

disciples about visible signs that would testify to the nearness of that return. It is what you would expect from a loving God who wants His people to anticipate with tingling excitement their imminent deliverance from a sin-polluted earth. Any rescue of such monumental proportions deserves all the advance publicity it can get. As is true of any positive event, anticipation heightens the effect and the emotion of the reality. The second coming of Christ is no exception.

Signs and Coming

7The whole idea that the present age with its amenities and progress will end does not appeal to many people—Christian and non-Christian alike. The average person seems interested in continuing his existence here despite living in a less than perfect world. In fact, many spend precious time and resources trying to make it a better place in which to live—and stay. Our preoccupation with the present situation is such a strong human characteristic that Christ considered it necessary to take special pains to warn us about its paralyzing effect. So it seems that many of the signs pointing to the Second Coming were or are designed to awaken or startle us into recognizing that His return is just beyond the horizon. Perhaps we can illustrate this with a modern-day experience.

Frequent earthquakes and lesser tremors gave ample evidence that something awesome could conceivably occur at Mount St. Helens. In fact, scientists from around the world were betting on that fact.

In March 1980 the mountain began erupting on a limited scale. Nothing fantastic—just a little steam now and then. However, people began to worry, and scientists warned people that it might be dangerous to remain in the area. The tremors continued and strengthened, and the eruptions increased.

At 8:31 one Sunday morning in May, David Johnston, age 30, was observing the mountaintop through binoculars from a distance of five miles. Suddenly he shouted, "This is it!" At precisely that moment the volcano erupted with a force equal to 500 of the atomic bombs that had been dropped on Hiroshima, spewing out 1.5 cubic miles of debris. Hot ash, pulverized rock, mud, and snow poured down the mountainside, obliterating 123 homes in and around the nearby town of Toutle and wiping out bridges, roads, and signs. The blast leveled 150 square miles of timber and did \$222 million worth of damage to crops in the area. Ash covered 5,900 miles of roads. No one ever saw David Johnston again.

David Crockett, 28, a photographer for KOMO-TV in Seattle, happened to be in the area and gave a running description of the disaster as he tried to escape from the nightmare. Speaking into his sound camera, he said, "I am walking toward the only light I can see. I can hear the mountain rumble. . . . The ash in my eyes burns my eyes, burns my eyes! Oh, dear God, this is hell! . . . It's either dark or I am dead. God, I want to live!" And he did.

Not so with Harry Truman. Truman, 84 years old, lived near Spirit Lake with his 16 cats, about five miles north of the peak of the mountain. He had been warned, as had the other residents, about the impending eruption. The tremors and spouting steam indicated that the activity rumbling in the bowels of the earth would soon burst loose in a shower of ruin and devastation. But Truman was secure in a false safety. "No one knows more about this mountain than Harry," he said, "and it don't dare blow up on him." Harry Truman was last seen the Saturday before the blast, watering his lawn. Now the site of his home is a lake.

For the sake of safety, many swimming pools with a deep end have a rope suspended by buoys at the point where the pool begins to slope downward at a steep angle. Ignoring the rope and continuing to head for the deep end of the pool can lead to disaster. The same thing can

happen in a world hurtling toward a destiny planned by God and predicted by the prophets. Failure to recognize and respond to certain events taking place around us can put us in the position of not being ready for Christ when He returns. And the results will be even more far-reaching and devastating than the catastrophe at Mount St. Helens. Worst of all, as was true for Harry Truman, we will have no excuse if the Second Coming finds us unprepared.

Perhaps the most comprehensive and complete description of the signs portending Christ's return appears in the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew. Jesus warned His disciples about three things.

1. He urged them not to be afraid. "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come" (verse 6). Most of the problems among nations and in the political and personal arenas are not new. Neither is their presence an indication of the end of time as such. Therefore the most important fact to remember is that their occurrence should not cause us to fear. We know we are living in an imperfect world, and as it becomes more and more so, as war and unrest increasingly threaten, and as crime and pestilence spread, our desire to see Christ come should also intensify—without our becoming afraid.

While it is true that such things have affected us all through the ages, yet at the same time there has been such an alarming growth in these problems that were they to continue, they would completely devastate the earth. A brief listing is enough to chill the thoughts of any thinking individual:

Item: Between the U.S. and Russia, in excess of 21,000 nuclear warheads stand poised and ready to be launched. It is enough weaponry to destroy civilization several times over.

