

Will Christ Return?



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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| <i>Chapter One</i> | |
| PREDICTING THE END | 1 |
| <i>Chapter Two</i> | |
| THE SECOND COMING—A FRAUD? | 6 |
| <i>Chapter Three</i> | |
| EVIDENCE OF THE PROMISE | 10 |
| <i>Chapter Four</i> | |
| “WHAT WILL BE THE SIGN OF YOUR COMING?” | 14 |
| <i>Chapter Five</i> | |
| WHAT SHALL WE DO? | 21 |

PREDICTING THE END

How many self-appointed pundits and would-be prophets of doom will step forward as we approach the year 2000? Judging from past experience, we should expect some.

The terrible disease of AIDS has already been declared by some a punishment from God—a scourge that could end the world.

Then there are the various catastrophes we are told to expect from global environmental mismanagement. And what about the collapse in morality and ethics? Surely these are all signs of the end.

The end of the world and the return of Jesus Christ have become synonymous for many in the Western world. And as we approach the end of this millennium, history can teach us some important facts. Dates often fascinate people. Some attach prophetic meaning to approaching years. The closer we get to such times, the more new prophecies seem to appear. For example, around the year A.D. 1000, in Europe there was speculation about the end of the world. A thousand years had almost passed since Christ's birth. Did not the Bible speak of a millennium of the kingdom of God on earth and then the judgment? Was it not evident from man's corrupt condition that the judgment must be nigh?

We read about this in the writings of a German monk

named Tritheim (1462-1516): "In the thousandth year after the birth of Christ, violent earthquakes shook all of Europe and throughout the continent destroyed solid and magnificent buildings. The same year a horrible comet appeared in the sky. Seeing it, many who believed that this was announcing the last day were frozen with fear" (*A History of the End of the World*, Yuri Rubinsky and Ian Wiseman).

With Europe experiencing such conditions, the popular conclusion was "judgment is at hand."

It was not. The occurrence of unusual events, coupled with the end of that millennium and an erroneous theology, brought about a serious miscalculation.

But such apocalyptic thoughts continued to haunt people. Some three centuries later, many people were convinced of *their* impending doom by another succession of remarkable events in Europe. According to Charles Morris's *Historical Tales: The Romance of Reality*: "The middle of the fourteenth century was a period of extraordinary terror and disaster to Europe. Numerous portents, which sadly frightened the people, were followed by a pestilence which threatened to turn the continent into an unpeopled wilderness. For year after year there were signs in the sky, on the earth, in the air, all indicative, as men thought, of some terrible coming event. In 1337 a great comet appeared in the heavens, its far-extending tail sowing deep dread in the minds of the ignorant masses. During the three succeeding years the land was visited by enormous flying armies of locusts. . . . In 1348 came an earthquake of such frightful violence that many men deemed the end of the world to be presaged. . . . Mountains sank into the earth. . . . The air grew thick and stifling. There were dense and frightful fogs. Wine fermented in the casks. Fiery meteors appeared in the skies. A gigantic pillar of flame was seen by hundreds descending upon the roof of the pope's palace in Avignon. In 1356 came another earthquake, which destroyed almost the whole of Basel. What with famine, flood, fog, locust swarms, earthquakes, and the like, it is not surprising that many men deemed the cup of the world's sins to be full, and the end of the kingdom of man to be at hand."

Actually, theories about the end of the world date from

antiquity. In the first century B.C., the Roman writer Lucretius had this to tell his readers: "The mighty and complex system of the universe, upheld through many years, shall crash in ruins. Yet I do not forget how novel and strange it strikes the mind that destruction awaits the heavens and the earth. . . . My words will perhaps win credit by plain facts, and *within some short time* you will see violent earthquakes arise and all things convulsed with shocks . . . the whole world can collapse, borne down with a frightful-sounding crash" (Italics added).

