

THE LAST DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN*

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It seems to come around like clockwork in the evangelical world – last days madness.* If the enemy of our souls cannot keep us from embracing a truth, then he appears to delight in pushing us far beyond the truth into extremes of error. This repeatedly happens with Christ’s promise to return someday. Now, here we go again – another preacher has set a date for the Lord’s return.

For two millennia, God’s People have been faithfully awaiting Christ’s return. This glorious event is, of course, nearer now than ever before. Many times through the centuries some well-meaning souls, and some ungodly deceivers, have twisted the scriptures to try and predict Christ’s Second Coming. Many historical figures through the ages have been confidently designated as “the” antichrist. European kings, barbarian leaders, Reformers like Luther, Roman Catholic popes, Napoleon, the Kaiser, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, etc., etc., ad infinitum, have successively been identified – with great passion and absolute certainty – as “the” antichrist.

Earthquakes, comets, wars, droughts, natural disasters, and all manner of plagues have been hailed as the final events definitely preceding the immediate apocalypse. In almost every generation a relatively few well meaning but misinformed Christians have worried themselves and everyone around them to death with end-times speculation. Good, godly leaders have repeatedly told God’s people the truth that all of the “natural” signs spoken of by Christ and his apostles were fulfilled long ago, and need not be repeated. Good pastors and teachers have repeatedly taught God’s People to live as if Christ or death could come at any moment, but plan and work as if they must hand this Church to another generation someday. That’s good teaching that some excitable souls have always chosen to ignore. Instead, they throw good money after bad at the false teachers and their products. Make no mistake – there’s a lot more money in preaching end-times craziness than there is in teaching holy living or Romans verse-by-verse. Once the prophecy date-setters have your money, they never give it back.*

Jesus himself specifically warned his disciples against just this kind of speculative thinking, living, and preaching. All the signs that the prophets, Christ, and the apostles gave us to identify the last days were fulfilled, often repeatedly, long ago. Indeed, Scripture explicitly and repeatedly teaches that the last days began with the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah, and were definitively marked by the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost. We’ve been living in the last days since that time. Christ warned us that there would be no sign to indicate that his immediate appearing was at hand. (Acts 2:14-41, 1 Tim 4:1, 2 Tim 3:1, Heb 1:2, 1 Pet 1:20, 1 Jn 2:18, etc.) He warned us not to become embroiled in speculation and prediction. His coming for us will be sudden and unexpected, with no time to prepare, avoid, or flee.

People who become obsessed with end-times speculation and eventually predict a specific time for Christ’s coming usually have a few things in common. They are usually independent, “lone rangers” in their walk and ministry. They have almost always rejected true submission and accountability to a larger network of ministers or a solid church denomination. They are also almost always very dismissive or condescending toward the greater Church of Jesus Christ, or what we would call orthodox, evangelical, and historic churches. Such obsessed teachers believe God has revealed special secrets or eschatological signs and calculations to them and their particular sect of believers. They often find exotic “codes” or never before seen new “meanings” in Scripture that every Christian reader, student, and

scholar for 2,000 years has been too dense or ungodly to discern. They always believe – whether those in the decade leading up to 1,000 A.D., or those during the Napoleonic Wars, or in our own lifetimes – that “they” are the final true recipients of much of Scripture, that God gave it with their particular “terminal” generation in mind.

In all of this they are usually elitists, thinking they have special super-spiritual insights, visions, or prophetic words from God that no one else has ever received or is now receiving. This is a sign of pride, even arrogance. They are often conspiracy theorists, seeing dark demonic forces and cabals behind every technological advance, economic announcement, and political realignment. For many of them, Beelzebub’s in the bar codes and the devil’s in digitization.

Finally, though some are well educated in fields unrelated to interpreting Scripture – engineering, law, computers – they are often not properly trained by good scholars in correctly handling the Word of Truth. Their hermeneutics – the principles they use to interpret God’s Word – are self-taught, or sectarian innovations, or learned from an unlearned “teacher.” Their doctrine is doomed before it is formulated, because they don’t know how to read and understand the Bible well. In addition, they are unteachable – they reject the wisdom of true teachers of the Church, the wisdom God’s leaders have acquired through the ages. They are “unauthorized” workers, leading God’s people astray, holding the Church and the gospel up for ridicule before an unbelieving world.

