

Day of the Lord Comes as a Thief

“... the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night... But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.” 1 Thess. 5:2-4

To many Christians, the second coming of Christ is an earth-shattering event. If so, how do we explain the above text describing his return “as a thief in the night?” We suggest that the second presence of Christ is not a cataclysmic event, but a period of time during which he accomplishes the preparation of the world for his Messianic Kingdom.

The text above indicates that the true Christian would be alert and searching for evidence of Christ’s return. When his disciples asked Jesus, “...what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world,” he did not leave them clueless, but proceeded to list many evidences which would be indications of this time. Matt. 24:3

MISTRANSLATIONS FOSTER MISUNDERSTANDINGS

The word “coming” in Matthew 24:3 is a misleading translation of the Greek word “parousia” — *para*, meaning beside or along side of, and *ousia*, a form of the verb “to be.” The thought is to be beside another or in their presence.

When the roll is called in the schools of Greece, the proper response to one’s name being called is to reply “Parousia,” that is, “Present.” Thus, the Scripture would be more properly translated: “... what shall be the sign of thy presence . . .”

The second part of the disciples’ question was, “What shall be the sign . . . of the end of the world.” The Greek word for world is “aion” and means *age*. Therefore, Jesus’ answer would indicate the conclusion of the time period in which he would return.

Proper translations are critical, because mistranslations lead to false expectations. For example, many Christians have the impression that the literal end of the world is coming at Christ’s return. This contradicts the thought that “the earth abideth forever.” (Eccl. 1:4) How comforting to know that Jesus was not referring to the end of the *world*, but the end of the Gospel *age*.

THE “DAYS OF NOAH”

One such evidence of this end of the *age* was that “... as the Days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the son of man be.” (Matt. 24:37) To many Christians the concept of Christ’s coming (*parousia-presence*) merely means the imminence of his actual

return. However, likening the presence of Christ to the days of Noah will show a far more dynamic significance. The Luke 17:26 account states: “As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man.” As it is obvious that Noah was present “in the days of Noah,” so it should be equally obvious that the Son of man would be present in “the days of the Son of man.”

The prophecy continues by elaborating the events of Noah’s day which would find their parallels in the days of the Son of man. Matthew 24:38, 39 reads: “For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.” It was the *lack of awareness*, then, and not the *wickedness* of Noah’s day that formed the illustration of conditions at the time of the return of Christ. Additionally, it was not the flood, but the presence and work of Noah before the flood which prefigured the return of Christ at his Second Advent. This, then, is the import of the days of Noah. As life continues its hectic pace with its eating, drinking, and mar-

rying, it is a temptation for the Christian to be swept along in this current of events and become drowsy. “Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.” 1 Thess. 5:6

THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH VIRGINS

In the chapter following the signs of the end of the age, Jesus gave his disciples a parable which would further warn to be awake and watching for the evidence of his return. “Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins [Christians espoused to Christ] . . . five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps [God’s Word], and took no oil [the spirit of truth] with them: but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh [the return of our Lord]; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps [searched the Scriptures and trimmed away every vestige of error]. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out . . .” (Matt. 25: 1-13) Jesus was warning his disciples that there would come a time when he would return and seek those



who would be awake, watching and searching the Scriptures for the evidence of his return. *"I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ."* 2 Cor. 11:2

The parable concludes: *"Afterward came also the other virgins saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh."* (Matt. 25:11-13) It is most important to note that Jesus is not saying this hour would never be known, for why would he have given so many signs of his return? Why indeed would Jesus need to give signs unless he knew that only those watching for these signs would be aware of what they meant? No, we can see that Jesus is illustrating conditions among his followers at the time of his return. Notice that the *virgins* are broken up into two classes—one which is diligent and excited about their coming bridegroom, and the other which is less zealous. The first class is ready when the bridegroom returns and the second class lacks the oil—the spirit of truth gained by diligent study, prayer, and fellowship with other Christians.

