

The End Is Not Yet

Warnings of Coming Punishment

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You may have noticed that the world has been going through a bit of a rough stretch over the past several weeks or months beyond the political and social upheaval that we have been witnessing as a result of rabid and rapid progressivism that has been going around the world, the constant sniping at, and the undermining of President Trump at every turn, not to mention the angst and the uproar over what is going on over there in North Korea and the test flights of nuclear weapons or whatever that have been going over Japan, and that sort of thing.

But also we have witnessed a handful of major natural disasters, as well as a few manmade ones, that have put quite a few lives in jeopardy. I am referring to, of course, hurricanes Harvey and Irma and of course, we had Jose and Maria come through too. The massive fires in Washington State, Oregon, Utah, Montana, California, and not all of those were caused by lightning strikes. We had an 8.2 earthquake and then a 7.1 earthquake in southern Mexico. And I believe yesterday we also had a 6.6 earthquake off the coast of Japan, near Fukushima. There was monsoon flooding and landslides in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh that killed many people there, and there were a handful of others around the world.

Now, when we see this in the news, we can think that these disasters are quickening. They are happening more and more often and many people do assert that the number and cost of these disasters are increasing, they would say, exponentially, which if you think about it is ridiculous. But according to U.S. government statistics, since 1980, 212 disasters have hit the United States causing \$1.2 trillion dollars in damage. Now, we are talking about 40 years or so since 1980. A typical year in the 1980s saw an average of 2.7 major disasters, and I should define major disaster as they do. That is, a major disaster is a disaster that occurs and damages over \$1 billion dollars also occur as a result. And all that is adjusted for inflation. So a major disaster is a \$1 billion dollar disaster.

In the '90s, that number of major disasters increased to 4.6 in that decade. In the 2000s, it went up to 5.4 per year. So far this decade, hold onto your hat, the number of disasters each year has averaged 10.5. Now, by this reckoning, we have been adding another major disaster to the average every four years. So we went from 2.7 to 4.6 to 5.4 and then jumped to 10.5. That seems astounding, does it not? But this is somewhat deceiving because these estimates, as I very clearly showed you, are based on cost. We are having more costly disasters because the economy is far larger than it was in the 1980s. In fact, the economy of the US since the 1980s has doubled.

Now, what does this mean? That means in areas like Florida and Houston and other places where the disasters have struck most recently, there have been more homes, more businesses, more factories, more hospitals. We have been building and building and building, and putting new things in a lot of those places where probably it should not necessarily be. And so when a hurricane comes through or some sort of natural disaster comes through, it causes a whole lot more damage than it did before when there was not so much built there.

So accounting for economic growth, if we do all the numbers and put everything on an equal basis in terms of our economy and all this economic growth we have had, then major disasters have been increasing by one every 25 years, not one every four years, like the other way of looking at it shows. So, yes, the number of disasters has been increasing, but not by nearly as much as we have been led to believe. Yes, these are bad storms. Yes, these are bad floods. Yes, these are bad earthquakes, bad fires, whatever—they are bad. I do not want to minimize that at all. But it is not significantly worse than it was 25, 30, 40 years ago. Only a little bit, a little incrementally.

Now, a major reason why everybody seems to think that these disasters are unrelentingly piling on is media coverage. The media has just been, I do not know, it is like they are rabid about these things. We saw it in the Hurricane Irma coverage very, very clearly. We suffered through a week of solid "Run for the hills! This is going to be the worst disaster that has ever hit the mainland of the United States!" And then, while he was ordering a mandatory evacuation, the mayor of Miami Beach, a man named Philip Levine, called Irma a "nuclear hurricane."

Now, if you could tell me what a nuclear hurricane is, I would really like to know. There is no such thing as a nuclear hurricane. I know what he was trying to get at, that it was going to be like a nuclear bomb came through after this hurricane came through. But, I just got the feeling that he had been watching the Weather Channel and they had been using up all the hysterical, overblown descriptors and superlatives and he decided he had to come up with a new one. I mean, have you watched the Weather Channel? They are hanging off poles in the 180 mile an hour winds ("It's great down here!") and they are trying to actually make money by their coverage and get you to watch their coverage and not somebody else's coverage. But I will get to that just in a minute.

The media have a saying, "If it bleeds, it leads." You know what that means. If there is blood, if there is negativity, if there is death, if there is disaster, it is going to go to the top of the news. That is what they are going to dwell on, that is what they are going to take the most time on. And they do this because negative news sells, negative news gets eyeballs on the screen, it gets people's attention. So we get a vastly disproportionate amount of bad news hyped, fluffed, and drilled into us constantly rather than good news. Good news does not sell.

