. Most remember Cult Leader David Koresh, who along with many of his followers fought against Federal agents and killed some. Koresh refused to give in to the federal government, and 74 men, women and children died in a fiery blaze in the Waco siege. Many of these so-called prophets will even be able to do miracles, especially in the last days. Look at v.24, “For false Christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.”

Now there is a relationship between vv.11 & 10. When men fall away from Christian belief, this is where many of them end up. They do not all lapse into paganism or atheism. They are more likely to get involved in one of the heretical sects. 1 Tim. 4:1, 2 says, “... in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons....”

¹⁰ Though he faced the death penalty, he bravely confessed his Christian faith before the court. Fortunately, he was given passage to Italy due to international pressure.

C. Lawlessness Will Abound (v.12a) - Paul said in 2 Thess. 2:7, “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work...” We are indeed living in the days of lawlessness. In a 2006 poll 81 percent of adults said the nation’s “state of moral values” is getting worse. In fact, a majority of American adults now say that gambling, sex outside of marriage, gay/lesbian relations and Doctor-assisted suicide are now considered morally acceptable to most Americans. And the primary thing that is driving the spirit of lawlessness is the tearing down of the concept of absolute truth. We are living in the age of relativism, and unrestrained freedom. They say that everyone has to establish their own truth. As a result, the standards of morality are left up to the individual. American judges have abandoned the concept of absolute standards of truth, and they are finding it increasingly difficult to uphold laws that have their root in our Judeo-Christian tradition. We are becoming a society as in the days of the judges in Israel, when every man did what was right in his own eyes. The result is lawlessness and anarchy. We are seeing it unfold right before our eyes this past summer with people justifying their looting. Defunding the police and legalizing marijuana and even harder drugs is all part of this spirit of lawlessness.

D. Love Will Grow Cold (v.12b) - There is a correlation between self-centered lawlessness and the decline of love. Self-centered sin cools your love for God and others by turning your focus on yourself. You cannot truly love if you think only of yourself. So instead of love for your neighbor, we are seeing more and more hatred. This is true even in churches. There is less love and more conflict, and even hatred. Paul said in 2 Tim. 2:2-3, “For men will be lovers of themselves... unloving...” And when there is less love and more hatred, you will surely see an increase in violence. This sign also explains why there will be an increase in persecution in the end times.

The tribulation of the end times will be very difficult for the tribulation saints. But Jesus says in v.13, “But he who endures to the end shall be saved.” This has nothing to do with soul salvation, unless Jesus intends to say that steadfastness is the key sign of true salvation. This could simply mean that those believers who are faithful and persevere to the end will be saved from further persecution or death when the Lord comes at the end and delivers them. Regardless, if we face days of distress and apostasy, may we trust in the Lord to enable us to remain steadfast and faithful to the Lord.

III. ONE SIGN IMMEDIATELY PRECEDING HIS COMING

Jesus gave some signs in vv. 5-6, and then He said, “the end is not yet.” But now He tells us one of the signs that does indicate that we are very close to the end. Jesus says in v.14, “And this gospel of the kingdom¹¹ will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” Despite the setbacks, the world mission of the Church is in fact being implemented, and in many areas is gaining ground. In Africa south of the Sahara the expansion is probably greater than many areas. Over 96% of the people of the world now have the Bible, or some portion of it, in their own tongue. And Jesus implies that the task of evangelism will be pursued until the end of the tribulation. This is confirmed by the Great Commission, for Jesus promised to be with His people to the end of the age. So no matter how great the opposition, the gospel of Jesus Christ will continue to make progress until Jesus comes again.

¹¹ This “gospel of the kingdom” is unique in Matthew and is essentially the gospel of Jesus Christ, not something totally different just for the end of the age. See how the same phrase is used in Mt. 4:23; 9:35. It combines the good news of salvation with the arrival of the kingdom of God, first in our hearts, and then to the whole world.

However, I must warn you that based on 2 Thess. 2:10-12, that those who have rejected the gospel by the start of the tribulation will be confirmed in unbelief and will not repent, even though there will be many obvious fulfillments of prophecy. It's possible that the only ones who will be saved after the tribulation begins are those who haven't had an opportunity to hear. If you are going to be saved, the time is now. Don't wait.

So here we have a great motive to fulfill the Great Commission to get the gospel to the ends of the earth. The evangelization of the world is the only hope of mankind! Jesus will not return to judge evil and give peace on earth until the task is finished. This is one reason to give to our Lottie Moon Christmas offering, which supports our Southern Baptist missionaries, who are spreading the Gospel in many countries. If we want Jesus to return, we must finish the task! May God help us to give, to pray, and to go. I wonder if anyone would surrender to become a missionary to a people group who has yet to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Conclusion: I want to close with vv. 32-33, "Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near—at the doors!" I believe that the signs of the times are increasingly pointing to the return of Christ.

Now we know that Jesus accurately predicted the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. We have seen many of His other predictions come to pass even in our day. If He has been so right in His predictions so far, don't you think we can have confidence that He is in fact coming again? Are you ready for His return? If He returned today, would you join the saved in rising up to meet Him in the air, or would you be left behind among the lost? Are you ready for His coming? You are not ready unless you have repented of your sins and placed your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2020; J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); A. Skevington Wood, *Signs of the Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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