The consequence of this unpreparedness is that the foolish virgins are unaware of the return of the bridegroom and lose the chief blessing of being a part of the *"bride of Christ."* Revelation speaks of this group of believers as those who serve *"before the throne,"* and not on the throne. They are still in heaven, but serving in a lesser capacity. Psalms 45:14-15 confirms this: *"The virgins, her companions who follow her, will be brought to Thee; they will enter into the King's palace."* The Apostle Paul also speaks symbolically of those in heaven: *"... one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead."* 1 Cor. 15:41-42

"EVERY EYE WILL SEE HIM"

The majority of Christians today expect a return of Christ so cataclysmic that *"every eye will [literally] see him."* (Rev. 1:7) Matthew 24:30 states: *"... they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds. . ."* These Scriptures seem to pose a real disharmony with the thought that he would return as a thief, quietly, in the night while the world sleeps, and also with John's thought: *"Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more."* John 14:19

Bible symbolism resolves this seeming conflict. The harmony comes by determining the definition of the word *see*. We use the term *see* when we understand another person's viewpoint. Thus, at Jesus' second advent, no one will actually see him with their literal eyes, for he gave his flesh for the life of the world and is now a powerful, invisible spirit being. (1 Pet. 3:18; 2 Cor. 5:16) Eventually, however, all will *see* by their mental *comprehension* that he has returned to finish the work he started when he first came 2,000 years ago—redeeming the groaning creation.

Additional understanding results when we determine the symbolism of Christ *"coming in the clouds."* The Scriptures use the term *clouds* to picture trouble. We certainly are living in troublous times, and every eye is beholding this image. *"That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress . . . and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness . . ."* Zeph. 1:15

Similarly, we are informed that *"the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God . . ."* (1 Thess. 4:16) Again, we must harmonize

this with the Apostle Peter's statement, *"... there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming [presence] . . .?'"* (2 Pet. 3:3-4) It is unreasonable to suppose that during this thief-like presence the scoffers would hear a loud shout. If so, they would not be scoffing, but would heed the trumpet call. No, that the trumpet call is only for those who are watching and eager to welcome their returned Lord. They will know what evidences of Jesus' return to look for and will perceive that the tumultuous events of this century are a result of that trumpet call.

DEFINITIVE EVIDENCE OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE

Evidence of Christ's return is closely associated with the work he is doing at that time. Matthew 24 and the events in the 12th chapter of Daniel demonstrate four types of work that would be a manifestation to those watching of Christ's return.

1. THE RETURN OF ISRAEL TO HER HOMELAND (Matt. 24:32; Jer. 16:13-18) Israel is spoken of as a fig tree. Our Lord mentioned the leaves budding forth on the fig tree in context with the work he would accomplish upon his return. Clear fulfillment of this prophecy is evident as Israel has taken its place among the most

productive and stable countries of the world.

2. INCREASE OF KNOWLEDGE & RAPID TRANSPORTATION INNOVATIONS (Dan. 12:4) The book of Daniel states: *"At that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince [Christ]. . ."* (Dan. 12:1) Evidence of this time would be the astounding increase of knowledge and travel. There should be no doubt that since the beginning of the 20th Century, the fulfillment of this prophecy has amazed even the most learned.

3. UNPRECEDENTED WORLDWIDE TROUBLE - See *Current Events*, next page.

4. RESTITUTION OF ALL THINGS BEGUN - (Acts 3:19-21)

Liberty has been the cry of the 20th Century. Equality of the races, human rights, women's rights, animal rights, environmental rights, etc. All that was lost in Adam due to his disobedience, is being gradually restored.

PROGRESSIVE WORK OF THE RETURNED LORD

Not only would Jesus' return be as a thief, but it is spoken of as a *snare* upon the world. (Luke 21:34-35) We read in 2 Peter 3:10, *"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens [powers of spiritual control-Eph. 6:12] shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements [ecclesiasticism] shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also [civil governments] and the works that are therein shall be burned up."* The burning described here need not be taken any more literally than the intensely symbolic language of the balance of the passage. It simply means that events shall be so destructive to the old orders of government, society and world religion that the people will be ready for and welcome the incoming Kingdom of our Lord. These events are but the first steps of Christ's return as he prepares for the establishment of this Kingdom. Then, at last, every knee will bow and every tongue confess his right to rule in righteousness as the *"prince of peace."* Isa. 9:6; 45:23

Truly, the events of the 20th Century have been unprecedented on every front compared to that of all history. All earnest Bible students should recognize these signs as being current realities. They signal clearly that we are living in the very *"days of the Son of man."* □



This Scripture applies not only to our Lord's first advent, but also to his second. Whether one is an atheist, Christian, Muslim or Jew, there is worldwide expectation of something about to overturn the world as we know it. According to a recent Associated Press Poll, nearly one out of every four Christians, an estimated 26.5 million Americans, expect Jesus' return in their lifetime. Nearly as many, an estimated 21.1 million, are so sure of it that they feel a desperation to convert friends and neighbors.