You know where they put good news? They put good news in a 30-second spot right near the end of their newscast so they can leave you with a smile and feeling like, well, maybe there is a rainbow somewhere, and you know, life will go on. But their real mental state is that the worse the world seems, the more viewers are going to watch what they have to say and therefore their advertisers will be happy. It is all about ratings. It is all about advertising dollars, as we have heard over this past summer or maybe it has been longer than that about the fake news that is going on.

The media is not necessarily interested in giving us a straight story. They do not necessarily care about the truth. The truth comes after things like their agenda, whatever it is that they want you to understand, their ideology, political correctness, and of course, their money and ratings. That all comes before the real truth, the actual truth of the matter because they are a business, they are tied with political people, political movements, and they are trying to persuade you to go in a certain direction.

So we cannot trust the news. We cannot even trust them in terms of natural disasters. We thought we could not trust them about things like politics and the military and that sort of thing, and cultural issues, but we cannot trust them about something as simple as the weather. We cannot even trust them about sports. Look at what has been happening with ESPN and all the politicization of their telecast. So we have to understand this going forward that we are not going to get the truth from the news media.

Now, I am not trying at all to minimize what the people of South Texas and Florida and others in disaster zones have gone through. Not in the least. I know that these disasters, these hurricanes, the floods, and the fires up in the northwest and that sort of thing, they caused a lot of damage and they displaced a lot of people. People died. I am not saying that those disasters were not bad, not at all.

But what I am saying is that the mainstream media sets us up to think that things are far worse than they truly are because they have an agenda that they are pushing. They want us to be afraid. They want us to think that things are bad because then they can move us to do something. They can motivate us to make bad choices under duress. Add in the alternative news media who are trying to push you in another direction with their own brand of negativity, and I am surprised that we are not all depressed and on the verge of mass catatonia, just cannot do anything.

For us, true Christians who hope and believe that the return of Jesus Christ is just over the horizon, this presents a special problem. We want Him to return soon to us. We want Him to come back in our lifetimes. We want all those good things that the Kingdom of God will bring. We desire to see God's Kingdom set up on this earth to bring peace and security and prosperity to all of us, to all the earth, so that our children and our grandchildren can live in the wonderful World Tomorrow. But this can make us vulnerable. Do you realize that this makes us vulnerable to the news media and to those who are banging a different drum?

Let me put it this way. It makes us vulnerable to false hope if we are taken in by the media's negative drumbeat because it is signaling with every disaster that the end of the world is upon us and it is getting us excited and thinking,

"Oh, Christ must be coming!" But all our news is coming from a part of this world that has a different agenda. And it does not even have to be a disaster like Irma or Maria. It can be something that they say is long term like climate change and suddenly, in the blink of an eye, we are going to have Arctic temperatures down to Atlanta or so something like that. Because the way this works, they say that suddenly we will reach a tipping point and things will be terrible. Or the long term effects of overpopulation or the inability to produce enough food or even asteroid strikes. The percentage of our risk of being struck by an asteroid strike has gone up by several points over the past few years because "we're in danger and this could be an extinction level event! So we better have something ready to go shoot some nuclear bombs up there or something to divert these things," and they try to get us scared that this is going to happen soon.

Now, I expect to receive criticism for this sermon that I am somehow putting far off Christ's return or saying that He delays His coming. And I am not saying that at all. Not at all. Like you, I want Jesus Christ to come as soon as He possibly can. But I do not want us, 1) to be manipulated by the media, not in the least, they are not our friends, and 2) I do not want us to place our own desires, our own hopes—which are good things—but to place them above what is revealed in Scripture about Christ's return. Because we need to be linked up with what the Scripture says, we need to be thinking along that line, not along the lines of our wishes and desires for Him to come. We need to be at one with God in thinking about the return of Jesus Christ.

As the apostle Peter says in II Peter 1:19, it is especially clear in the King James Version that, "the word of prophecy is more sure than even eyewitness testimony." What this is saying is that what God reveals to us in His Word in terms of prophecy is more sure, it is far more reliable than the evening news. If you know what the Bible says and you have the ability through the Spirit of God to make links between that and what is going on in this world, then you have a far better chance of understanding where we are in prophecy. But the Word of God and the prophecies that are in it have to come first, not what the news is telling us, not what our feelings are telling us. We have to be tuned in to what God is saying in His Word rather than what we are seeing externally.

This is the Feast of Trumpets and I would like to go back to Leviticus 23 and read the scriptures here on the Feast of Trumpets just to touch bases here.

Leviticus 23:23-25 Then the word of the Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, saying, 'In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work on it; and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the Lord.'"

