

"Signs of the End"

(Matthew 24) I saw a cartoon once that showed two men sitting next to a graph that indicated their church's dwindling worship attendance. One fella looks at the other and says, "Pastor, I don't mean to be critical but I think you need to quit ending your sermons by saying, "Then again, what do I know?" Most people aren't interested in hearing someone who isn't confident about what he is saying. Most people like their truths in black or white. They like a preacher who knows what he knows and knows that he knows it. When it comes to looking into the future there will always be an audience for the guy who presents his case with great confidence even though his confidence may be grounded in ignorance. But certainty is not always an evidence of knowledge and thoughtfulness. Just as often it arises from ignorance and credulity. But certainty is always more popular than vacillation. And since I'm a normal kinda guy who wants to be popular I am reluctant to tell you this - but I must. The Bible does not provide us with a nicely sequenced calendar of events for the end of the world. There are those who will give you those things. They will chart out for you when the anti-Christ will arise and what war will be when. They can tell you what all the creatures and visions of Revelation are all about. But honestly, friends, not only does church history warn us of the foolishness of that, but the more I've studied the Scriptures the more I've determined that when handling Biblical prophecy a little tentativeness may be in order. It's not that I feel the Bible is unclear in what it says. There is no problem with the Bible. There is no question that all it says will happen will happen. But I have reason to doubt our ability to understand it all and I have reason to doubt that God intended for us to have exact knowledge of future events. I quote from theologian Charles Hodge, (Hoekema p.132) "*the first point to be considered in the interpretation of prophecy is the true design of prophecy, and how that design is to be ascertained. Prophecy is very different from history. It is not intended to give us a knowledge of the future analagous to that which history gives us of the past.*" By way of example, Hodge notes that, though many prophecies were given by the Old Testament prophets about the first advent of Christ, no one knew exactly how these prophecies would be fulfilled until Christ had actually come. Hodge says, "*Christ was indeed a King, but no such King as the world has ever seen, and such as no man expected; He was a priest, but the only priest that ever lived of whose priesthood He was himself the victim; He did establish a kingdom, but not of this world.*" He is saying that the prophecies concerning Christ were all fulfilled but that the way they were fulfilled surprised the

Bible scholars of his day and even his own followers. Even John the Baptist, who introduced Jesus to the world, had some doubts at one point. In Matthew 11:3 he says to Jesus, “*Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?*” Why would John have doubts? I think it was because he had pictured the Messiah as One who would come in burning judgment, who would cut down the fruitless tree and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Those are things the Messiah would do and will do but in his first coming Jesus was more into healing and teaching. There were other elements of prophecy being fulfilled by His first coming and John himself needed to be instructed by Jesus as to these things. John the Baptist believed that all the prophecies concerning Jesus would come true and he was right but he was mistaken about the way in which they would come true and the timing. So, I am suggesting some caution as we look into the final events of human history and seek to understand what God is saying. I’m convinced from Acts 1:7 where Jesus says it is not for us to know the time which the Father has fixed by his own authority that Jesus isn't very interested in us knowing a chronological sequence for final events. What does concern Him is that we be ready for what is coming. That's what must concern us as well and, therefore, as we look today at the signs which will mark the end of the age, I will offer not only an explanation of each but an application that I hope will help all of us to be ready.

We read a number of things in Scripture pertaining to the final period of human history and what it will be like just before the end. These are often called the signs of the times, or the signs of the end. My list today will include five, and we will follow the order in which they are given in Matthew 24:**1-3** *Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. 2 And He said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down.” 3 As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”* You will notice that the disciples ask two questions. They ask when the temple will be destroyed and then what the signs of Christ's coming at the end of the age will be. They may have thought these events would occur at the same time, but they did not. The lengthy response from Jesus gives us prophecies that were, no doubt, fulfilled, in part, in the first century but also prophecies that can only refer to the second coming for which we wait. There are more end-times prophecies in this chapter than any other in the New Testament, but we will use it as sort of a catalog of the signs of the end. The first sign or sign group is given in verses **6-7** *You will be hearing of wars and rumors*

*of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. 8 But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.*

