

The transcendental character of the Second Coming is underlined again by its suddenness. Men and women will be taken by surprise. Jesus employed several metaphors to warn the disciples about this: the thief in the night (Matt. 24:42–44 ; Luke 12:40 ; cf. 1 Thess. 5:2 , 4 ; 2 Peter 3:10), the bridegroom and the 10 virgins (Matt. 25:1–13), the Flood and the pre-Flood world (24:38 , 39). The apostle Paul adds to this the figure of labor pains coming upon a pregnant woman (1 Thess. 5:3).

Far from suggesting a secret or invisible Second Coming, these images announce it as breaking upon the scene of action in a sudden and unexpected way. For this reason the disciples were called upon to be watchful (Matt. 25:13 ; 24:42). “You also must be ready,” said Jesus, “for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (24:44).

The figures employed by Jesus and Paul do not even mention the time when the Advent will take place: The master of the house does not know when the thief will come; the virgins do not know when the bridegroom will arrive; the woman wonders when the pain will start. No one knows the moment, neither the angels, nor even the Son (Matt. 24:36), but only the Father (Mark 13:32). The disciples are not informed about the precise time (Acts 1:6 , 7; RH Aug. 16, 1887; 1T 72).

However, Jesus has provided signs to herald His coming, not to allow a calculation of the date of the coming, but to sustain the disciples’ attention, to keep them awake (1Thess. 5:4–6). Nobody knows if the master will come in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, or in the morning; however, no one should be sleeping when He arrives suddenly (Mark 13:35 , 36) because important events have already announced His coming (Mark 13:28 , 29). It is important to be attentive to these signs.

F. The Signs of the Second Coming

In his study of the Advent hope, Samuele Bacchiocchi has dedicated many pages to the signs of the second coming of Christ (113–262). This is in harmony with the emphasis Christ Himself gave to the signs in His Olivet discourse (Matt. 24 ; Mark 13 ; Luke 21). The believer waiting for the Second Coming finds hope in the signs. As the prophecies were given to strengthen the faith of the disciples (John 13:19 ; 14:29), the signs energize the believers, who recognize with Paul that “salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand” (Rom. 13:11 , 12).

The signs were to take place in nature, among nations, and in the hearts of human beings. However, before addressing the signs, certain puzzling verses that have been used to set a time for the Second Coming should be examined.

1. Some Difficult Texts

The misunderstanding of three texts in Matthew has caused some to suggest that Jesus expected a very early time for the Second Coming. Since the Advent did not occur then, the reliability of Scripture is negated. An examination of these passages should clarify the true meaning of the signs in these verses.

a. Matthew 10:23 . “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all of the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes.”

This text would seem to indicate that only a short time would elapse before Christ’s return. In an attempt to relate this saying to the delay of nearly 2,000 years, some have suggested that the coming of the Son of man was in reality the resurrection or the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Others have taken this as an expression of the wishes of Matthew’s Christian community.

In Matthew 24 Christ blends the prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem with the prediction of the end of the world. This apparent merging of the particular with the general is characteristic of many eschatological prophecies. Just as the judgment of the world in the OT is considered against the background of judgments pronounced on Edom (Isa. 34:5–15 ; Jer. 49:7–22) or Assyria (Nahum 3:18 , 19), so in this chapter, the judgment of this world is apparently merged with the judgment of Jerusalem.

In this passage the term Israel seems to have been used not in either a geographical or political sense but rather with reference to people. This passage can be interpreted as a double prediction: the spread of the gospel would take place until the very end of time, and it would be accompanied at times by trouble and persecution. Thus, if Israel is taken as a broad term and disciples are understood as all believers, the process of preaching goes on until the Second Coming, regardless of its date.

b. Matthew 16:28 . “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.”

For the Church Fathers and many scholars through the centuries, Jesus was referring here to the Transfiguration, as indicated by Matthew 17:1 . In Matthew 16:21–28 , Jesus announces His death and sets forth the cost of discipleship for His followers. He then encourages them by affirming the certainty of His glorious victory: some would see His glory in their lifetime. Immediately Matthew notes that the Transfiguration took place only six days later.

That the disciples were eyewitnesses to His majesty is corroborated in 2 Peter 1:16–18 . Certainly the Transfiguration shares certain features with the Second Coming: it occurs in a high place and is accompanied by a bright cloud (Matt. 17:1 , 5 ; 26:64 ; cf. Dan. 7:13).

c. Matthew 24:34 . “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place.”