There is really not much here. This is very bare bones instruction, a very bare bones command here. It tells us when, the first day of Tishri; it tells us that we are supposed to keep a Sabbath; that we are supposed to have a holy convocation; we are not supposed to work; we are supposed to offer an offering. And the only thing that it tells us that gives us an idea of how it is different from any other kind of holy day is that it is a memorial of blowing trumpets. It is a day of warning. It is a day of getting us awake to something. It is a signal of some sort.

Now, if we would go to I Thessalonians 4:16, we can get an idea of how we have understood this in terms of its place in the plan of God, on the prophetic timeline of the plan of God. We believe that this festival looks forward to the return of Christ and to the resurrection of the firstfruits. Let us just read that.

I Thessalonians 4:16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice [And I should mention here that back in Leviticus 23, that is essentially what the word is. It is a shout of the shofar.] of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

So, we have always thought of the Feast of Trumpets in these terms, that it looks forward to the return of Jesus Christ, to the resurrection of the saints, and all those other details that we find in Scripture about what will happen on that day. His coming as a warrior to fight the enemies that are gathered against Him and all of that stuff that happens with the false prophet and the Beast and that sort of thing that will happen at the time of the return of Christ. So this is how we have understood it.

But today, beyond all of this, I want to rehearse a few of the prophecies of the end time. Not necessarily of Christ's return, although we will get to that, but certainly the prophecies of the end time so that we refresh our minds about what we should be looking for. And so that we stay in line with God's Word and with God's plan in terms of our understanding where we are.

Again, I want to reiterate here that I do not want to discourage anybody in any way by what I say today. But I probably will. People really are eager for the return of Christ. But I feel that we do ourselves a greater disservice by clinging to wrongheaded speculation. And then we suffer unnecessary disappointment when our hopes are dashed. I have been in this church for a long time. I was baptized in 1984 and I do not know how many times my hopes have been dashed down through the years because we have speculated in the church that things are going to hell in a handbasket. You know, Christ must be coming back in the next five years or something like that.

And here I am now, 51 years old. I do not know how many iterations of this I have been through, but it has not happened yet. And that is not to say that it will not happen in my lifetime. But what I am saying is that we have this tendency to say, "Oh, it's almost here, it's now, it's now, it's now!" We have been on this gun lap for a long time and each time we are discouraged because it has not happened. And I think that is because we have been wanting it so much that we have been cramming the things that are happening in the world into prophecy rather than thinking rationally and rightly from God's Word about what is actually going on.

I just do not want us to get to the point where we just kind of give up. As a matter of fact, I will admit to you that for the last several years, I have been almost dead to prophecy in my own study, in my own thinking. I do not want to talk about it because I have been so discouraged by how much we have been pressured over the years to think that "It's coming, it's coming, it's coming!" and it does not come. You notice I do not give very many sermons on prophecy. I have avoided it because it tends to get people all hyped up and then we just end up disappointing them. So much speculation has gone on in the church and it is not good. I do not think so.

I am giving you my own opinion, as proud or humble as it happens to be, I do not know. But I do not think the speculation is a good thing. Not at all, because it takes our minds off the focus of Jesus Christ and His way of life. We are focused on the *prophecy*, we are focused on His return, which sounds great. But we are not doing the things that we need to be doing. We are constantly trying to figure out all the numerology of how this is going to work out and we are watching the news 24/7 and Bible study really slips, except in those areas of prophecy of course. As we will go through in a minute, Jesus Christ says our focus needs to be somewhere else.

Proverbs 13:12 says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick." That is kind of how I have been feeling over the past 10, 15 years, maybe even a little longer than that. I would not say I have been depressed for all that time. I will just say that I have been a little heartsick in terms of prophecy. Christ has not come. We have said, "He's going to come, He's going to come, He's going to come, He's going to come." And it just got to the point for me where I said, "Okay, I've got to think this through and I want to just take it slowly and rationally and not worry about it and focus on other things that are far more important."

So, what I am saying here is that we need to make sure that our hope in the return of Jesus Christ is based on truth, what is revealed in Scripture, so that we can await its fulfillment with faithful endurance as God expects. Is that not what He said to us in Matthew 24:13? "He who endures to the end shall be saved." Does it not sound like, with Him using the word "endures," that it is going to take a while, that we are going to have to wait patiently? And you know, the ones that He said that to are still waiting patiently in their graves. It never came for them except in their own special day of trumpets, as it were, that they died and the next thing that they will see is Jesus Christ as He returns and they are raised from the dead.