- Item: Two men in a black car dropped a bomb into a trash can near a department store in Paris. In the resulting explosion five people died, and 53 were wounded. That and subsequent bombings in France during the summer and fall accounted for eight deaths and 162 wounded. Later, acts of violence in Pakistan and Turkey killed and maimed scores more in an airplane and a synagogue.
- Item: More than 22 million Americans have used cocaine, and about 5 percent of all high school seniors smoke marijuana every day. With the growth of drug usage in America among the younger generation, we face the prospect of the next generation having addiction and behavioral problems on a scope unprecedented in history.
- Item: The ozone layer of the atmosphere has been decreasing in specific parts of the earth—in some cases as much as 3 percent per year. Scientists estimate that each 1 percent drop in this layer (which absorbs ultraviolet radiation from the sun) could cause an additional 20,000 skin cancers in the U.S. alone.
- Item: Twenty thousand civil rights marchers in Forsyth County, Georgia, encountered jeering from White supremacists throwing rocks and bottles.
- Item: The World Health Organization predicts that the AIDS virus will soon infect more than 100 million people. In Africa an estimated 2 to 5 million persons carry it, and researchers believe that at least 50,000 have already died from the dread disease there. The disease appears uniformly fatal, and is spreading so rapidly that United States Health and Human services secretary Otis Bowen stated previous epidemics such as typhus and the

Black Death—which killed as many as 25 million people in Europe at its height—will “look very pale by comparison.”

We can view such events in two different ways. (And our view of them is most important. In fact, it may determine our survival.) We may see them as merely the worsening of an already bad situation about which we can do nothing, or we may interpret them as signs of our impending rescue from this planet of woe. “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:25-28).

Clearly, our reaction depends on where we are looking when the signs begin to intensify. According to the passage, some people will keep their gaze fixed on the events themselves. That will lead to terror, or as the King James Version renders it, “men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth.”

The message is clear. Only by looking up will we be able to find the hope that will give us the strength to endure. And that is good advice for us even now! When everything around us as Christians seems draped in the gloom of pessimism and doubt, when fear and hate appear the order of the day, only the upward gaze can sustain our courage. And in those days just before Christ returns, those days when violence wraps the earth like a cloak and despair overwhelms the nations, recognizing the situation as the harbinger of the end and lifting the heart and eyes upward in anticipation of the return of our Lord, will be

our response to events that strike fear in the hearts of unbelievers.

2. Christ warned His disciples against being deceived. Obviously Satan would like to becloud, distort, and generally confuse the issue of Christ's return. If he could somehow capture the imagination and energies of those looking for the Second Coming and divert them to a false concept, he could successfully lead them away from the true hope of the ages.

All kinds of false prophets have surfaced to attract people to every possible kind of deception. For example, in recent years people paid hundreds of dollars apiece to hear a housewife tell them, "You will receive what you want. . . . You are masters of your destiny." She claimed to be the conduit for the teachings of Ramtha, a 35,000-year-old being who gave her the messages she then passed on to others.

People who followed her teachings indicated that they could accept her because what they heard agreed with what they felt existed inside themselves. The apostle Paul wrote, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Timothy 4:3, 4).

And who can forget the terrible catastrophe that overtook more than 900 people at the now infamous commune in Jonestown, Guyana, when Jim Jones convinced his followers to commit mass suicide. Truly the power of the false prophet can be enormous. Our only safety is in being alert and heeding the words of Christ when He said, "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many" (Matthew 24:4, 5).

Christ has warned us away from all such persons who would lead us to believe that they represent the dawn of a new age—and specifically the ushering in of His kingdom.

Such persons are the thieves Jesus mentioned in John 10:7-10: "I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers. . . . The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." As indicated by the incident in Jonestown, the end result of such deception, of following the thief instead of the True Shepherd, is not entrance into a new age, but the bitter ashes of unfulfilled dreams.

3. Christ warned His follower to be ready. "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Matthew 24:42-44). And later on in the same speech, He repeated, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour" (Matthew 25:13).

The picture seems to depict a group of people who tend to become so engrossed with present pursuits that an impending event loses its significance. In fact, Christ's words would lead us to believe that He will be returning at a time not only when men will not be expecting Him, but when *they will feel that He won't be coming back at all*. Paul echoed the same thought when writing to the church in Thessalonica: "Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape" (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3).