A fundamental principle of understanding God’s Word is that the clear must interpret the unclear. A book of the Bible is interpreted on its own merit, but also as it fits in the whole of Scripture – the canon. A passage is interpreted in its immediate context – sentence, paragraph, theme – and in the context of the book (such as Colossians). It is interpreted through its historical setting in time and culture. And most importantly, it is understood according to the form of literature it is – narrative, history, law, prophecy, poetry, gospel, apocalyptic, and so forth. You do NOT read all passages or books of Scripture alike, for they are not written alike, and God never intended for us to read them identically. The Spirit inspired some men to write declarative sentences of teaching, some to write poetry, others to write in highly metaphorical or symbolic language. God expects us to respect his inspiration of that literary form as much as we respect the inspiration of the words in that form.

In all of this, a fundamental principle of reading and understanding Scripture is that “the clear always interprets the unclear.” If a passage is symbolic, or uses unusual words, concepts, and grammar that are ambiguous or hard to understand, it may well be “unclear.” We must try to find other passages that address this issue or topic, passages which are much clearer and easier to understand. The clear passages are used to interpret the unclear, never the other way around. Explicit and declarative mean that it is clearly declared, not implied, not inferred. All of the factors above must still be considered, but the meaning is still easier to get at. Most erroneous teaching is a result of violating these principles of interpretation.

Concerning his return to earth someday, Jesus made some explicit, declarative, clear statements. He made them repeatedly. The synoptic gospels, particularly Matthew, record Christ’s repeated warnings against trying to identify either the general or specific time of his return. As Christ and his apostles were leaving the temple in Jerusalem in Matthew 24, his disciples asked him two questions, including “what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” In verse 36 Jesus begins to answer that second question by saying “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in

heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” He then compared his coming with Noah’s flood, saying in verse 39, “ ... and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.” *Christ then repeatedly and explicitly declares that there will be no notice, no signal, no sign given that his return is imminent.*

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” (24:42) “So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” (24:43) In the second coming parables that follow in chapter 25, four of the main emphases are related: there will be a delay between Christ’s departure and his return, his return will be sudden, his return will be unexpected, and we must therefore be ready at all times, for no one will know either the general or specific time of his return. (24:50, 25:5,13,19) These themes are repeated elsewhere in the New Testament.

Every other passage on the return of Christ must be interpreted by these words of Jesus. Whether in the prophets, gospels, epistles, or Revelation, the clear must interpret the unclear. That means there will be no warning before Christ returns. The false teachers who through their wild, obsessive end-times speculations continually manipulate, distract, frighten, and fleece God’s holy People are going to receive a severe judgment when they stand before the Great Shepherd of the sheep.

Every day I look for the Lord’s return. Every day I pray “Maranatha! Even so, come Lord Jesus!” Every day and every night when things look “normal” on this beautiful planet, I think, “This could be it! Nothing unusual is happening! Christ could come today!” News of disasters, wars, earthquakes, plagues and the like, simply mean that we still live in a world that, for all its glory and beauty, is fallen, broken, and frequently devastated by tragedy. All of these things are a part of the present “normal” of planet Earth. We know – know, not speculate – from history and science that all of these things wax and wane in frequency over time for many different reasons, and that our lifetimes have seen none of these things increase far beyond what humanity has experienced proportionately in past ages. And, besides, these natural signs have been fulfilled since apostolic times and need no further fulfillment.

But, to borrow a recent iconic phrase from popular culture, “all of this has happened before, and all of this shall happen again.”* 2012 is just around the corner, and we all know what the Mayans warned us would happen! Never mind that the best archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians all agree that the Mayans merely expected their long-count calendar to run out ... and then simply start all over again. Many people will simply say, “We don’t want to hear that. We want apocalypse now!* We want to live on the eve of destruction!”* All the failures of eschatological speculators and schemes, all the rewriting of their books, all the rearranging of their villainous nations and good nations, all of their errors and failures, will be taken in stride and ignored by those distracted saints who love living on the road to Armageddon.* Sad, but true.