You understand what I mean? Most of us, I would think, I would hope, that most of us would be alive when Jesus Christ returns. But I have no guarantee of that. I could step out into the street this afternoon and get killed. Next thing I would know is the resurrection. But still, even so, I would have lived my entire life without Jesus Christ's return. And that happened for all the Christians down through history until now. We have to understand that that

He may not come in our lifetime and therefore, what should we do? That is the important thing. It is not that we do not desire it. We do! We hope for it and pray for it all the time. But as we will see in a minute, we have no idea when He is going to come.

Let us go to John 4, please. You might think this is a strange place to go but I felt that I needed at this point in the sermon to establish something. We will just read verses 23 and 24. He is talking to the woman at the well and she was speaking that we should worship on this mountain and the Jews say that you should worship in Jerusalem, and Jesus said, you really do not know what you're talking about.

John 4:23-24 "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers [that is us] will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

This is such an important scripture to us in terms of our relationship with God. This is what you might call *the* foundation of our relationship with God and with Jesus Christ. The phrase "in spirit and truth" describes our approach and our service to God. And a lot of commentators have said that when it talks about this word Spirit it really means sincerity, and there is a good deal to that. And of course, the truth would mean truth. It would mean something that is completely real and actual, and that is fine.

But we have to remember the context in which Jesus said this. He had just said it to this woman who was talking about physical things, worshipping God on a mountain, at a temple, in a certain place at a certain time. Those are kind of all physical things. We can all go to a place at a certain time. We can go into a certain building, we could do certain rites and rituals. Those are all physical, but Jesus told her, "No, no, no. The ones that God is wanting to worship Him, the ones that He is seeking to worship Him, worship Him spiritually, in spirit and in truth."

Now that does not mean that the physical things are not important, but the *more* important thing is the spirit. He is talking about the difference between a physical kind of worship and a spiritual worship. This comes *through* the Holy Spirit obviously, but He makes a very important point in verse 24 when

He starts out with "*God* is Spirit." Our God is not physical. If we want to have a relationship with Him, if we want to worship Him, then the linkage, if you will, is spiritual. He is talking about our relationship with Him. Our communion with Him is in the spirit. And these physical things that are going on around us are not nearly as important.

What He is telling us, if I can just make it over simple, is that the spiritual matters that are part of our lives, things like the fruit of the Spirit and the commandments of God and the Beatitudes and that sort of thing, those are far more important to our lives and to our future in the Kingdom of God than any of these physical things around us. He is telling us that God wants a people that are focused on those things—spiritual things—things that will edify and enhance the relationship with Him. Not that we are all so busy and concerned about making sure we are in the right place all the time or that we are doing the exact right thing in terms of, let us say, a rite or whatever.

That is what the Jews got hung up on. They were so hung up on all these little physical details that they forgot the overall spiritual message that those physical details were informing them about. And so they had no relationship with God. All they had a relationship with was the physical things. They would go out of their way to make sure no Gentile came into the Temple precincts, but then they would not give two hoots for lying or cheating one of their brethren or even blaspheming God themselves by the things that they were doing.

You see the differentiation here I am trying to explain? I do not know if I am doing a very good job. But Jesus is saying that the worshippers that He and the Father want are more interested in spiritual development than anything else, that they are more interested in staying in communion with God through His Spirit than anything else. They are not going to let the physical things that are around them shunt them off the path in any way because they are in line with God at all times through His Spirit. And that is what is most important.

So our worship, then, is based on these two factors: A spiritual relationship with the Father and the Son and the truth that has been revealed in the Scriptures. If an idea or any kind of belief does not square with what God reveals in Scripture, it should not at all enter our understanding of God's way

or of His purpose or of His plan. It does not belong, and we should be intelligent enough and astute enough to recognize them and not allow them to come into our thinking. And this includes our understanding of prophecy and especially our understanding of the return of Jesus Christ. We cannot let these outside ideas influence our thinking because it is going to move us off the path.

I want to give you an example. There was an article that was posted on Facebook a couple weeks ago and it eventually made it to the Drudge Report. It got to be national news. This was something that was circulating among church of God people on Facebook. And this article (it is almost impossible to explain), asserted that since the eclipse took place on August the 21st (one month from today), notice the number 21st, and Hurricane Harvey hit the mainland on the 25th, and the flooding in Houston began on the 26th, well, lo and behold, that must refer to Luke 21:25-26. Let us go there. Let us see this. And wow, your head is going to explode.

Luke 21:25-26 "And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; 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."

Now, that is a true prophecy. It *is* going to happen. But the eclipse and Harvey and its flooding, is no sign of this! This means, they said in this article, because of the 21st, the 25th, and the 26 and, of course, leading to Luke 21:25-26, this means, then, that these events are signs of Christ's return!

