

Who will make it **right**?

Not surprisingly, it is not only "religious" people who are interested in the end of the world. People from various fields of study and expertise are convinced that the world is moving rapidly toward something big and bad. From philosophers to politicians and from Hollywood producers to the common person, the end of the world is a bit of a hot topic. Perspectives, of course, vary, but many are gravely concerned. It's hard to deny the idea that the world appears to be "coming apart at the seams" morally, environmentally, economically, and socially.

The Bible has a great deal to say about the end of this world. As many as 1 in every 25 verses in the New Testament address the topic. Three important New Testament passages are found below. Look up each of them and see if you can recognize a crucial word that occurs in all three.

› Matthew 24:42

› 1 Thessalonians 5:4,6

› 1 Peter 4:7

The word is "watch". When it comes to the end of the world Jesus says watch. And Paul says watch. And Peter says watch. The question that naturally follows from that imperative is: for what? That is, what are we to be watching for?

The answer is signs. Not road signs or advertising signs, but the signs of the times. See Matthew 16:1-4.

History Repeats Itself

Throughout history God has sent His people specific signs that pointed to an important event. For example, consider some of the signs associated with Jesus' first advent.

› the mysterious star ~ Numbers 24:17 (fulfilled Matthew 2:2)

› born of a virgin ~ Isaiah 7:14 (fulfilled Matthew 1:22,23)

› born in Bethlehem ~ Micah 5:2 (fulfilled Matthew 2:6)

The purpose of the signs was to prepare people to recognize and receive the promised Messiah. Sadly, though, Scripture records that Jesus was largely unrecieved and unrecognized by His own people, the Jews (see John 1:11). Why? In part, because they did not consider the ancient signs. They were not

watching, thus they were not ready for His arrival. They simply missed Him. It may be helpful to read Matthew 16:1-4 again in this context. According to the Bible, history will repeat itself on this very point. Jesus will return to this world a second time, but He will be unrecognized and unreceived by many. As before, many will not be prepared for His coming. Why? For the same reason: because they did not consider the foretold signs. Yes, just as there were signs for His first coming, there are signs for His second coming. No wonder Jesus, Paul, and Peter were so emphatic: Watch!

A Helpful Analogy

In Matthew 24, we find Jesus sitting atop the Mount of Olives as His disciples approach Him for a private interview. They sense that Jesus' most recent rejection (Matthew 23, especially vss. 37-39) has taken an emotional toll on Him. In short, they can tell He's down. So they come to cheer Him. They seek to encourage and uplift Him by pointing to the Temple's beautiful stones and enduring position (v. 1). They can't believe what Jesus says to them (v. 2) in response! "*Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.*" This is not what they were expecting. Jesus tells them that this grand temple—the very object they were trying to cheer Him with—will be so totally destroyed that two stones will not be left together. Talk about a change of direction! The disciples, being Jews, couldn't imagine life without a temple. The first temple—Solomon's grand temple which was much larger and more magnificent than this one—had already been destroyed. The destruction of the second temple, they assumed, must coincide with and portend the very end of the world itself! This is clear from the question they then ask Jesus: "*Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?*" (v. 3)

In answering their urgent question Jesus intertwined the coming destruction of Jerusalem (which would occur in AD 70) with the end of the age. That is, the end of the world. His answer, sometimes called The Olivet Discourse, is the what follows in Matthew 24 and 25. In this answer Jesus employs two very helpful analogies, or illustrations, to help us understand the nature of the signs of the end. The first is found in Matthew 24:8. The second in Matthew 24:32, 33. Here they are:

1. labor pains—these announce the coming of a baby
2. the buds of a fig tree—these announce the coming of summer and of fruit

These two illustrations share the following characteristics. They are:

1. visible (they are detectable with the eye)
2. progressive (they increase as they approach the coming event)
3. climactic (they have an end; in one case a baby, and in the other summer and fruit)

Both illustrations describe things that increase in both frequency and intensity until the terminal event is achieved. That is, they become greater in number and greater in prominence as the event approaches. In employing these illustrations, Jesus is effectively telling us that the "*signs of the times*" will not be something new or novel, but things that have previously occurred. What will make them recognizable will be their increasing frequency and intensity—like labor contractions, closer and closer and more intense and more intense.

The Signs of the Times

What follows in Matthew 24 is an amazing sermon where Jesus Christ reveals these "*signs of the times*". A great many signs could be cited, but we will just note just nine. They address the religious, political, natural, and social world. As you read over each of them ask yourself the question, Is this happening with greater frequency and intensity than ever before? They are:

1. False christs and false prophets (Matthew 24:4,5,11,24)
2. Wars and rumors of wars (Matthew 24:6)
3. Famines (Matthew 24:7)
4. Pestilences (Matthew 24:7)
5. Earthquakes (Matthew 24:7)
6. Violence (Matthew 24:12)
7. Pleasure driven society (Matthew 24:12; 2 Timothy 3:1-4)
8. Loss of family values (Matthew 24:12; 2 Timothy 3:1-4)
9. Gospel to the world (Matthew 24:14)

In each case we see that Jesus' analogies were profoundly appropriate. Each of these is happening at never before seen rates and/ or intensities. The baby is about to come! The tree is about to fruit! Summer is almost here! Only it's not a baby in a manger this time. It's the King of Kings and Lord and Lords (see Revelation 19)! He's coming to save His followers and punish His enemies (see 2Thes. 1:7-10).

A Reasonable Motive

There can be little doubt that this prophecy demands our attention. Something is just over the horizon. The "*signs of the times*" events are progressing at a climactic pace. Unfortunately and tragically, many are missing the signs—just like at the first coming. But the signs are there for all to see. As we said at the outset, even nonreligious people sense that something is happening. Consider the following wonderful promise: "*Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*" (2 Peter 3:13). There is nothing to fear. Yes, the end is near. But for those who are lovingly hoping and watching, the end is really just the beginning!