To believe and live as Jesus taught, we too must long for the end of the world as we know it, but with a different focus and passion. Our focus is on living for and sharing with others the ever-living and glorious Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. We rejoice that we’ve been swept up into God’s great story, his mission to redeem creation and lost people from among every nation. Our focus is on obeying Christ’s great commission in Matthew 28: Making disciples of Jesus – sharing Christ with others, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything Jesus taught. Our focus is on bringing the end of the world as they know it in their hearts and homes, to

be replaced by the redeeming inbreaking of God's Kingdom. We are to be living as if Christ could come or call at any moment, but planning and working as if we will hand this Church and its mission over to another generation.

At the end of His time on Earth, Jesus commanded His disciples to always be making disciples of all nations until He returned (Matt 28). At the end of his time on Earth, the apostle Paul commanded Timothy to focus completely on preaching and teaching and passing on the Faith so well that the disciples he made would in turn make disciples so deep and true that they would in turn make disciples just as true (2 Tim 2). At the end of their times on Earth, both the Lord Jesus Christ and His apostle Paul were completely focused on reaching the lost and making disciples. Paul was looking three generations into the future in his command, and Jesus was looking to the end of the Age! No time for wild speculations about the last days ... just reach the lost and make disciples, over and over and over forever until Jesus comes again!

I'm looking for THAT Day, and THAT Christ. As for the antichrist? I'm not looking for him. I'm more concerned that I – Michael – might be polluted and deceived by the "spirit of antichrist" that the apostle John said was already abroad even in his day. That's the real danger. So, I'm keeping my eyes on Jesus the Christ, walking in the fullness of the Spirit, learning and obeying more of God's Word, and trying to lead as many others as possible to walk this ancient and future Christian way. I want to build such deep, biblical, spiritual discipleship into my life and the lives of others, that we will all stay true and be ready should Christ come or call tonight or 50 years from now. I want those I help disciple to be better Jesus-followers and better disciple-makers than I ever was. Do I seem to sense in my own heart that his coming is near? Yes, but that could be for any number of reasons. I cannot build my doctrine or my life on that. Only Christ and the Word are sure foundations for life and doctrine.

I'm not distracted by Yom Kippur, 1988, or by May 21, 2011, or by any ridiculous new visions or indecipherable prophetic words being blathered over the Internet or television. Christ's coming will be judgment for the lost, but ultimate redemption for the children of God and for God's creation. I do not live in fear, anxiety, or despair. I live in joy, hope, and confidence. God is working his purposes out in his way and in his time to our ultimate victory and to his glory. I never worry about this conspiracy theory or that world leader or the "spiritual" meaning of an oil spill, a tsunami, a comet, or a war. I'm looking for the great redemption Day. It could be May 21, 2011, or September 15, 2150, or any other day before or after. To say otherwise is to flatly contradict the correctly interpreted words of Scripture.

For those who love living on the road to Armageddon*, every crazy new prophetic speculation means that the last days are here again.* For God, for his Church, and for me, the last days began at Christ's first coming and will last until he comes again, which could be at any moment. Maranatha! Even so, come Lord Jesus! Amen!

* Although I use no material from these sources, and though some of these phrases have been around for years, and though I used some of them (including the title of this article) prior to knowing anyone else had ever used them, several phrases in this article are also used in the titles of relevant books and media, as follows ...

The Last Days Are Here Again: A History of the End Times. Richard Kyle, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998,

Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church. Gary DeMar, Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999.

"Once you have their money, never give it back." – The First Principle of The Ferengi Rules of Acquisition, Deep Space Nine.

"All of this has happened before, and all of this shall happen again." – An oracle of Pythia in Battlestar Gallactica. Originally from James M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*.

"Apocalypse Now." – Francis Ford Coppola, 1979. A dark, violent Vietnam War epic.

"Eve of Destruction." – P. F. Sloan, Barry McGuire, 1965. A song protesting war and impending nuclear destruction.

On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend. Timothy P. Weber, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.

(NOTE: This article was written in 2011. It has been on the district website since then.)