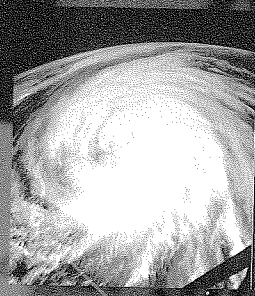


Last in a
three-part series
on the signs
of the times



The Approaching Storm

A CAREFUL INTERPRETATION OF THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

As we approach the end of the Church Age, there appears to be a dramatic increase of the signs of the times. In the previous two installments, we considered the callous indifference to and the contemporary increase in the signs of the times. In light of the sensationalism and speculation among some students of prophecy, it may be helpful to comment on the judicious interpretation of the signs of the times. How can the serious Bible student avoid some of the prophetic pitfalls?

It is beneficial to remember that no specific prophecies are being fulfilled today.

1. Avoid newspaper exegesis

Although likely tempted, the serious student of prophecy will avoid identifying present developments as fulfillment of prophecy. For some well-intentioned believers, reports of a locust plague across North Africa suggest the judgments of the tribulation period. When buses and taxis in Israel have the prefix 666 on their license plates, some people connect those instances

to Antichrist. The use of bar codes in commerce and implanted information chips is said to be related to the mark of the Beast. Some people identify the large flocks of migratory birds that visit Israel each year as the vultures predicted in Ezekiel 39:17–20 and Revelation 19:17 and 18.

It is beneficial to remember that no specific prophecies are being fulfilled today. Alarming developments simply point to beyond the Rapture, when a Christ-rejecting world will experience long-delayed and well-deserved punishments. The redeemed rejoice in the prospect of the Rapture and the subsequent reunion with the Lord.

2. Abandon date setting

Believers who set dates for end-time events lose credibility and bring reproach on themselves as false prophets. Great harm has been done to the serious study of prophecy by such date setters as NASA rocket engineer Edgar Whisenant and his booklet *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 88* and Harold Camping's dogmatic book *1994*.¹

Jack Van Impe's 1996 book, *2001: On the Edge of Eternity*,² predicted that the Millennium would begin shortly after the year 2000. One of his videos, *2001: Countdown to Eternity*, was advertised with the following words: "Discover for yourself how our Millennial Kingdom is predicted to begin shortly after AD 2000." On his telecast on Sunday, August 12, 1997, he opined that "the apocalyptic times started in 1948 and will find culmination somewhere around 2001, probably no later than 2014."³

The informed interpreter of Scripture realizes that date setting is wrong. One would think that date setters would learn a lesson in humility from their disappointed predecessors or their own erroneous earlier prophecies. In Acts 1:6 and 7 Christ left His disciples with the reminder that it is futile to guess—and forbidden for them to know—the times or seasons of His return and the subsequent establishment of the Kingdom.

Sir Robert Anderson was correct that date setting brings legitimate teaching of prophecy into disrepute and brings disgrace upon sensationalists.

3. Adhere to what is revealed

Sensationalism and speculation arouse interest, gain crowds, and sell books and videos. However, the careful student of prophecy will make every effort to stay within the bounds of Scripture.

Jack Van Impe asserted on his telecast on September 7, 1997, without any Scriptural support, that "the Bible predicts there will be a war with China anywhere between 2003 and 2006."⁵ He has taught that Russia will invade America by way of Canada and repeatedly has identified King Juan Carlos of Spain as the Antichrist.

Hal Lindsey, the best-selling author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, though like Van Impe basically correct in his eschatol-

One writer, George Zeller, correctly notes the total inability of even informed believers to make accurate predictions:

Salem Kirban, a student of prophecy and a student of current events, tried to predict what the world would be like in ten years. Thirty years later we are now able to look back on these predictions and clearly see that most of his predictions were totally inaccurate. This serves to illustrate the fact that man, by himself, is totally unable to predict future events.¹⁰

Hardly any of Kirban's hundreds of predictions have come to pass. One can be a lifelong student of prophecy, with a detailed knowledge of current events, and still be unable to make accurate predictions. Only God knows what will come to pass.

Mark Twain once wryly commented that predictions are very dangerous—especially those about the future. What is true about accurate prognostications in the religious realm is equally true in matters of politics.

Mark Steyn shows the impossibility of accurate predictions in the political realm:

We're not very good at projecting half-a-century out. In fact, we're not very good at projecting half-a-decade out. There weren't a lot of people in 1913 predicting that by 1918 the Russian, German, Austrian, and Turkish empires would all be gone. And there weren't many experts in 1987 predicting that by 1992 the Berlin Wall, the Warsaw Pact, and the Soviet Union would all have collapsed.¹¹

The future is God's possession. He has revealed some matters about the future but concealed others (Deuteronomy 29:29). The effort to wrest from God what He has not revealed, such as the date of the Rapture, manifests a callous disregard of His sovereignty. One writer issues the warning that "craving knowledge of the future beyond that which is revealed is absolutely contrary to God's will for man and therefore any attempt to obtain it is devil inspired and eventually damaging or even destructive to all who pursue it."¹²

4. Accept literal interpretation

Prophecy constitutes an important part of the Biblical canon. At the time of its writing, 25 percent of the Scriptures comprised prophecy. Seventeen Old Testament books and one New Testament book are almost

Predictions about the future that are void of clear Biblical support are useless and impossible.