At Jesus' first advent, all men of faith had great expectations of the coming deliverer of God's people. Yet, their expectations were that a mighty general would ride into Jerusalem and immediately overthrow the oppressing governments. When, instead, Messiah was the lowly and meek lamb of God, their expectations soon turned to disappointment. In fact, after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. Not knowing it was Jesus, they said to him in their disappointment, "We trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel." (Luke 24:21) At that point, Jesus revealed to them the meaning of the prophecies which indicated that he must first suffer to accomplish the ultimate freedom of the entire human race. "... he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him..." Isaiah 53:1-3

As at his first advent, Christ was among his people, but they saw him not. So too, it will be in the parallel of this time during his second advent. John the Baptizer said, "... there standeth

one among you, whom ye know not." (John 1:26) Further, the Apostle Paul states the reason for this secrecy, "Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." (1 Cor. 2:8) Could it be that there standeth one among us whom we know not? And could it be for the very same reason—that the kings and nobles of our day must be unaware in order for the Lord to accomplish the work of tearing down this old order to bring in the new?

What makes today's anticipation of the Lord's return more intense than the last two millennia? Israel! We submit that Israel is THE key factor in Christian anticipation of the Lord's return and Jewish anticipation of their Messiah. When Israel became a nation in 1948, there was no stopping the hope of this generation. "Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled." Luke 21:32

Another factor which fuels anticipation is Bible chronology. Even if various denominations are off by a few years of one another's chronology, most agree that we are now in the seventh thousand year since Adam was created. Those who believe chronological features of Scripture wait with special expectancy, for these promise that after 6,000 years of the permission of evil, a time of 1,000 years rest is to follow. Then Christ rules from heaven over the Kingdom of God on earth. Many Bible scholars agree that the seventh creative "day of rest" in Genesis is symbolic of this future day of rest and is 1,000 years in length. "...a day to the Lord is as a thousand years." (2 Pet. 3:8) Soon, the expectations of all will be rewarded with this everlasting peace and rest. □

CURRENT EVENTS: TODAY'S HEADLINES WRITTEN 2,000 YEARS AGO



One particular sign of the Lord's return is intense trouble. Daniel 12 states: "...there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation... the wicked shall do wickedly..." Jesus stated: "For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time... except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved..." Matt. 24:21-22

ASSOCIATED SIGNS WHICH ACCOMPANY THE RETURN OF CHRIST

- Evils exposed as never before - Luke 12:2; 1 Cor. 4:5
- Spiritism and the Occult increases - Matt. 24:26
- Wars and war preparations intensify - Joel 3:9-11; Matt. 24:6
- False Christs appear everywhere - Matt. 24:5
- Natural disasters — floods, hurricanes, earthquakes - Mark 13:8
- Rampant infidelity from presidency to pulpit - Luke 18:8; 2 Tim. 4:1-4
- Faith replaced by philosophies—Luke 18:8; 2 Tim. 4:1-4
- Men seek pleasure rather than Godliness - 2 Tim. 3:1-5, 13
- Strife intensifies between capital and labor - James 5:1-4
- Juvenile delinquency and lack of respect for parents - 2 Tim. 3:2
- Men cry fearfully for peace - 1 Thess. 5:3; Luke 21:26

All of this shaking and turmoil is because the new King is tearing down this old order and ushering in his Kingdom. Psalm 72 speaks of this as dashing the old civil, social, financial and corrupt religious

institutions as a potter's vessel. This is the beginning of the reign of righteousness. As a result of this blessed reign, "He shall judge the afflicted of the people, he shall give help to the children of the needy; but he shall crush the oppressor... In his days shall the righteous flourish, and abundance of peace shall be so long as the moon endureth... He will deliver the needy when he crieth; the afflicted also who hath no helper..." Psa. 72:4-14

Although there is great trouble prophesied, there is also blessed peace which shall follow, "...when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord... whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began." Acts 3:29-21

Yes, times of refreshing and restitution result from the Lord's presence, too. "Seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger." Zeph. 2:3 □

Israel Watch: Jerusalem, A Trembling Cup

Since Israel became a nation in 1948, Jerusalem has been the most contentious world issue. Yasser Arafat claims ancient eastern Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital. Most nations want to internationalize the city because it is holy to three faiths: Christian, Muslim and Jew. The Vatican is especially vocal, opposing Israel's claim to Jerusalem. Israel declares that Jerusalem is its eternal capital, never to be divided again.