Luke 21:27-28 "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. [and of course, verse 28] Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near."

How many people did that give heart palpitations to because they believed the silly bit of numerology? The eclipse on the 21st, Harvey struck on the 25th, the flooding started on 26th. Wow, that means Christ is coming soon! And beyond that, the article went on to say that the end will arrive on September the 23rd. You guys better get ready, that is only two days away.

Now, why is that? Well, do you not know that there just happens to be a planetary alignment on Saturday? Now we need to go to Revelation 12 for this because this is where the answer to this problem appears.

Revelation 12:1-2 Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. Then being with child, she cried out in labor and pain to give birth.

Why is this the answer to our planetary alignment problem? Well, it just so happens that the sun, the moon, and Jupiter, which astrologers say is equal to the great king (of course, that would be Christ), are going to be in Virgo and Virgo is the constellation of the Virgo "Virgin Mary." So the sun, the moon, and Jupiter will be in Virgo. And do you not know that Mercury and Venus and Mars will be in Leo? That is another one that has to do with Jesus Christ as being king. He is the Messiah. So on Sabbath, on Saturday, when this all comes together according to these biblical numerologists, Revelation 12:1-2 will be fulfilled. Of course, that means that Jesus has to come right then.

Now, if you notice, Revelation 12:1-2 has nothing to do with the return of Jesus Christ. It is talking about the first appearance, giving birth to the Son of Man. Oh, well.

I find this to be maddening that people who call themselves Christians would make such leaps of, I do not even want to call it logic. They are just clutching at straws. They do not seem to realize that this is not how Bible prophecy works.

What were those things that happened in the past few weeks and months? What were they, then, if they were not signs of Jesus Christ's imminent return? What are they? Let us go back to Amos 4 and we will find a biblical answer to this question. God works in patterns. He did the same thing with Israel and with Judah that He is doing with us today. If we could not rely on the patterns that He used in the past, we have no idea of how He works today. But here He shows how He worked with Israel.

Amos 4:6-12 "Also I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places; yet you have not returned to

Me," says the Lord. "I also withheld rain from you, when there were still three months to the harvest. I made it rain on one city, I withheld rain from another city. One part was rained upon, and where it did not rain the part withered. So two or three cities wandered to another city to drink water, but they were not satisfied; yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "I blasted you with blight and mildew.

When your gardens increased, your vineyards, your fig trees, and your olive trees, the locust devoured them; yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt; your young men I killed with the sword, along with your captive horses; I made the stench of your camps come up into your nostrils; yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "I overthrew some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a firebrand plucked from the burning; yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!"

What are these things that this country, and other nations too, have gone through lately? What God says to Israel here provides the best answer. That they are *warnings* to the nation that God is aware of their sin. He is aware of their straying from Him. He is aware of how immoral they are and how their decisions are going against Him and His covenant. And the people, then, because of these warnings, need to repent and return to God. And after these warnings are repeatedly ignored, then He will send the punishment that they deserve—His major punishment, His wrath upon them—which He had described at the end of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4.

Amos 3:12-15 Thus says the Lord: As a shepherd takes from the mouth of a lion two legs or a piece of an ear, so shall the children of Israel be taken out who dwell in Samaria—in the corner of a bed and on the edge of a couch! Hear and testify against the house of Jacob," says the Lord God, the God of hosts, "That in the day I punish Israel for their transgressions, I will also visit destruction on the altars of Bethel; and on the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground. I will destroy the winter house along with

the summer house; the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end.

And then he goes on and talks to the women there in chapter 4. That is what it will eventually come. But these things that happen in the meantime, the famine, the withholding of rain, the problem with their crops, the plague, the pestilence that He sends, as well as warfare and overthrowing these cities, those are these warning signs that things are getting to a point where He is about to boil over and they need to sit up, listen, and repent. That is what we have been going through. We can say that we are going through the birth pangs of the very end. So they are, if I can put it in a few words, precursor judgments and threats, wake up calls, prods to motivate repentance and a restored relationship with Him.

Now, we know with Israel and Judah, twice it did not work. And the ultimate judgment of God comes later, after they fail to repent, which it is human nature to do, to fail to repent. And Christ's return, then happens according to the prophecies recorded in Scripture. It is all very well set up and orderly. God gives repeated warnings and then He sends His punishment; and then Christ will return at the very end of all of that.