Under sign number one put wars, famines and earthquakes. I lump them all together because Jesus does and because they are all designed to communicate a sense of imminent divine judgment. Wars, famines and earthquakes are used on several occasions in the Old Testament to describe the coming judgements of God on a people. And so, possibly, they will mark the period before Christ's return. However, this particular sign doesn't help a whole lot in trying to construct an end-times calendar. And I say that for three reasons. First, is that Jesus says **6c** *those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. 8 all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.* The beginning of birth pangs they are called. Now, we know that a normal labor for a woman may last twelve hours, but what is the expected period of labor for the cosmos? Don't ask me? The second reason these things don't help our calendar much is that wars, famines and earthquakes have been going on for a long, long time. In fact, there has never been a period without them. I suppose one can figure on the period soon before the end to be marked by an unusual number of these occurrences; but if that is all it is, it may be very hard to notice when this prophecy is actually fulfilled. The third reason I say this sign doesn't help us much in finding the time of Christ's return is that it likely doesn't have reference to that at all. Here I get very tentative, but my humble opinion is that wars, famines and earthquakes served as a sign of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD and have no relationship to the return of Christ. There can be no question but that the time prior to 70AD was marked by wars and famines and earthquakes. When Jesus gave this word the Roman Empire was the model of peace and stability, but before 70AD the whole thing started to fall apart. In Rome itself four emperors met with a violent death in less than 18 months. For the Jews, it was a highly turbulent time. Marcellus Kik says there was an uprising against them in Alexandria. In Seleucia 50,000 were slain. In Caesarea a battle between Syrians and Jews left about 20,000 Jews dead. Just prior to 70AD there were reports of earthquakes in Crete, Smyrna, Miletus, Chios, Samos, Laodicea, Hierapolis, Colosse, Campania, Rome, Judea and LA. The city of Pompei was much damaged by an earthquake in 63AD. And, as for famines, Acts 11:28 mentions a famine that occurred in the days of Claudius Caesar and spread not only in Judea but to other parts of the world. This word of Jesus is already fulfilled. Granted, there may be another fulfillment at the end of this age, but I have my doubts and you will understand why after point five.

Now, the application of this prophecy, whether for the first century or the last is clear isn't it? Jesus says, "See to it that you are not frightened." In other words, don't panic, be cool. The sovereign Lord, who is our King, has told us these would come, so be cool. Let your emotions be controlled by the word of God, not by the evening news.

The second sign of the end is tribulation and persecution. **9** *Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. **21-22** For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. 22 Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.* Again, found in this context in Matthew 24, we may say that Christ is speaking only of the devastation of Jerusalem in 70AD, but there is reason to believe that persecution of Christians will mark the time before Christ returns, as it did the time before the judgment of AD 70. In addition to this warning of Jesus, Paul also writes in II Timothy 3:**1** *realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come.* In the much disputed 20th chapter of Revelation, we read that at the end of the thousand year reign of Christ in heaven Satan will be released to wage war against the saints of God. So, there is reason to believe that we will see an increase in persecution against believers just before our Lord returns; but you will notice I said, "increase." Persecution and trouble is not reserved for just the last days of history, but is a common experience for Christians of all ages. Jesus said, "If they hate me, they will hate you." In Acts 14:22 we read that the apostles told the early believers **22** *"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."* And the practical application arising from this sign would be what? Hang tough, don't give up, hang on. Whether our own day would qualify as meeting this final days characteristic is very hard to say. Certainly, there is considerable persecution going on. We see milder forms in our country and we see more blatant forms in certain communist and Muslim nations. Some have even suggested that ours is an age of unparalleled persecution. But, the greater freedoms available now in Russia and China hardly point to an increase in global persecution although it is very bad in certain sectors.

The third sign of the end is apostasy (R). Apostasy is the abandonment of the faith by those who formerly held to it. Matthew 24:**10-13** *At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. 11 Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. 12 Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. 13 But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.* Now again, apostasy is hardly limited to the end-time. We read of several

apostates in the New Testament, not the least of which was Judas Iscariot. Apostasy will always be with us, but the New Testament tells us to look for widespread apostasy prior to the end. I Timothy 4:**1a** *the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith.* II Timothy 3:**13** *evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.* And then in II Thessalonians we read a statement that can refer to nothing but a final apostasy before the return of Jesus. II Thessalonians 2:**1-3** *Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, 2 that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. 3 Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction.* It goes on in this chapter to describe this falling away which is led by the man of lawlessness, who is commonly referred to elsewhere as *the anti-Christ*. Next Sunday we will devote our morning study to the subject of the anti-Christ but for now notice that he arises out of this final great apostasy, this desertion of Biblical Christianity, prophesied in several places of the New Testament.