The misunderstanding regarding the time of the Second Coming derives from the interpretation of the word “generation.” The word *genea* can refer to descent or the time between the birth of a father and his son. It also refers to an age, a time period. The Greek word corresponds to the Hebrew *dôr*, which is often used to designate a group or class of

people: “a stubborn and rebellious generation” (Ps. 78:8) is not limited to one age group. In Proverbs 30:11–14 (KJV) the beginning word of each verse is *dôr*, “generation”; the RSV correctly translates “there are those who,” for here “generation” refers to a kind of people, not an age group.

In harmony with this OT usage, Jesus would have used the term “this generation” without a temporal meaning, to refer to a class of people. The evil generation would include all who share evil characteristics (Matt. 12:39 ; 16:4 ; Mark 8:38).

If the word “generation” is given a temporal meaning in this passage, care should be taken to respect the time frame given in the context. In Matthew 24:34 Jesus is speaking of final events. Thus, the temporal generation would be that of those living at the end-time, not the one to which Jesus was speaking.

Jesus Himself made it clear that His words were not to be taken as setting a time for His coming. He said, “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). This would not fit with the claim of some that although the day or the hour cannot be known, the year may be ascertained. Nowhere did Jesus suggest a time for His coming, either in His time or in the distant future.

In Mark’s version of Jesus’ prophetic sermon (Mark 13) it is clear that Christ did not expect that all of the prophecy would be fulfilled during the time of the apostles. Jesus said: “The end is not yet” (verse 7); “This is but the beginning of the birth-pangs” (verse 8); “The gospel must first be preached to all nations” (verse 10); “He who endures to the end will be saved” (verse 13). Finally, the elect would be gathered “from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (verse 27), suggesting the results of worldwide evangelism.

None of these three texts can be used as a basis for setting the time of the second coming of Christ. Neither can they be considered as evidence that the signs of the Second Coming are not valid. The signs serve as landmarks, assuring us that the historical process is moving toward its intended goal, without a specific calendar for the end. The believer is filled with hope as the signs are fulfilled.

The prophetic signs were given to strengthen the faith of the disciples (John 13:19 ; 14:29), to keep them awake to the importance of the times. Likewise, they keep us alert and aid us in understanding that the end “is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11).

2.Signs in the Natural World

“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars,” Jesus foretold (Luke 21:25); He further specified, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken” (Mark 13:24 , 25).

Jesus was not merely announcing future eclipses of the sun and moon. These would not have made good signs because they occur regularly and do not constitute exceptional phenomena. Furthermore, the place these signs occupy in the Olivet sermon should be considered: just after a great tribulation, and just before the appearing of Christ (Mark 13:24–26 ; Matt. 24:29 , 30). These signs were specific, marking the end of the 42 months of persecution, as described in Revelation 12:13–17 and 13:1–10 .

In Revelation 12 and 13 John is referring to Daniel 7–9 , where the prophet sees a horn, a power, coming out from the Roman Empire and speaking against God and His saints. Following a large body of historicist interpreters, Seventh-day Adventists have recognized the Papacy in this political and religious power (4BC 49–54). This power grew slowly from the ruins of the Roman Empire, and received a great impetus about 538, when the siege of Rome was lifted, and the Ostrogoths were subsequently defeated (*ibid.* 834–838). During 12 centuries the pretensions of papal Rome were such that this power persecuted those who disagreed with it. The prophecy of Daniel 7:25 , interpreted by John in Revelation 12:6 , 14 as 1260 prophetic days or 1260 years according to the year-day principle (Shea 56–92), locates the end of the prophetic period in 1798. At that time the effects of the French Revolution resulted in a disruption of the power of the Roman Catholic Church, when General L. A. Berthier took Pope Pius VI into exile. (See PFOF 2:749–782.)

It is understandable, therefore, that those events revived eschatological hope around the world. Three times Daniel places the last judgment immediately after the evil doings of the beast (7:13 , 14 , 21 , 22 , 26). Out of the political and religious upheavals that shook Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, a great awakening arose, and the attention of believers was directed to the signs of the times prophesied. The end of the world seemed to be near, and the signs preceding that event were recognizable.