Well over one hundred years ago, the London Bible scholar Sir Robert Anderson, chief of the Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard, wrote warnings about date setters that are just as relevant today:

In our day prophetic students have turned prophets, and with mingled folly and daring have sought to fix the very year of Christ's return to earth. . . . If such vagaries brought discredit only on their authors, it were well. But though broached in direct opposition to Scripture, they have brought reproach on Scripture itself, and have given a stimulus to the jaunty skepticism of the day. We might have hoped that whatever else might be forgotten, the last words which the Lord Jesus spoke on earth would not be thus thrust aside: "*It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power*" [Acts 1:7]. But what was denied to inspired apostles in days of pristine faith and power, the prophecy-mongers of these last days have dared to claim; and the result has been that the solemn and blessed hope of the Lord's return has been degraded to the level of the predictions of astrologers, to the confusion and grief of faithful hearts, and the amusement of the world.⁴

ogy, is ever given to sensationalism. On the Fox News Network program *Prophecies of the Millennium*, which aired July 30, 1997, Lindsey offered the following startling and strange prediction: "The prophet [John] who wrote the book of the Revelation, says, 'I looked, I saw and heard.' A first-century man was propelled up to the end of the twentieth century and he actually saw a war of technical marvel. . . . An intercontinental ballistic missile warhead reentering the earth's atmosphere; poison water, radioactivity, every city on earth virtually destroyed." Of course, the book of Revelation contains no such prophecy.

Predictions about the future that are void of clear Biblical support are useless and impossible. Salem Kirban, a lifelong student of prophecy, wrote a book in 1970 titled *I Predict*.⁶ He clearly stated that his predictions are not to be considered inspired but simply prognostications based on his understanding of the Scriptures and signs of the times. The predictions included a human head transplant on a well-known individual,⁷ the discovery of a cure for cancer, the extinction of denominations,⁸ and the landing of a U.S. space team on Mars.⁹



exclusively prophetic. Half of the Biblical prophecies have been fulfilled. Their fulfillments were literal. So it is reasonable to insist that unfulfilled prophecy will likewise find literal fulfillment. For example, five hundred years before Christ, Zechariah predicted that Christ would enter Jerusalem on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). And that is exactly how He made His triumphant entry (Matthew 21:4–7). Zechariah further predicted that Christ would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12), the precise amount Judas received for his despicable deed (Matthew 26:14, 15). Many of Zechariah's predictions await future fulfillment: Christ will return physically, with the nail prints visible (Zechariah 12:10); He will personally descend to the Mount of Olives after the Tribulation (14:4); He will make Jerusalem the capital of the millennial earth (14:11, 16, 17).

5. Anticipate a glorious future with the Savior

Believers should live in eager expectancy of the Rapture and eventually a one-thousand-year reign with Christ on earth. As they anticipate the eternal future with the Savior,

they are guided by certain chronological and prophetic considerations.

First, believers recognize God as the God of eternity, Who is in sovereign control of history and not bound by a human calendar (Psalm 90:1, 2; 31:15). God is not thwarted by human activity nor coaxed by unbiblical predictions.

Second, believers refuse to be guided by an anticipation of the terrifying Apocalypse or technological advance, but by the triumphant appearance of the Bridegroom to gather the world's believers to Glory before the judgments of the Tribulation (Titus 2:13; 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:9).

Third, believers realize that each additional day on this earth brings them one day closer to the Rapture. Believers realize that the date for the Rapture is fixed in God's eternal counsel. Each day brings us one day closer to that glorious event. The signs of the times seem to indicate a coming. This hope of the any-moment return of the Savior should produce personal purity (1 John 3:3) and ethical productivity (Ephesians 5:16). Believers remember that the Bridegroom is completing an eternal home for His own in Heaven (John 14:1–4)

and is consummating the church on earth (2 Peter 3:9), not willing that any of His own should perish.

When the last building block is added to the city in Heaven and the last believer is added to the church on earth, the Savior will return. And that might be this very day. Maranatha!

Notes

¹ Harold Camping, 1994? (New York: Vantage Press, 1992).

² Jack Van Impe, 2001: *On the Edge of Eternity* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 17.

³ Videotaped by the writer.

⁴ Sir Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 1957), 131, 132.

⁵ Videotaped by the writer.

⁶ Salem Kirban, *I Predict* (Huntingdon Valley, PA: Salem Kirban, Inc., 1970).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁰ George Zeller, "The Difficulty of Making Accurate Predictions," <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/prophkirban.htm>.

¹¹ Mark Steyn, "Future Shock," *National Review*, vol. 57, no. 18 (October 10, 2005): 60.

¹² O. Quentin Hyder, *The Christian's Handbook of Psychiatry* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1971), 76. ■



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