(someone interrupts) Now, a theological question that always arises in connection with apostasy is whether or not Christians can actually lose their salvation. There are denominations that teach that salvation can be lost and regained, many times over. They will actually tell you that what you are doing at the moment Christ returns could make an eternal difference. Last week I was scolding one of our ushers about not wearing his name tag and he asked me, "If Jesus comes back and I'm not wearing my name tag will I be saved?" I said, "I think you'll be okay, but if you hear trumpets you better slip that thing on just to be sure." If apostasy meant that some were saved and then lost it obviously the answer would be "yes, you can lose your salvation." But apostasy doesn't mean that. Apostasy is the desertion of the faith by one who formerly professed it and maybe even followed its forms but who never actually repented from sin and trusted Christ. In I John 2:19 the apostle speaks to this issue of apostates and says **19** *They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.* Their apostasy doesn't prove that you can lose salvation but that you can counterfeit it. You can look saved to the external eye and not really be saved, and many times when things get tough the phonies hit the road. So, apparently it will be in the final days of the age. Matthew 24:24 is a wonderful text that should grant considerable comfort to Christians. **24** *For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead,*

*if possible, even the elect.* What is the implication of that? That the elect of God, those who are really His children, will not be and cannot be lead astray even by the false wonders of powerful lying leaders. I Peter 1 says we are kept, protected by the power of God, thru faith. So, what is the practical application of this sign of the end? Because apostasy will come, you Christian need to stay true, and by the grace of God, we shall.

Our fourth sign of the end is the preaching of the gospel to the whole world. **14** *This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.* Not all the signs of the end are bad. This one is very good indeed. What exactly Jesus means here by the whole world is hard to nail down however. Does he mean every single people group no matter how small? Does he mean every language group? Does he mean every major race? Does he mean every major nation? There is really no way to say. It is conceivable that this end-times sign has already been sufficiently fulfilled. It is also possible that there is a long ways to go before it is fulfilled. Whatever the case, the good news is that what Jesus said would happen is happening. Let me share some really, really exciting statistics with you that come from the U.S. Center for World Missions. Bible-believing Christians, in the year 1500 there were 5 million on the earth, best estimates. In the year 1900 there were 40 million. In the year 1950 there were 80 million. Now, listen, in 2012 there were 650 million Bible-believing evangelical Christians on this planet, best estimates. In the 20th century the ratio of non-Christians to Christians went from 27-1 to better than 7-1. Walter Mead in an article in 2011 wrote: *A new report from the invaluable Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life looks at religious belief worldwide and finds that Christianity in the last one hundred years grew to become the world's most widespread and diverse religion ever, as well as the largest. Roughly one third of the world's almost seven billion people profess to be Christian. The most dramatic change in the last 100 years is Christianity's global surge. In 1910, there were about 9 million Christians in sub-Saharan Africa. Today there are more than half a billion. In another major development, Christianity has achieved a significant presence on the mainland of Asia. One hundred years ago Christianity had a negligible presence in China; today China, where an estimated 5 percent of the population (about 67 million people) professes the Christian faith, has one of the largest populations of Christians in the world. In addition, Sara Miller notes: In 1920 there were some 300,000 Christians in Korea; today there are between 10 and 12 million, approximately 25 percent of the total population. Add to this the fact that many of the largest and fastest growing megacities, among them São Paulo, Manila, Mexico*

*City Kinshasa and Kampala, already boast large and in a few cases majority Christian populations -- and these are swelling too. In some cities churches can't be built fast or big enough. Praise God for that good report! And take up your part in making it all happen. II Peter 3:12 speaks of us hastening the coming of the day of Christ. It implies that there are things we can do to make His return sooner and if there is, the only good one I can think of is to preach the word (R). You have a part in the proclamation of the gospel to the whole world. That means, first of all, that you be a witness for Jesus right where you are, in your family, and neighborhood, and business, and church. But it has to mean more than that. Have you considered whether or not Jesus would have you go as an agent of the gospel to some place where it is little known? The practical application we derive from this particular sign of the end is easy to see but often hard to do. You preach the word. You serve as a witness for Jesus wherever you are and wherever He would send you.*