Because Christianity has been a major religious influence in Western thought, it is sometimes easy to overlook what earlier times and other religious leaders have written about the end of the world. Take Muhammad, for exam-

ple. He is quoted in the Koran, dated A.D. 652, "[The unbelievers] think the Day of Judgement is far off: but We see it near at hand. Are they waiting for the Hour of Doom to overtake them unawares? Its portents have already come. . . . On that day the heaven will shake and reel, and the mountains crumble and cease to be."

Of particular note here is that "portents" of doom, or signs of the times, are something to anticipate. When we see these signs we will know, supposedly, that the end is near.

Such accounts make it easy for the 20th-century reader to say: "There, I knew it—people have been saying the end will come soon since time immemorial, and nothing has happened. Therefore it never will."

That, of course, is *not* a logically defensible position to take. We cannot assume that because humans have theorized or even proclaimed end-of-the-world prophecies that in fact failed that all prophecies ever spoken are void. What is clear however, is that natural disasters do not necessarily mean the

We cannot assume that because some have claimed failed prophecies, all prophecies ever spoken are void.

end of all life as we know it.

Some Christian groups today subscribe to the idea that Jesus Christ gave a set of "signs of the end times" to his disciples when they asked him, "What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3, New King James Version throughout). Yet closer examination of his recorded reply to their question shows otherwise.

*Is it possible
that neither skeptics
nor believers have it
right? Could Jesus'
words have been
misunderstood?*

It is precisely this preoccupation with certain signs that has led many to proclaim false prophecies.

For example, the 16th-century German astrologer Johannes Stoeffler predicted that the world would end in a giant flood in February 1524. Many believed him because he was a respected university scholar. People built wooden arks and waited on the River Rhine for the end. There was

no global flood, just a severe storm that increased Stoeffler's reputation as a prophet. Although there was no catastrophe, at least it had rained!

Then there was the case of the English clergyman-scholar, William Whiston, who made a similar prediction. The world would end with a flood, beginning with the destruction of London on October 13, 1736. Again, many in the population waited anxiously. Nothing happened and the record shows that everyone rejoiced.

Do we crave assurance about the future because we experience so many uncertainties? Many of us no doubt want someone to come along and tell us with utmost confidence that this or that will happen for sure. And in some curious way, the assurance that this troubled world will end is a kind of certainty. Is this one way to explain—even *before* Christianity—man's historic preoccupation with the end of everything?

Famous Predictions

Perhaps one of the most famous examples of failed prediction is that of the American preacher William Miller. Miller, a soldier and an atheist, had become a prosperous farmer. Then his intensive studies of the Bible in his later years led him, in 1831, to pronounce the general period of Christ's return.

Accounts show Miller to have been a sincere man. He was intent on believing the Bible. In particular, he constructed a prophetic scheme from the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation.

The New York Herald reported Miller's prophecies. Miller first predicted fire would destroy civilization on April 3, 1843 (the approximate beginning of the new lunar year). This pronouncement caused quite a stir in New England, although, of course, nothing later happened. The movement rapidly gained listeners. Miller later declared the Day of Atonement (even with this, he was one month late in his calculation!) Oct. 22, 1844, as the day of Christ's return. Hundreds climbed hillsides waiting for the second advent. Again, nothing happened. Miller died in 1849, continuing to believe in the imminency of Christ's return.

End-time anticipation is still a preoccupation. A 1988 book predicted events would happen in September of that year that would lead to Christ's return in November, 1995. When events failed to happen in September as predicted, the book's author adjusted his calculations and said they would happen in September of 1989, leading to Christ's return in 1996. Once again, nothing happened in September 1989.

What are we to make of all this? What about the centuries of failed prophecies—some by the devout and the sincere? Consider this: Is it possible that neither skeptics nor believers have it right? Could it be that the words of Jesus Christ, "I shall come again" (John 14:3), have been misapplied and misunderstood?

THE SECOND COMING— A FRAUD?