The prophecies of Scripture are very straightforward. They are not esoteric, they are not discernible only to numerologists or somebody who is a "biblical expert," or an expert in prophecy, or some expert in the Bible code who happens to make the right number of crisscross-y things in Scripture, in the Hebrew. That is all silly. It does not mean anything because what we find in the pages of Scripture that we can read and understand are what God is going to do. The prophecies will be fulfilled in real visible, unmistakable events. There will be no doubt in those who see them, those who know the prophecies of God. They will say, "Ah, this is what Jesus meant." They will know it.

Let us go to Mark 13. This is one of the recordings of Jesus' Olivet prophecy. But I want to go to the end of it in verses 32 through 37. I have done this before in another sermon, but I want to go through it again. The Master Himself, Jesus Christ, sets some very necessary ground rules here. He had given the disciples a prophecy of when He would return. But here at the very end of the prophecy, He tells them where their heads need to be.

Mark 13:32-33 "But of that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch and pray, for you do not know when the time is."

Notice that He started saying the day and the hour. The next verse, He says the time is very general. I have heard people say, "Oh, you said that people will not know the day and the hour, but they will be able to know the month and the year." And I am not sure that that is what Jesus said here. We will not know the day or the hour. Then He comes back and says, "You do not know the time. That's only in the Father's hand." When He says to Jesus Christ "Go," He will go no sooner and we will not ever figure it out—never, ever. I mean, could you imagine a bunch of us Christians going, "Okay, come on. He's got to come now because we figured it out. We're so smart." No, that is not how it works. God, the Father is in complete control and only He knows when He will pull the trigger, as it were.

Mark 13:34-37 "It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch. 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 [He is saying you do not know at any time when He is coming]—lest coming, suddenly he finds you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!"

Now this, I said, is where He wants our heads to be in terms of His return. He sets the timing of His return out of the way, first of all, because He knew His disciples. He knew human nature. "Okay, Christ, you told us all these things about this sign and this sign and this sign. When is that going to be?" He did not even let them get it out of their mouths. He said, "You will not know, you do not know, do not think about it. No one knows but the Father." He said not even He knew because that was something that He and the Father had decided to leave in the Father's hands. So that should not be an issue with us. Jesus does not want it to be an issue with us. We should not worry about it because God will take care of it in His good time.

And in my opinion, and this is my opinion only, we should not even be eager to try to figure it out because it is *a waste of time*. It is a futile task. It is not going to end up with a right answer because it is in the Father's hand. It is in the Father's mind when He will do that. We will *never* be right. And should we do it, it is absolutely unverifiable until it happens. So what is the use? It becomes some worthless scribblings on a piece of paper when you work all the numbers and days out. You do not know. It is, "We'll see." I have said that to a lot of people. "When do you think Christ is coming?" "We'll see. I don't know! That's in the Father's hand." And I think that the task of trying to do that really has no spiritual benefit. It may keep your nose in the Scripture at best, in the prophetic parts of Scripture. But in terms of the spirit and truth thing that we talked about just a few minutes ago, this trying to figure out something against the counsel of Jesus Christ here it is not good.

So what are we to do then? Take heed, watch and pray. That was His advice because we do not know when He will return. We must be ready for His return constantly, every second of every day. Because remember, I said I could step out on that street and get struck by a car and die. That, for me, is the return of Jesus Christ because I have no more time to get ready. So we have to always constantly be ready, taking heed, watching and praying.

"Take heed" is a Greek word here *blepete* (funny word), and it means "to notice carefully" or "to be ready to learn" or "to pay attention." This is the one I really like, "be prepared to respond appropriately." That is what that word means. Take heed, be prepared to respond appropriately. Be ready to zig when Jesus says zig, and be ready to zag when Jesus says zag. Be ready to respond appropriately to whatever the situation is. This is like being on the starting line of a race, let us say it is the 100 yard dash. You get down on your hands and knees and the starter says, "Ready, get set," and you come up into your stance. That is when you take heed, because you want to be able to go as soon as that gun fires. You are paying attention, you are prepared to respond appropriately. And in the 100 yard dash, the appropriate response is to get out of those blocks as fast as you can. So that is what He says. Be ready, be ready to move, be ready to do whatever it is you need to do, and you can only be ready if you know what is going to occur because you have studied His Word and the signs that He has given. So be ready.

Watch here. Let us move on to the next word. Watch is the Greek word *agrypneite*. That means "to keep oneself awake," "to remain alert," "to be sleepless." That is hard to do. But that is what happens when you are being told to do something and it needs to get done. "To be on the lookout," "to be vigilant," "to be on watch," or "to be on watch duty." That is what that word means. So He is saying, "Okay, be alert and pay attention, be ready to learn, be prepared to respond appropriately. Also, remain awake, stay on guard, keep watching." Obviously, the word picture here is of a guard, standing watch, keeping himself awake and alert so that he can notice if anyone approaches.