Why are so many fighting over Jerusalem, and why now? Jerusalem is the focal point of this trouble because of its centrality in God's plan — that He will regather His people and that mankind will come to Jerusalem to learn from the Jewish people about Him. (Isa. 2:1-4; Jer. 32:37-44; Zech. 8:20-23) Just prior to this golden age, trouble and controversy fill the earth as the kingdom of this world passes from Satan's control to Christ's. Nations and religions are unaware that their efforts to control Jerusalem will fail and that these efforts fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah (12:2-3). He foretold that Jerusalem would be a "trembling cup" in the hands of the nations and a "burdensome stone" to the people of the world. Current controversies surrounding Jerusalem are signs that this present evil world is ending and a new righteous world under Christ will soon begin. "I will shake all nations and the desire of all nations shall come." Haggai 2:7 □

EDITOR'S NOTES: MEN'S HEARTS FAIL FOR FEAR

"When the Son of Man cometh, will he find faith in the earth?" (Luke 18:8) The conflict between faith and unbelief is the great reality of the 20th Century and is one of the many signs of the Lord's return. With lack of faith comes the inevitable — fear. What is this world coming to? What will happen to all who have not accepted Christ?

FEAR OF FAILURE

Christians entered the 20th Century optimistic that modern advances in mass communications would make world conversion finally a reality. But check their progress in the chart provided. The fact is that Christianity, even in its broadest possible definition, has barely kept pace with world population growth!

And still the majority of Christians today insist that they must convert the world for fear that these billions will be lost forever if they don't. In an unprecedented action, the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination, last year vowed to make special efforts to evangelize the Jews. But, is this effort futile? Is God's will to convert the world now? If it is God's will, don't these statistics indicate that God has been a miserable failure? Yet, He did promise in 1 Timothy 2:4 that he *"will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth."*

We believe that the answer to these questions follows in verse 6 *"...to be testified in due time."* The work of the Gospel Age has not been to convert all, but to call out from the world a *"little flock"* for *"God's name"* — to test their faith in this present evil world. When

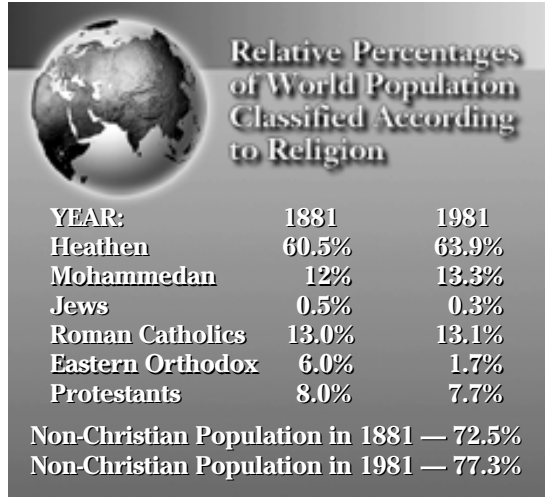
this work is complete, that small number of faithful believers constituting the Church will reign with their returned Lord and teach righteousness to the groaning creation. Then will come the *"due time"* for blessing and successfully converting the world.

FEAR OVER THE YEAR 2,000

Little do most people know that the year 2,000 has already begun. What do we mean by this? If we calculate the actual date of Jesus' birth, we find that he was born in BC2. "BC" means before Christ, and "AD" means *anno Domini* or in the year of our Lord. Thus, BC2 would be the date from which to start counting. This frenzy over the year 2,000 is based on anticipation of catastrophe upon our Lord's return. In reality, the year 2,000 is an arbitrary date which holds no prophetic significance. Based on the actual date of our Lord's birth, the year 2,000 clock has already begun to strike!

"ANTIDOTE FOR HUMAN WOE"

Fear not only grabs hold of the faithless masses, but also those who claim a faith in God. What is the remedy for fear? **Conform your heart to God:** *"The peace of God which passeth all understanding shall keep your mind."* *"My son, give me thine heart and let thine eyes observe my ways."* **Pray:** *"Come boldly to the throne of grace that ye might find grace to help in every time of need."* **Study:** *"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet. . ."* To have faith in God we must learn His character, plans and purposes. The promises of God will provide needed rest. Prov. 23:26; Psa. 119:105; Phil. 4:7; Heb. 4:16; 2 Tim. 2:15



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The goal of this report is to encourage others in their studies of the Scriptures and to share the peace and joy we have learned through this same kind of careful study. The articles covered in each edition are the result of cooperative studies of Bible Students worldwide. We encourage you to search diligently for the beautiful plan of salvation found in God's word; proving all things and holding fast that which is good. II Tim. 2:15

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