For many today, Christ seems completely otherworldly, a mystery, virtual fiction. There are those who doubt he ever existed as the Son of God. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who eagerly anticipate his second coming soon. Then there are a lot of people in between.

One thing is sure, if Jesus Christ did return, it would leave the deepest of deep impressions on all of us. It would be impossible to ignore.

Let's examine some of the Old and New Testament statements about Christ's return to this earth.

The biblical text records Jesus Christ explaining what will happen when he again sets foot on this planet. Is that text valid? And what of the paradox that many who profess to be Christian do not accept these biblical statements as reality?

For some years, a number of theologians have taught that later writers added to the Bible the prophecies attributed to Jesus. One recently formed group of scholars, known as the Jesus Seminar, claims, "Rather than being historically exact reports of Jesus' words and deeds, the gospels are the early church's interpretation of Jesus and his significance in the decades after his life." As a result of their investigation into the concept of the kingdom of God, they concluded Jesus

“did not speak of the imminent end of the world or his own Second Coming.”

When the scholars voted on various proposals, the results showed in part that only two of 30 scholars strongly agreed that “Jesus expected to return as the Son of Man and usher in the new age” while 26 *strongly* disagreed and two just disagreed.

The following statement produced similar results: “Taking the Bible seriously means expecting Jesus to return as the Son of Man and usher in the new age.” This time 24 strongly disagreed, two abstained and only four of the scholars strongly agreed.

The idea that Jesus did *not* speak about the apocalyptic end of the world is generally accepted by Bible scholars, according to the Jesus Seminar.

Should we then dismiss Christ’s return as an impossibility? Does it have any basis in biblical fact? If it does, mankind is in for some extraordinary times. Why? Because the events predicted to precede Christ’s return would jar human consciousness as much as his actual return.

Before we discuss that, let’s look at an intriguing passage concerning skepticism about Christ’s coming. We find it in II Peter 3:3-4: “Scoffers will come in the last days . . . saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming?’”

Peter was an apostle of Jesus Christ and an eyewitness to his death and resurrection. He was writing a final appeal at the end of his life to the fledgling Christian Church. Peter began this section of his letter, “Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle . . . that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Savior” (II Peter 3:1-2).

Peter plainly wanted to give the Church a warning: Do not be swayed from the original truth delivered both by apostles and Old Testament prophets concerning Christ’s coming.

A Precise Warning

It is striking that he warns *specifically* against “scoffers.” He is predicting that some express their doubts about

Christ's return by saying, "Where is the promise of His coming?" Through deception or convenient denial of ancient records some will deny any "second coming." They will say, "All things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." They will believe cataclysmic events like Christ's second coming just will not happen.

In analyzing this attitude, Peter emphasizes deliberate suppression of information. He writes, "For this they [the scoffers] willingly are ignorant of" (II Peter 3:5, King James Version).

What is it of which the scoffers are willingly ignorant? "That by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water" (verses 5

and 6). Their willing ignorance stretches to a denial of the Flood of Noah's time. That, of course, has become a commonplace notion of our day. The Flood, we are told, was only a local Middle Eastern disaster. Yet paradoxically, today it is not difficult for people to believe that other catastrophes can happen on a worldwide scale. We live in an increasingly globalized world. Convenient travel makes worldwide epidemics possible. The greenhouse effect and ozone depletion threaten the entire planet. Weapons of mass destruction hang over every man, woman and child.

Despite these realities, those who deny God intervened in the past may find it difficult to believe that he will intervene in the future.

Admittedly, it is much more comfortable to believe that life will go on as usual, without any major changes. It is easier to believe that than to look forward to worldwide disruptions. Of course, the more time that passes without the sight of Christ returning in the heavens, the easier it is to become

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oblivious to the reality of that eventual return.

Still, there's that nagging doubt. When polled about the likelihood of Christ's return, 62 percent of Americans said they believed it would occur. But don't be surprised if within 15 or 20 years most will have accepted what some scholars now teach in seminaries and universities—that Christ never said he would return! In fact, in some areas such as Northern Europe many people already believe that.