Now, lot of people have said that this means watch world events, but that is not what Jesus said. He said be alert, be awake, be sleepless, be vigilant. And you what He modified that word with? Pray, watch and pray. This implies being in constant communication with God. This means making sure the relationship that we have with God is as solid as we possibly can. This modification "watch and pray" suggests that our watching is spiritual. Is not praying a spiritual activity? Our watching is also a spiritual activity. The parallel verse in Luke 21:36 says explicitly that our watching and praying are focused on our being counted worthy to escape the dangers of the end times and to stand before the Son of Man. Our watching and praying are about spiritual matters.

What is going on in here, in the heart, our responses to God, our service to Him and the brethren, that is where we are watching and praying. Why? Because He could come at any time! We have to be prepared! And watching the world news is not going to prepare us because what God wants to see is the *spiritual* growth that we have made and are we ready for our jobs in the Kingdom of God. Not whether we got the score right on when He is coming. That is what is most important.

This is how we will be prepared for when Jesus Christ comes and this is how we will be prepared to endure the Great Tribulation and the Day of the Lord—by being diligent in keeping ourselves on the straight and narrow path to the Kingdom of God, not by watching world news. We can do that every once in a while and see where things are, but God is far more interested in

those things that will enhance our spiritual relationship with Him. That will show that we have grown in the image of Jesus Christ and that we are indeed His people.

But Jesus also gives us signs of His coming so that we will know, so that we will know when our redemption draws near, as we saw there in Luke. These things are necessary to help motivate us and that is why He supplies them. Because He wants us to be motivated, to be hopeful, to be desirous, and to trust Him, and to endure to the end. So He gives us a bit of a road map and that is out of love for us.

Let us go to Matthew 24 and look at some of these things. Obviously, with the time we have left, we are not going to go into them in any great detail, but I want to rehearse them just a little bit.

Matthew 24:3-8 Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" [you see, that was their carnal nature coming out, wanting to know all these things] Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. [That is the first thing He said. It has to do with our spiritual health; that we do not get deceived by what is going on out there around us.]

For many will come in My name saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation [this is talking about ethnic groups rising against other ethnic groups], and kingdom against kingdom. [these are nations against other nations or other kingdoms] There will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows."

So Jesus lays out what we know of as the first four seals of Revelation 6. But He twice in this chapter here, in this section, emphasizes that these kinds of things will happen almost as a matter of course. They do not by themselves indicate that the end is imminent. We could say this sort of event—all these

deceptions and wars and famines and pestilence and earthquakes and such—all these things are, at best, the *beginning* of the end. Notice He says in verse 8, "all these are the beginning of sorrows." They are kind of like the foundation of sorrows, they are the sorrows that happen as a matter of being human. Humans make war, humans deceive one another, humans, because of war and other things, have to suffer famine, they get diseases. That is just the way it is.

If you will, notice there were wars and deceptions and famines and diseases before Christ and there have been those same things ever since. These things are all part of what it is to be human on this earth, living in a carnal world. So their value in assessing how close we are to the end is not very high. Now as they increase in *frequency* and as they increase in *intensity*, then we can begin to use them that way as saying, "Okay. Things are getting bad." But they are not in themselves specific science of Christ's return.

Then we drop down here to verse 14. This was Herbert W Armstrong's favorite prophecy of the end.

Matthew 24:14 "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."

That is fine. But this is one that, again, is not real specific. It perhaps points to our time and Mr. Armstrong may have fulfilled this in his own way. But Mr. Armstrong has been dead since 1986. That is 31 years ago and the churches of God are still doing it. We are using the Internet and other means to go all over the world with the gospel and we are teaching it as a witness. But you see, the specificity of this prophecy is not real exact. It is happening, and I would say it is a good prophecy to understand, but all it really tells us is that we are in the ballpark of the last days.

How complete does the witnessing have to be? How far around the world does it have to get? Does it have to reach every ear? I do not know. So it is very general and so we can say, yes, this has been done, is being done, so we are not all that far off, but we do not know how far off that is, because Jesus

Christ Himself said in Revelation 22, "I come quickly"! And that has been almost 2,000 years. So soon and quickly to God the Father and Jesus Christ are different than soon and quickly to us. So we just have to endure patiently.

Matthew 24:15-22 "Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand), "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. For then shall be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake, those days will be shortened."

Many people believe this section of the prophecy refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD, while others say it is end time. There is no problem with it being both: a kind of a type and an anti-type. However, verses 21 and 22 are certainly end time. The tribulation at the very end will be the worst the world has ever seen. Jesus' words there must be taken literally. "Such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time." That sets a standard for the tribulation of those days at a level, of course, that we have never seen, that we could hardly imagine.