The appearance of heavenly phenomena would be preceded, according to John, by a great earthquake (Rev. 6:12). The book of Revelation regularly associates earthquakes with the final events (8:5 ; 11:13 , 19 ; 16:18), as if the earth itself were sharing in the anguish of human beings who face the fearful prospect of coming events (Luke 21:25 , 26).

a.Lisbon earthquake. The Lisbon earthquake, which occurred on November 1, 1755, was one of the strongest in recorded history. It was felt in North Africa and several parts of Europe. Combined with a tidal wave, it caused the death of tens of thousands of people. It was recognized at the time as a portent of the end (Smith 439–441).

b.Darkening of the sun. On May 19, 1780, thick darkness covered the northeastern part of the North American continent, remaining until the next morning. Many people believed that the time of judgment had come. Following the dark day, the moon rose blood red. These phenomena can be associated with the celestial signs to accompany John's earthquake: "The sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood" (Rev. 6:12 ; Smith 441–445).

c. Falling of the stars. In addition to the signs just described, John notes that “the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale” (Rev. 6:13). This part of John’s prophecy was fulfilled on November 13, 1833. That night the sky was crossed by an estimated 60,000 meteors an hour. From Canada to Mexico, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, the whole of North America was witness to this extraordinary demonstration. Many wondered about the meaning of such an event (PFOF 4:289–300; Smith 439–448).

In and of itself an earthquake or meteor shower may have no more religious meaning than a storm or blizzard. But when these phenomena are notable and occur according to the biblical sequence, at the time foreseen by prophecy, one should heed Jesus’ words: “When these things begin to take place,... your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28).

Seventh-day Adventists have traditionally given particular importance to these signs which appeared in areas where people were studying the Scriptures, more particularly biblical prophecy. Already at that time these portents were taken as God’s signs.

d. Famines. Without including them in a precise chronological order, Jesus also announced that before His coming there would be famines in various places (Matt. 24:7). It may be difficult to recognize famine as a sign because today hunger is so widespread. Famines have always existed. However, the scale of hunger in the late twentieth century is unprecedented. Furthermore, famines are evidence of our inability to solve our problems in spite of our extraordinary scientific achievements. They also attest the egotism and violence that are the roots of most endemic famines.

In the OT famines were considered as God’s judgments upon His people, or upon the heathen nations, because of their rebellion (2 Sam. 24:13 ; Jer. 29:17 , 18 ; Eze. 5:11 , 12). Today we do not judge as guilty the famished populations of the earth. But the hosts of starving people testify that the day of the One who will judge the world is near.

e. Other natural disasters. Jesus did not announce only one earthquake; He foretold many (Matt. 24:7). Famines and earthquakes are only one aspect of the imbalance of our planet. The ecological movement around the world today emphasizes the increasing problems created by human carelessness and greed. It is time for God to judge “the destroyers of the earth” (Rev. 11:18).

3. Signs in the Moral World

The evils of this world are not simply a consequence of natural phenomena. People share an important part in them. Jesus foretold the moral debasement of the human race in His sermon on Olivet, comparing the time of the end with the situation preceding the Flood (Matt. 24:37–39), when “the wickedness of man was great in the earth” (Gen. 6:5). He also compared the end-time with the condition of Sodom prior to its destruction (Luke 17:28–30). Paul describes in detail the moral pollution of the world at the time of the end (2 Tim. 3:1–5). Statistics on the abundance of crime confirm his predictions.

Jesus used two key words to describe the moral state of the world at the eve of His second coming. He said that “because *wickedness* is multiplied, most men’s *love* will grow cold” (Matt. 24:12). “Wickedness” comes from the Greek *anomia*, which more specifically refers to the absence of law, the refusal to recognize the authority of any law and thus to live by one’s own desires and passions. From this lawlessness spring all the deviations in matters of sexuality, food, entertainment, or leisure, which modern people practice in the name of freedom. In contrast, Revelation praises those who in the end-time “keep the commandments of God” (Rev. 12:17 ; 14:12).

The second term used by Jesus in Matthew 24:12 is *agapē*, “love.” Paul gives this word an extended definition in 1 Corinthians 13 . *Agapē* presides over relations with others. Its absence results in family conflicts such as divorce, conflicts between nations (Matt. 24:7), the disruption of societies through exploitation, revolutions, and strikes, as well as the loss of respect for human beings (10:21). A lack of love can take on criminal forms, such as rape, murder, theft, or use of drugs; it also leads to the various ways in which humans exploit one another (cf. James 5:1–6 ; 2T 252; FE 101).