But let's recall the doubters' question: "Where is the promise of His coming?" Is the promise only in the New Testament? Significantly, no. We will see that the Old Testament is not silent on the subject. Not only did the ancient prophets foretell the Messiah's *first* coming, but also his *second* coming.

EVIDENCE OF THE PROMISE

Some theologians believe that later writers *added* statements to the New Testament about Christ's second coming. What do we find if we begin in the Old Testament? After all, according to Peter, the New Testament Church understood that Christ's second coming was based on Old Testament prophecy. He is quoted as saying of Christ, "Whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:21).

Those prophets wrote much of the Old Testament. Take Isaiah 9:6, for example. We find a familiar passage: "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

In his human lifetime no one called Jesus Christ by those titles. He did not have the government placed on his shoulders. To what, then, do these words apply?

The next verse gives us an important clue. "Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this" (Isaiah 9:7).

Will Christ set up God's government "with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever"?

The Bible indeed tells about a time that will produce peace for which "there will be no end." Yet no kingdom or government exists like that today, nor has any since the beginning of recorded history.

We can confidently say that Isaiah's prophecy about Jesus Christ is at most completed only in part. A time break of at least 2,000 years at the beginning of Isaiah 9:6 takes us forward to a yet future date.

That, perhaps, sounds like a giant leap in logic. Were we not just citing examples of erroneous predictions of the end of the world? Yes, we were, but as stated earlier, let's not make the mistake of assuming that *all* prophecy is invalid. It may surprise you to know that most *biblical* prophecy has simply not been fulfilled yet. With respect to the Bible, it is man's *interpretation* of its prophecies that fails—not the prophetic intent. Biblical prophecy can still prove true though a thousand people misinterpret.

Where so many have gone wrong is in looking for specific signs. They believe that a major earthquake, famine or disease epidemic means that many more are on the way. And that leads to the conclusion that global catastrophe will soon occur.

The End of Human Government

A significant Old Testament prophecy about Christ's second coming is found in the book of Daniel. Daniel recorded a series of prophetic passages with relevance to the general course of world history. Those prophecies extend from the Babylonian period to the Medo-Persians, Greco-Macedonians, Romans and down to our time.

Describing a scene in heaven, he says, "I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated" (Daniel 7:9).

Here is a picture of the Ancient of Days. By context, we know this is God the Father. Then, in verses 13 and 14, Daniel writes: "I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought

Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed.”

This is the conclusion to all human kingdoms—they are brought under the just and beneficent rule of “one like the Son of Man.” The Bible is explicit about who the Son of Man is—Jesus Christ.

Here in Daniel is a preview of Christ’s eventual rule over the kingdoms of mankind spoken of by Isaiah. It promises to bring peace, prosperity, justice and judgment to a world in conflict and pain.

There are many other references to this ultimate rule of Jesus Christ scattered throughout the prophetic portions of the Old Testament. The major and minor prophets all speak of this coming peaceful era.

It is apparent from the gospel records that Christ would return to set up a new world order.

The New Testament Confirms

But what about New Testament statements? What about those claims that Jesus Christ never said he would return? What about the suggestion that the references to such an event were all added by New Testament writers anxious to give their flock hope after Christ’s death by crucifixion?

Let’s first consider a New Testament reference in the book of Jude. We have here a very early source. Jude is quoting part of a spoken tradition that later became written. He says, “Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied . . . ‘Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all’ ” (Jude 14-15).

This ancient reference is put to use by Jude to indicate Jesus Christ’s second coming. As shown by the biblical

record, it cannot in any way refer to Christ's first coming as a human being. He did not come with thousands of saints, and he did not execute judgment on all.

All four New Testament gospels mention Christ's return. One of those gospel writers was Luke. It is worth taking a moment to consider his credentials and his emphasis in writing. Luke was a physician and a man of detail. He not only wrote the gospel account bearing his name, but also the history of the early New Testament Church recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. His historical sense is clear in his writings, his faithfulness a hallmark of his work.