Peace and safety. "Everything is going to be all right. No need to worry or fear. Forget the idea that the world will end in a flash of fear and fire. It's not that we live in a utopia now—but we're getting there." Peace and safety. "Sure, there have been problems in the Middle East and

Afghanistan. It's true that the world is full of tension, but after all, it has been more than 40 years since we have had a world war. Things are getting better all the time. Sure, the stock market takes a little plunge when there is a recession, but we seem to overcome it—in fact, it is now above the 2400 mark.” Peace and safety. Sudden destruction. As a woman in labor pains.

Some may think of the end of the world as a climax that will spring on us entirely without warning. But according to this passage, that is not the case. The allusion is to birth pains, or contractions. They start out simply and innocently. Like little puffs of steam venting from Mount St. Helens, or small tremors you would hesitate to call earthquakes.

In many cases the mother-to-be is not really sure that in fact she felt anything out of the ordinary. She wonders whether she actually had a contraction. But the reality soon makes itself crystal clear. Before long not only is she aware of them, but they have convinced her that they are in earnest. Something is about to happen. Now she can ignore them only at the risk of the baby's life and her own welfare. While the initial contractions may not be hard or regular, they indicate that an inevitable event will soon take place.

Mary had been in labor for just a few hours. We medical students were working with the resident physicians in obstetrics, taking care of not only her but a whole roomful of patients. The women were in various stages of labor, their gasps and cries indicating the progress of birth. The room was air-conditioned, but the emotional intensity of everyone there made it seem warm. It required concentration to time the contractions for any individual patient accurately. Failure to keep track of them could lead to embarrassment at the least, and possible tragedy for the infant at the worst.

This particular young woman had two other children and seemed to be enjoying the experience of giving birth to her third. She reclined on the bed with a smile on her

face. Her labor pains seemed no more annoying than what one would expect from a mild case of cramps.

Then she warned us, “Be careful. My labor does not last long, and I deliver quickly and easily. In fact, if you are not careful this baby might be born in the bed!”

Of course, we were “experienced” students, and so her words fell on deaf ears. It was not that we did not believe her; it was just that no baby could sneak into the world while we were in attendance. Having already participated at the birth of several, we were well schooled in the intricacies of labor dynamics and the warning signs that meant delivery was about to occur. She had had only two children—we had delivered many more than that. So we went about our business, confident that we had things well in hand.

Periodically we would look in on the patient to make sure things were going as we expected and planned. Each time we concluded that the situation was under control. Her labor progressed smoothly, and she kept smiling. But you can never predict just how the uterus, that organ in which the baby develops, will act at every point in time. Sometimes it moves quickly—only to slow down. At other times it responds with all the speed of a crippled snail, then gallops full speed to birth in just a few moments.

And so it was in this case. The next time we thought to check the patient again (fully intending to take her to the delivery suite if labor was progressing nicely), she greeted us with the announcement “I think the baby's here.”

Although we did not believe her, when we lifted the covering sheet we saw an obviously newborn infant in the bed—and that without the benefit of our medical expertise.

And so will it be when Christ returns. We Christians know the signs and know His coming will occur. And that is where the Christian has an advantage over the non-Christian. Or does he? Does the fact that we realize that Christ will return give us an advantage? Apparently not, for Christ told us that we need to watch also. In fact, our

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very confidence that we can “handle” the last days may put us at risk. Confidence and familiarity can leave us unprepared for the seriousness and impact of the Second Advent. Certainly one would have expected a brand-new medical student on the obstetrical ward to have been much more attentive to his patient’s progress.

This, then, should cause us to be particularly sensitive to Christ’s words in Matthew 24:8: “All these are the beginning of birth pains.” The birth pains announcing His second coming. And what a coming it will be!

Ready or Not

8 What is worse than being a hostage? We so value our freedom that few things or situations can anger and frustrate us more than having it restricted, our desires denied, and our movements dictated by someone else.

Hostages are people taken captive against their will. Terrorists take hostages, kidnappers take hostages, and Satan takes hostages! The entire world has been captured, intimidated, and abused by this evil tyrant. For thousands of years he has had pretty much his way with the earth, and now the human race is about to be rescued in a most spectacular manner.

Air France Flight 139 took off from the Tel Aviv airport on June 27, 1976, with 258 passengers, some of whom were anticipating reunion with loved ones and friends. Others were traveling to Paris on business. Still others were planning to enjoy vacations in the City of Light. None realized that within 24 hours they would be hostages in what was then one of the most despotic of African countries.

When the flight made an intermediate stop at Athens, several passengers boarded, including two young men transporting two large tins supposedly carrying dates. Dora Bloch remarked to a friend about the tins, noting that they seemed rather large.