

## Are These The Last Days? (Part 1)

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How long do we have to wait until Christ returns to set up His Kingdom? How long until our change comes? These are very current questions in the greater church of God. Some people say we still have a few hundred years. Many predict twenty to fifty years. Others assert we can count the years on one hand, and a few even insist Christ could return tomorrow.

Are the waning years of the twentieth century the last days? Does our former teaching under Herbert Armstrong still apply? Does the break-up of the church and the subsequent lack of power in preaching the gospel around the world mean that the end is far off? Did we read the fig tree wrong? Did we read a false interpretation into the signs of the times?

Many say just that. Even publications of some of the churches of God "hedge their bets" when the subject of Christ's coming arises. Peter and Jude warned us that this would happen (II Peter 3:1-4; Jude 16-19)! Just when all the factors would be in place, they wrote, scoffers, mockers, cynics, skeptics, rationalists—all absolutely reasonable people—would try to convince God's people that He would not return soon.

What does their siren song sound like? Many look upon the world scene and conclude: "Europe needs a decade or more before it can challenge the U.S. economically, politically and militarily." "Peace in the Middle East looks feasible for the first time since Israel's founding." "The 200-million-man army of the East is not even on the horizon." "Every thought of man's heart is not evil continually yet!"

Some, judging the church's condition, form a similar opinion: "Christ cannot come back now—we haven't gone to all the world as a witness yet!" "The church still has a big work to do!" "We must reunite before Christ can return!"

All of these statements have one thing in common: an assumption that events will progress as they always have. Peter, however, warns that such reasoning is a mistake (II Peter 3:4-10)! World events will *seem* to be occurring normally, but when God's time comes, terrible and *sudden* changes will take place—and we, as His children, need to be ready!

### What Are "the Last Days"?

Most of us know what the term "the last days" means, but for clarity's sake, a quick review is warranted. The Bible uses it for the first time in Genesis 49:1, where Jacob calls his sons and says, "Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in *the last days*." Jacob then proceeds to prophesy about the national traits of the tribes of Israel before the Messiah comes.

We also find the same Hebrew word in the well-known verses of Isaiah 2:2 and Micah 4:1: "Now it shall come to pass in *the latter days* that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established on the top of the mountains. . . ." The prophets then describe what will occur when God's Kingdom is established on earth.

In the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles use the corresponding Greek term 16 times, and it is translated "last day," "last days," "last time" "last times" and "last hour." John alone uses it 8 times, most often referring to the first resurrection. In John 12:48, Jesus uses "the last day" to denote the Great White Throne period.

From just this short review, we can see that "the last days" is a synonymous term for "the day of the Lord," "that day" or "the day" found throughout the Old and New Testaments. Depending on its context, it can mean the specific day of Christ's return, the time of God's wrath, the Millennium, or the whole Christian era from the church's founding to all eternity! However, when someone speaks of the last days, he most frequently means the general period before the return of Jesus Christ.

## Signs of the Last Days

Herbert Armstrong most frequently cited Matthew 24:22 as the most provable of the signs that we are living in the last days: "And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened." It is instructive to see the clause, "no flesh would be saved," in other translations:

**James Moffatt:** "not a soul would be saved alive."

***The Four Gospels* by E.V. Rieu:** "no living thing would have escaped."

**Amplified Bible:** "no human being would endure and survive."

**Revised English Bible:** "no living thing could survive."

***The New Testament* by Kenneth Wuest:** "all flesh would not be saved from destruction."

We can infer a concrete meaning from this verse: The last days will be marked by mankind's ability to annihilate every living thing from the face of planet earth! If God does not step in, if He does not intervene in world affairs, the nations will fight until all life perishes!

Is this possible today? The U.S. and Soviet Union just fought a 45-year Cold War during which both sides stockpiled enough nuclear weapons to erase life from earth 50 times over. That is overkill! Though the nations have reduced nuclear stockpiles in recent years, the current overkill factor is still more than enough to kill all flesh. Statistics from 1995 show that 40,640 nuclear weapons are still available to the five major nuclear powers: the U.S., Russia, Britain, France and China. Several other nations are known or thought to have nuclear capabilities: Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea, South Africa, Iran, Ukraine and others.

Today, the nations do not have just nuclear weapons at their disposal. Now they have chemical weapons, biological weapons, neutron bombs, and who knows how many secret weapons systems still yet unearthed by the media.

Are we living in the last days? Yes, indeed! This one sign proves it conclusively, for at no other time in history has this been possible! Only since the advent of the atomic bomb in 1945 or the hydrogen bomb in 1952 has man had the knowledge and ability to wipe himself out!

## How Long Do the Last Days Last?

So man has been able to commit genocide for fifty years or so. He has not "pushed the button" yet, so why suppose he ever will? Could we not go on for a long time, maybe centuries, before we attempt to

kill ourselves off? We know from history that man has never failed to use a weapon he has invented. Though many consider nuclear weapons to be the armaments of last resort, can we confidently assert that no one will ever resort to them? How long must we wait before genocide begins?

Jesus gives us the answer in Luke 21:32: "**ASSUREDLY**, I say to you, this generation will *by no means* pass away till all things are fulfilled." But which generation is "this generation"? Obviously, if we are to believe Scripture, it could not have been the generation of the apostles because "all these things" were not fulfilled in their lifetimes. By putting verses 31-32 together, we can conclude that "this generation" is the one that "see[s] these things happening." That is, the generation that recognizes the signs of the Olivet Prophecy being fulfilled is "this generation."