Think about the atrocities that have happened in this world just in the lifetimes of some of us sitting here. The Tribulation will be worse than the fall of Jerusalem. If you know of any of the history of the fall of Jerusalem, that was a horrible, horrible siege. But think about it. I mentioned people who have lived through some of these things. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, worse than that; worse than the Holocaust that killed six million Jews or so; worse than the World War II bombings of Dresden, Hamburg, London, Tokyo; worse than the famines in East Africa; worse than the Spanish flu—worse than *anything* that we have ever suffered in this world. Worse than before the Flood.

Now, are we there yet? Most of us are wearing nice suits and dresses. We have full bellies, we have nice cars and nice homes. We have a lot of disposable income. Have you suffered the worst that anyone has ever suffered in terms of a large population? I do not think so. Even though we think things are getting so bad, they are not nearly to this level yet. We need to temper our thinking on these things by what is actually said in God's Word. I am not trying to put things far off. I am just saying, let us think about what Jesus said and not jump to conclusions so that we dash our hopes again.

Those things that He said there *are possible* now. That we can destroy all life from this earth can be done. We have more than enough nuclear weapons to do that in the various arsenals around the world. So we are in the ballpark. These things could happen fairly soon. But other things need to happen first. Let us not get the cart ahead of the horse.

Matthew 24:23-28 "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it. For false Christ's and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together."

This is a warning for those who are overly-eager for Christ to return. He says, do not let yourself be snookered by those who claim that Christ has returned, or we can extend this in principle to cover those who think they know when, how, or where Christ will return. If they say He is going to come at this place and this time, do not believe them. Do not give them the time of day. They are only distractions and deceptions because He Himself has told us what to look for! We do not need anybody else to tell us what to look for. His return will not be secret. It will not sneak up on us! We are going to have plenty of time to see where the trajectory of things are going.

It will be a tremendous show, if you will. I am talking about His actual coming here. He says it is like a flash of lightning that covers the entire sky from east to west and the rolling thunder that fills the air. We are not going to be able to avoid it. It is going to assault our senses. When Jesus Christ comes, it will be a worldwide phenomenon that no one will be able to miss. It is like "I am coming now!" and everybody will know.

And He says here that this will happen during a time of war, world war. That is where the eagles are gathered together, the vultures. They are coming at a time when there is great slaughter. That is when the birds begin to show up because they want a feast. Is that happening now? We will be able to understand where we are in the timeline of events through these signs that He gives us. Not because some guy out there thinks that he has figured out the numbers of how this is going to work out. We need to trust Jesus Christ.

Notice His own description of His second coming.

Matthew 24:29-31 "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. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all of 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. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet [like what we are commemorating today], and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

This is something this world has never seen. It is a completely unique occurrence. It will be so astounding and powerful that the people of this earth will quail in fear thinking they are doomed to destruction; that whoever this is that is coming will surely just destroy everything on the earth. It will not be secret, it will not be done in the corner. We will know because it will be wonderful and glorious and frightening and very decisive. There will be no ambiguity about what has happened, not to us, not if we know what God has given us in His Word.

Let us finish in Isaiah 66. He says,

Isaiah 66:14-16 When you see this [he had been talking about God's providence within the church among His people], your heart shall rejoice, and your bones shall flourish like grass. The hand of the Lord shall be known to His servants, and His indignation to His enemies. For behold, the Lord will come with fire and with His chariots, like a whirlwind, to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire and by His sword, the Lord will judge all flesh; and the slain of the Lord shall be many.

After founding and building His church, the bride, to the point that she is complete and ready for the marriage supper of the Lamb, Jesus Christ will return in wrath, in great power and glory as the great Judge to slay His enemies and to set up His kingdom. It will not be a good time. It will not be a fun time. It is going to scare the pants off us and everybody else, because the wrath of God is so great. The day of the Lord is a time of death and destruction. As Amos 5:18 says, in a understated way, "it will be darkness and not light." It is not an event in God's plan that we should desire. (I am talking about the Day of the Lord.) It is not an event in God's plan that we should desire. It is necessary, necessary for God's justice to be satisfied. But it will be a time of appalling loss of life and devastation. In Malachi's words, it is that "great and dreadful day."

We can be thankful that that Day has not come yet. Would we have been ready if it had? As the days darken as we move toward the return of Christ, use the warnings that are embedded in these latest disasters. Take them personally to repent of your sins and to move even closer to God, as close as you possibly can. Because He is preparing His bride and she will, as Revelation 19 says, make herself ready for His glorious appearing.