He begins his gospel account: "Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which are most surely believed among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed" (Luke 1:1-4).

Notice these words: "those things which are most surely believed among us," "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses," "having had perfect understanding . . . from the very first," "the certainty of those things in which you were instructed."

It is apparent from the gospel records that one of those certainties was that Christ would return to set up a new world order.

The most famous prophecies of that return are found in three of the four gospels—in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. It is to those accounts that we now turn.

“WHAT WILL BE THE SIGN OF YOUR COMING?”

Of all the gospel references to Christ's return, Matthew 24 is the most detailed. It is presented as a firsthand account of what Jesus replied when questioned by his disciples about the end of the age. Did Jesus actually reply with the words we are told he did? This is a question posed by some contemporary theologians.

When we put the entire biblical record together and read the Olivet prophecy in that context, the conclusion is clear. Jesus Christ's return is an ultimate reality. In the final analysis, believing that Jesus said what we are told he said must be a matter of faith—but not blind faith. We believe the words of other historical figures based on eyewitness accounts. Why not Christ's?

On the Mount of Olives, some of the disciples asked him, “When will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3).

To understand Christ's reply, we must show the context of their conversation. Herod had built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem. His disciples had just commented on its beauty. For the time, it was an architectural masterpiece. It came as a surprise when Jesus told his disciples that a day was coming when there would not be one stone left on top of another.

Four disciples (Peter, James, John and Andrew) asked Jesus privately when the end would come. They were looking

to the Messiah to free them from Roman rule and set up a new society. What Jesus said in reply takes up the whole of chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew. An understanding of these pivotal New Testament chapters is basic if we want to grasp fully what Christ indeed did say!

First, consider what he did *not* say in response. He did not say: "You asked about the signs of my coming. Here is the first sign. And here is the second sign, and the third" and so on. A careful reading of Matthew 24 shows that the disciples asked for *the* sign of the Messiah's coming, not the signs. In the original Greek, the word *sign* is singular, not plural. Christ's reply does not begin with a series of signs (plural), that simply would have ignored the language of the question. Instead he gave a *warning*: "Take heed that no one deceives you" (verse 4).

A Critical Warning

This is the first important point in Christ's answer. Be sure that you are not deceived about my return. Why? He continues, "For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many" (verse 5). Impostors would come claiming to be messiahs or saviors of mankind and would deceive many by their counterfeit activities.

Today the statement "I am the Christ" carries a distinctly religious overtone. Some interpret this verse to mean that false religious leaders, claiming to be Christ, would come to deceive masses of people. There have been *a few* such impostors. However, concentrating on "the Christ" rather than its Hebrew equivalent "the Messiah" or "the anointed," obscures a more important point. For the past 2,000 years, leaders of various persuasions have come posing as messiah-type figures, counterfeiting Christ's ultimate authority and role as the ruler of the peaceful and just kingdom of God. They have come not primarily as have the religiously deluded who think they *are* Jesus Christ, but as political or politico-religious leaders.

Messianic examples in our own century might be Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong or Pol Pot. Mussolini said: "I am the State. I, because of God, I am called. I, because I am the superman incarnate . . . I am a

law-giver as well as war lord." Such men, by way of charisma and government machinery, have persuaded the masses to follow them. Winston Churchill described Hitler as "a haunted, morbid being, who, to their eternal shame, the German people in their bewilderment have worshipped as a god." Dictators invariably promise peace, prosperity, liberation, justice, the model society. Instead, they invariably produce corruption, war, oppression, genocide. As messiahs, they are frauds and they deceive many.

Christ warned his followers that such leaders would inevitably come. Their desire for power would be so consuming that they would unwittingly put themselves in Christ's ultimate role.