By understanding that since about 1952 man has been able to eradicate all life from this planet, we begin to narrow down the parameters. What generation discovered, invented, tested and used (in Hiroshima and Nagasaki) the technology to erase human life from earth? What generation heard the heavily prophetic message of Herbert W. Armstrong, particularly his explanation of Matthew 24? What generation most enthusiastically supported his work during its heyday?

If this is correct reasoning, Christ describes the generation that fought World War II and carried on the Cold War. This generation witnessed the escalation of religious fervor, war, disease, hunger and natural disasters and recognized that the prophecies were being fulfilled. These people, called by some demographers "the G.I. Generation," are now in their seventies and eighties and will pass into history within the next decade or two. They formed the backbone of the church when it hit its spiritual peak in the 1950s and 60s. More than any other age group, they fit the parameters of this prophecy.

This is not exact. Jesus never meant it to be a perfect indicator, for He says, "But of that day and hour no one knows" (Matthew 24:36). We know generally, however, that these are the last days because religious deception is intensifying, as are war, famine, pestilence, earthquakes, strange weather patterns, and other natural disasters.

"All these," warns our Savior, "are the ***beginning*** of sorrows" (verse 8). These must come first before the Tribulation, the martyrdom of the saints and the persecution of the church (verse 9). If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we can easily recognize these preparatory events as fulfilling this prophecy. These place us squarely in the last days.

### **Another Sign of the End**

Matthew 24:14 offers another sign of the end time: "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." The church believed in recent years that the ministry of Herbert Armstrong fulfilled this verse, but subsequent events force us to modify our understanding.

It is certain that the end did not come immediately upon the death of Herbert Armstrong. On the other hand, he indeed preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God around the world as it had not been proclaimed since the first century. Though he technically did not witness before every nation, the preaching and literature of the church of God blanketed the globe in a way never done before.

In the context of Matthew 24, however, the timing of this great work of preaching the gospel is wrong if it applies *strictly* to the ministry of Herbert Armstrong. In the paragraph running between

verses 4 and 14, this statement appears at the end of the context, after the opening of the fifth seal (verse 9; see Revelation 6:9-11). Thus, verse 14 seems to indicate a ministry active DURING the Great Tribulation, the subject Jesus expands on in verses 15-28.

What ministry is active on a worldwide scale during the Great Tribulation? None other than the Two Witnesses! From the summary of that ministry in Revelation 11, we can easily see that God empowers them during the 3½ years of the Tribulation (verse 3). Their ministry is called a "testimony" (verse 7), the same Greek word translated as "witness" in Matthew 24:14. When the Beast finally kills them in Jerusalem, everyone on earth rejoices (Revelation 11:10), indicating that the witnesses' work is worldwide. And three and a half days after their deaths, Christ returns and the age ends (verses 11-13; Zechariah 14:3-5).

Mr. Armstrong would probably be the first to admit this. When he told the church near the end of his life that the preaching of the gospel had been done, he could not have been ignorant of the work of the Two Witnesses. It is clear he meant that he had finished the work God raised *him* to do. That work revived the truth of God in many areas and prepared the way for the ministry of the Two Witnesses, who will surely base their teachings on the foundation of true doctrine restored through Herbert Armstrong. However, we should see his ministry only as a type or precursor to the even greater work that will be done during the Great Tribulation.

Matthew 24:14 is indeed a definite sign of the end. It applies specifically to the very last days before Christ's second coming when God will give the world a final warning through the mouth of two witnesses (see II Corinthians 13:1; Deuteronomy 17:6).

### **Church's Condition a Sign**

The apostle Paul gives the brethren at Thessalonica still another sign of the end: "Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition" (II Thessalonians 2:3). He explains "that Day" as "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" and "the day of Christ" (verses 1-2).

Thus, before Christ returns, two events must occur:

1. The falling away.
2. The revealing of the man of sin.

Because of space restraints, we will limit our comment to "the falling away." (For more information on "the man of sin," please request our audio tapes on that subject.)

"The falling away" is a translation of the Greek *apostasia*, meaning "departure," "forsaking," "defection" or "apostasy." In secular Greek, the word "is used politically of rebels" (*Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 413). Thus, in the present context, it denotes a departure or apostasy from the faith, the revealed truth of God (see I Timothy 4:1). Such a defection from the true gospel and doctrine was a very real concern for the first-century apostles. Paul, Peter, John, James and Jude all warned of it in their letters. Despite their warnings, it did indeed occur as the century wore on.

Paul tells us specifically what the "unrighteous deception" (II Thessalonians 2:10) is for which the people depart. In verse 7, he names it "the mystery of lawlessness," a set of beliefs that is totally

contrary to "the truth" (verses 10-12). This deception is "the lie" that Satan has always foisted on mankind—that we do not need to obey God's law (see Genesis 3:4; Romans 1:21-25).

Just in the last decade we, too, have faced apostasy. How many of the former tens of thousands of brethren in God's church are "contend[ing] earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3)? How many of these have turned their backs on the revealed truths of God and returned to the twisted doctrines of "mainstream Christianity" (II Peter 3:16)?

Paul advises, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (II Thessalonians 2:15). We should be diligently re-affirming and strengthening the truths we were taught and deepening our understanding of them. In this way we will show we love the truth that we might be saved (verse 10).

Just the fact that we must "hold fast the pattern of sound words" (II Timothy 1:13; see I Timothy 6:20) adds weight to the other signs that these **ARE** the last days.