Our final sign of the end is what I will call the Noah syndrome (R). And here I pick up on the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 24:**37-39** *For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, 39 and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be.* This passage, as much or more than any of the others we have read, gives us an idea of what things will be like just before Jesus comes. And what does it say? Is the whole world going to be at war? Will there be people streaming to the hills to prepare for the Lord's coming? Jesus says it will be like the days of Noah. In Luke He adds that it will be like in the days of Lot as well. What was that like? Luke 17:**28-30** *It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; 29 but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. 30 It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.* Noah and Lot have this much in common. They were both righteous men living in the midst of very corrupt people. In both cases God gave them warning about a coming judgment and delivered them from those disasters. Noah, you know, was saved from the great flood; Lot was saved from the shower of fire in Sodom. Is the point then that the Lord will come in a day when evil is rampant? That may be true; as we have seen there is indication of that elsewhere in Scripture; but I don't believe that is what Jesus is getting at here. Jesus says it will be like in the days of Noah but He tells you what He means by that. 24:**38**

*as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark. Is there something wrong with eating and drinking and marriage? Luke 17:28* *It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building;* Is anything wrong with buying, selling, planting, building? Of course not. The point isn't that these will be especially evil times but that they will be especially normal times. The similarity between the three events being compared is that in each case life was proceeding on as normal when judgment suddenly appeared. But it was not a time when the end of the world was a hot topic. The people didn't sit around talking about how judgment was soon to come. They were too caught up in the ordinary affairs of life - and right there is where the danger lies, that everyday life, the routine, could so grab your attention that you lose any regard for eternal concerns. And friends, don't you see this happening in and around you? I see this insidious danger within my own soul. You just get wrapped up in taking care of your house and fixing your meals and doing your jobs and running your errands, buying, selling, planting, building and watching TV with the result that your senses become dull to anything usual and anything eternal. Everyday life, the routine, lulls you to sleep and God is saying, "Wake up!" Start to realize you are engaged in a war. The world as it is will not last forever and you can either behave like a soldier engaged in battle, you can be alert to prepare for Christ's return or you can marry and buy and sell and plant and build without thought of the judgment ahead.

This is one sign of the end that strikes me as definitely fitting our present day. Nobody is really alarmed over anything. There is no sense of urgency about our religion. We are caught up in the affairs of the everyday. We don't have time for Jesus to come back. I think of the bumper sticker that says, "Nuclear war? What about my career?" That is how most of us feel. Christ can't come back this week; I have too many important things to do. We have been caught up in the stream of things and forgotten what counts. "Religion" said Karl Marx, "is the opiate of the masses." By that, Marx meant that religion gets the poor so caught up in thinking about the spiritual that they forget they are being oppressed by the rich; they neglect the concerns of this life. On the other hand, I would say that everyday life, especially the comfortable life that we enjoy, is the opiate of the masses that makes us insensitive to concerns of the soul. Beware of the dulling influence of the everyday and make sure it doesn't put you to sleep. The application from this sign is in I

Thessalonians 5:6 *so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.* God says, "Wake up and be ready."

Those are our five signs and our five applications. #1 is wars, famines, earthquakes and the application is "fear not." #2 is tribulation and persecution and the application is "hang tough." #3 is apostasy and the appl. is stay true. #4 is the worldwide proclamation of the gospel and the application is to preach the word. #5 is the Noah syndrome and the application is to wake up. Has this study helped you know when Jesus is coming back? Probably not. Am I disappointed by that? No. The objective is not to know but to be ready and be faithful. Augustine said of the date of Christ's return , *"That day lies hid, that every day we may be on the watch. He who loves the coming of the Lord is not He who affirms that it is far off, nor is it he who says it is near; but rather he who, whether it be far off or near, awaits it with sincere faith, steadfast hope and fervent love* (quote from Crier p.124) " May it be so with you. Let's pray