Wars to Come

Next, Christ mentions another condition: "And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled; for such things must happen, but the end is not yet" (Mark 13:7). Notice the language again: "do *not* be troubled," "the end is not yet." The emphasis is on *not* being surprised by such events. They do not mean the imminent end of the world, as bad as they may be. Luke puts it this way: "But when you hear of wars and commotions, do not be terrified; for these things must come to pass first, but *the end will not come immediately*" (Luke 21:9, italics added). These gospel writers are clearly stressing that warfare is a typical condition in human history. Of itself, war does not mean the world is about to end.

An additional thought follows about what one would normally expect of a human-dominated world: "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Matthew 24:7).

Then there is the inevitable result of war: "And there will be famines, pestilences" (verse 7). Together with earthquakes in a variety of places, these conditions "are the beginning of sorrows" (verse 8) or birth pangs of a new age. These are the *beginning*, not the signs of the end. After this, Christ speaks of *enduring* persecution and personal offense.

So far Jesus Christ has not given his disciples the specific sign of the end of the age of man, but only various

warnings of what to expect as that eventful sign approaches.

In Matthew 24:14, we at last read of an indication of when the end will come. Christ tells his disciples, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come."

Here is the first inkling of how to know that the end of this age of man is near: The gospel will be preached worldwide. This preaching of the gospel has been much misunderstood. Again notice the language. Christ said, "*this* gospel of the kingdom." What was he referring to by "this gospel"? It can only mean the gospel that he himself taught. And what is the gospel, or good news, that he brought? Simply this, that the kingdom of God will finally extend to the whole earth. The very same good news that we read of earlier in Isaiah and Daniel. It is the time when the true Messiah or Savior will rule with justice and judgment for all, when peace will become the order of the day. It is the time when war and conflict, famine, disease and disaster will come to an end.

For the next several verses of his reply, Christ describes particular events in the area around Jerusalem immediately before his return. He refers directly to the prophecies of Daniel. By doing so he shows the validity of our earlier reference in chapter three to Daniel's prophecies.

Next comes a warning about believing people who, at the end of the age, will claim that Jesus Christ has already returned. False

prophets and false Messiahs will *then* come on the scene, even performing convincing miracles. "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it" (verse 23). Why? Because people will see in a most astounding way with their own eyes when Jesus Christ comes back. "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes

**"*B*ut
that day and hour
no one knows, no,
not even the angels
of heaven, but
My Father only."**

to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (verse 27).

What none of the disciples knew was the timing of that return. Everyone who has tried to predict it from ongoing conditions has been wrong. Now we know why. These are not steps in a predictable, continuing countdown by which we may know the day or the hour. The events Jesus described are indeed *warnings* not to take politico-religious saviors, wars, famines, diseases and earthquakes as indications of the end. The preaching of Christ's specific good news to all the inhabited world *is* an event *near* the end. But as we read in Matthew 24:36, "But that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only." Even Christ himself did not know when he would come back. If people tell you they know, you can be sure, on Christ's own authority, they do not.

We have concentrated on what Christ did *not* say about the signs of the times. *Did* he say anything about the events immediately before the end of this age of man?

Apart from the world-wide proclamation of the good news of the coming of God's kingdom on earth, there are other indicators of when the end is near. Christ said, "So you also, when you see these things happening, know that it [or He] is near, at the very doors" (Mark 13:29). What are "*these things*" which happen?

A major event before Jesus Christ's return, according to his own words, "will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Matthew 24:21). You can be sure it has not happened yet. Jesus continues, "And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved [alive]; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened" (verse 22). It is a time of

If people tell you they know when Christ will return, you can be sure, on Christ's own authority, they don't know.

unparalleled horror. There will be destruction and war the like of which humanity has never experienced. It could involve a nuclear conflict or some form of warfare not yet developed. This event is a direct precursor to Christ's second coming. He returns, at that moment, to save mankind from its own destruction.

Christ continues this frightening scenario in verse 29: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." A series of incredible events occurs in the heavens (this is explained in detail in Revelation 6:12-17). These extraordinary events will terrify people. Luke records "men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken" (Luke 21:26). It is only now that we are told to "look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near" (Luke 21:28).