4. Signs in the Religious World

From a religious perspective the time of the end is paradoxical. On one hand the gospel is announced to the whole world (Matt. 24:14). Already in their time, the apostles had pressed toward this goal (Col. 1:6). Now, in the end-time, the gospel proclamation is symbolized by an angel who cries with a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come” (Rev. 14:6 , 7 ; see Remnant/Three Angels V. A-E). On the other hand, people will attempt to quench their thirst for God’s Word from broken cisterns (Amos 8:13 , 14 ; Jer. 2:13). Jesus pointed out that false christs and false prophets would appear in the end-time (Matt. 24:5 , 11 ; 1SM 15). Among those whom John denounces in special terms is the one called antichrist (1 John 2:18 ; 4:3 ; 2 John 7); that is to say, the one who is opposed to Christ or who takes Christ’s place. In John’s time the antichrist spirit already was recognizable by its rejection of Jesus’ incarnation and divinity (1 John 2:22). This same spirit of falsehood will reappear in the beast of Revelation 13:11–17 . With it, an extreme form of religious oppression and fanaticism will develop, which will put an end to religious freedom by imposing a new idolatry (Rev. 13:14–17) akin to that mandated by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (Dan. 3).

The challenge during this period of trouble and delusion is to persevere until the end in order to be saved (Matt. 10:22 ; Rev. 13:10 ; 14:12). For this reason it is important for all believers to be acquainted with both the true and false signs of Christ’s coming. (See Great Controversy V. A-C.)

5. False Signs

Jesus cautioned His disciples that some would perform miracles in His name even though He did not recognize or accept them (Matt. 7:21–23). In His eschatological speech, He warned about the false nature of those miracles and their purpose: “to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24). The apostle Paul indicated that the “man of lawlessness” would appear with “all power, and with pretended signs and wonders” (2 Thess. 2:3–9). Paul describes the coming of the “lawless one” in the same terms used to describe Jesus’ advent: *apokalypsis* (verses 3 , 6 , 8) and *parousia* (verses 8 , 9).

The prophet Elijah called fire from the Lord down upon the altar at Mount Carmel to demonstrate the identity of the true God (1 Kings 18:24 , 38). In the end-time the same miracle will be performed by the power with two horns that look like those of a lamb, but that speaks like a dragon (Rev. 13:11 , 13 ; GC 624). The only means by which to escape such seduction is the love of truth (2 Thess. 2:10 ; RH Sept. 5, 1899).

6.A Mistakenly Interpreted Sign

The dispensationalist school of thought applies the vision of Ezekiel 37 to the state of Israel. Accordingly, the return of Israel to Palestine, its conversion to Jesus Christ, the reestablishment of the Davidic monarchy, and the rebuilding of the Temple serve as signs of the end for this school of thought (Pache 317–350). The secret rapture of the church becomes an important part of this scheme.

This unscriptural teaching about the massive conversion of the people of Israel is most frequently supported by an interpretation of Romans 11:12 , 26 . However, this important chapter is not a prophecy regarding the end-time. Having shown that there is no difference between Jews and Greeks concerning salvation, for all are under the power of sin (Rom. 3:9), Paul expresses his wish for all Israel to be saved. While all, Jews and Greeks alike, are consigned to disobedience, all have equal access to God’s mercy (Rom. 11:32). Paul does not discuss the time of the conversion of the people of Israel; he teaches rather the manner of their gathering: the heathen will come together with the converted Jews, the Israel of God (verse 26 ; cf. Berkouwer 323–358).

It is clear, both in Jesus’ statements (Matt. 24:6–13) and in Revelation 12–14 , that the time preceding the Second Coming will not be a golden age. Rather, it will be a period of trouble and anguish (Luke 21:25 , 26). Because of the wickedness of human beings, true faith will become uncommon (18:8). Moreover, Jesus did not talk about several returns or of several occasions of conversion. He described only one visible, glorious, and mighty coming. At that time the living saints, together with those resurrected, will be taken up in the clouds of heaven to receive their Saviour (1 Thess. 4:16 , 17).s

G. The Reasons for Jesus’ Second Coming

“The final triumph of God is a theological necessity” (Pidoux 53). He is the Almighty, the master of history. He has demonstrated this fully through Jesus Christ. It