Events Signaling Christ's Return

These are not mere meteors and comets, solar flares or eclipses. They are cosmic disturbances never experienced in human history. Only now does *the* sign of the Son of Man—of Christ's return—appear. Recall that the disciples had asked for the *sign* of Christ's coming or appearance. Now the answer finally comes: "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:30).

His coming will involve great events in the skies, followed by worldwide catastrophes and the appearance of Christ in glory as he returns.

It is significant that the language here matches Daniel 7:13: "I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him." This description is echoed in a description of Christ's eventual return recorded at the time of his ascension in A.D. 31: "Now when He had spoken these things, while they

watched, He was taken up, and a *cloud* received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, *will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven*'" (Acts 1:9-11, italics added).

The events directly leading to Christ's return take place within a generation. As Christ said, "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all things are fulfilled" (Luke 21:32). These "things," said Jesus, include specific occurrences involving Jerusalem (Matthew 24:15-20), great tribulation (Matthew 24:21) and cosmic disturbances (Matthew 24:29) to be experienced by a future generation.

According to Jesus, these events are sure, though many may doubt them. Remember Peter's warning in his final letter: "Knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation'" (II Peter 3:3-4).

Peter went on to warn his audience, "But the heavens and the earth which now exist are kept in store by the same word, reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men" (verse 7). A time is coming when the judgment of God will occur and it will take many by surprise, as Peter shows next: "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night" (verse 10).

That thought leads us to a postscript to this booklet. No longer is it the answer to the question "When will Christ return?" that matters. It is, rather, "What manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness?" (verse 11). Since we know what Christ said about his return, what should we do in the meantime? We now turn to Christ's words about this in Matthew chapters 24 and 25.

WHAT SHALL WE DO?

No human knows the day or the hour of Jesus Christ's return. Of course, the disciples wanted to know. They asked the question more than once. Even with the answer given in Matthew 24, just before the crucifixion, the disciples soon came back to the theme. About six weeks later, after Jesus's resurrection, we read, "Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?'" (Acts 1:6). His reply was consistent: "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority" (verse 7).

The disciples undoubtedly wanted to believe Jesus Christ's rule would be soon. They wanted to know for sure when the troubles of this weary world would be finally over. That has been a common desire of everyone who has learned the truth and significance of God's plan for man. The early New Testament Church that grew from Christ's teaching continued to look for his imminent return. We find the apostles James, Paul and John writing as if Jesus would come back in their day. Note the italicized phrases in these scriptures: "Little children, *it is the last hour*; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that *it is the last hour*" (I John 2:18). "You also be patient. Establish your

hearts, *for the coming of the Lord is at hand*" (James 5:8). "Then *we who are alive and remain* shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (I Thessalonians 4:17).

As we saw earlier, speculation about when Christ will return is common among many who anxiously expect the most important event in human history. It is also common to overlook what Christ emphasized. "But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only" (Matthew 24:36).

In expectation of the event, some have overly anticipated. It is easier for us today to avoid the same mistake and to learn from them. But should we criticize their enthusiasm, their anticipation, their zeal? By no means.

The lesson becomes clear when we read all of Matthew 24 and 25 as one continuous answer. The balance of these two chapters now moves to what all should do who are faced with Christ's second coming.

Christ reiterates the thought that life will appear to many to be proceeding "normally" before his return by citing the example of Noah's time. In Matthew 24:37 we read, "But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be." Almost no one expected the Flood to occur. Some had undoubtedly heard the prediction, but most were oblivious to the reality.

Many people today have heard of the end of this age or the return of Christ. Most do not expect it in reality. Life goes on without reference to the fact. As in the days of Noah, when the Flood came unexpectedly and caught the overwhelming majority unprepared, so it will be in the day of Christ's return. The point here is to be ready for such an event. Christ repeated this theme several times throughout

The early New Testament Church that grew from Christ's teaching continued to look for his imminent return.

the rest of his reply to his disciples. Notice verse 42: "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming." The word *watch* means be alert, be vigilant, be aware, be watchful.

In verse 44, Christ emphasizes: "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect Him." Then comes a warning not to grow complacent because time goes on: "But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming'" (verse 48). The temptation to conclude that Christ is actually delaying his return can lead to materialism, violence, the dissolute life. It can persuade a person to put off until another day the requirements of Christ's way of life. We read in Luke's account, "But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly" (Luke 21:34). Those who take that path will be surprised: "The master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of" (Matthew 24:50).

How to Prepare

The theme of Matthew 25 is the same—be ready for Christ's return by living a godly life now on a daily basis. We are to live as if each day might be our last. The well-known parable of the 10 virgins begins chapter 25. It is the story of five wise and five foolish virgins who are preparing for a wedding. They each have an oil lamp to light their way. But five of them, the foolish ones, have no oil for their lamps. The bridegroom comes unexpectedly at night and the five foolish virgins are left out of the wedding feast. The message is simple. Be prepared for the unexpected return of the bridegroom, Jesus Christ. The parable concludes, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming" (verse 13).

Next comes another famous parable—the parable of the talents. Here is information on *how* to be ready. It is the story of a man who travels to a distant country leaving his servants behind to take care of his business. The parallel with Jesus Christ leaving his disciples behind until his return is obvious. After giving his servants money to trade with, ac-

According to the ability of each, the master leaves. The servants trade, some more than others, each with varying success. The master returns and shows each person the fruits of his labor. Those who have used their "talents" wisely are rewarded. The one servant who has done nothing to increase his yield is punished for his laziness. The lesson: We must be at work improving our spiritual condition throughout life each day, making progress according to our differing levels of ability.

The final section of Matthew 25 shows in yet greater detail how to be ready. Here again is a famous section depicting Christ's judgment of all mankind: "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats" (verses 31-32).

Christ tells those whom he recognizes for their good works, "for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me" (verses 35-36). This puzzles some. They ask: "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" (verses 37 through 39). Christ answers: "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (verse 40).

The meaning again is obvious: Serve other people. Then you serve Jesus Christ because they are all his creation. They are all potential children of God. Those who neglect genuine care and concern and active service of humanity, are in danger of Christ's words: "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (verse 41).

What, then, is the summation of all this teaching? Peter expresses it well at the end of his second letter: "Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless" (II Peter 3:14). Those whom Christ accepts at his return must be

actively pursuing the Christian life. They will put into practice the admonitions of Matthew 5, 6 and 7, the core of Christ's teaching—the Sermon on the Mount.

Peter concludes, "You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (verses 17 and 18).

The need to grow is paramount—to be continually developing and improving, to be honestly serving neighbor and family. Vigilance in personal conduct is essential to prepare for Christ's return. Mark emphasizes the point: "Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the

evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning—lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping" (Mark 13:35-36). Vigilance will keep us in a state of perpetual readiness whenever Christ's return occurs—before or after our death. In that regard there is no more appropriate scripture than Luke 21:36: "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."

What will be your frame of mind, your spiritual condition "in that day"? Only you can decide. You are free to choose how you respond. You are free to choose life. As God said to Israel, he says the same to us today: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

W*hat will be your frame of mind, your spiritual condition "in that day"? Only you can decide.*

“And why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?”

Luke 6:46

Jesus Christ made it clear that genuine Christianity is more than just a verbal confession, however sincere.

As He said, “Not everyone that says unto me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

Well, who will find salvation then? What is God looking for? Is regular church attendance enough? How about a good attitude and a friendly smile? What really makes someone a Christian?

This free booklet *What Is a Real Christian?* will help you discover the answer. No question could be more important to those seeking a true relationship with God.

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**What Is a
REAL
Christian?**

