

The Approaching Storm

A CALLOUS INDIFFERENCE

**First in a three-part series
on the signs of the times**

As the twenty-first century continues to hurry along, we are jarred by increasingly unusual events. Devastating earthquakes, deadly tsunamis, unusually destructive hurricanes, and dreadful terrorism convince many believers in Christ that we are truly approaching the end. Discerning students of prophecy realize that between now and the Rapture (Christ's return for Church-age believers), no specific prophecy needs to be fulfilled. The Rapture could occur at any moment. However, as one observes the natural catastrophes, religious alignments, and political upheavals in the world today, it becomes apparent that events and conditions predicted for the seven-year tribulation period following the Rapture already cast their long shadows today.

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While dedicated disciples are interested in understanding the significance of the signs of the times, a large segment of Christendom, like Judaism at the time of Christ, is totally oblivious to the prophetic significance of current events.

What do we mean by the "signs of the times"?

Students of the prophetic Word use the term "signs of the times" for extraordinary natural or world events that point to current or future fulfillment of prophecy. A glance at the religious scene today makes it obvious that most of Christendom is so involved in the here and now that they neglect the study of the signs of the times in relation to the prophetic Word. Even during the earthly ministry of Christ there was an obvious neglect of the signs of the times.

The neglect of the signs of the times at Christ's first coming

The groups of religious individuals in Christ's day were oblivious to the portents of prophecy all around them.

First, there were the disparagers of the Savior—the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes. According to Matthew 16:1–4 the Jews of Christ's day displayed their indifference and ignorance of the signs of the times related to Christ's first coming. The Scripture passage reads,

Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, "When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red'; and in the morning, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." And He left them, and departed.

The Pharisees and Sadducees demanded an irrefutable sign from the Savior that He was their promised Messiah. Christ refused to grant their request, except for pointing to His future resurrection, because they were literally surrounded by ever-increasingly precise signs.

The religious leaders were steeped in the Messianic predictions of the Old Testa-

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ment. They knew that Christ would be of the human race (Genesis 3:15), of the nation of Israel (Genesis 22:18), of the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10), of the family of David (2 Samuel 7:12–16), and born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14). They also could have calculated the time of His sacrificial death (Daniel 9:25, 26). The interrogation of Matthew 16 took place in AD 32, the very year for which Daniel predicted that the Messiah would be cut off.

The prophet Micah predicted the place of Christ's birth: Bethlehem of Judea (Micah 5:2). When Herod consulted the chief priests and scribes during the visit of the wise men, they correctly pointed to Bethlehem as the birthplace of the King of the Jews (Matthew 2:5, 6.)

Their incredible indifference is seen in the fact that not one of those religious leaders traveled the mere four miles south to Bethlehem to check out the fulfillment of Micah's prophecy and the Magi's premonition!

The spiritual leaders of Israel refused to examine the account of Christ's birth and rejected the evidence of Messiah's presence.

Sadly, the disciples of the Savior likewise ignored the signs of the times. When Christ responded to the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 16, He was indirectly indicating that His own disciples should be alert to the signs of the times and thus anticipate the suffering of the Savior, a needful admonition as seen by Peter's incredulous response to Christ's announcement of His impending death. It was in northern Israel, in Caesarea Philippi, where Christ first revealed the details of His death and resurrection (Matthew 16:21–23). One of the saddest commentaries on their unbelief is given by Luke. As the Lord and the disciples left Caesarea Philippi on their way to Jerusalem (Matthew 16), the Savior reiterated, "The

Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men" (Luke 9:44). But the disciples did not understand His words, and they were afraid to ask Him to explain (v. 45).

The neglect of the signs of the times today

As the signs of the times were ignored at Christ's first coming, so various religious groups today neglect the study of prophecy and do not display any alertness to the signs of the times and anticipation of the Rapture.

Theological liberals discourage the study of prophecy. Symptomatic of the sentiment of liberals are the comments of David H. C. Read, former pastor of New York's Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. Some years ago he spoke at First United Methodist Church in Des Moines, Iowa.

Here are his comments about the Bible and prophecy:

[The Bible] is a collection of ancient religious documents . . . through which the Word of God comes to us. . . . I believe in the Second Coming, but I cannot possibly know when or how. I believe the end of the world is in the hands of God, and the end is not chaos, it is Christ. In the apocalyptic age we live in, the mainline churches should be offering hope, and not in some crude and selfish way.¹

In a cavalier manner, Read dismisses the possibility of specific prophecies and labels a detailed study of the Word as "crude and selfish."

In a similar fashion, amillennialists deny a future hope. That branch of Christendom—which denies a visible, physical one-thousand-year reign of Christ on earth after the Tribulation, as clearly taught in Revelation 20—postulates that when Christ comes back, the dead will be raised. They and the living will be judged: unbelievers will be consigned to Hell, and believers will be welcomed to Heaven. At



that time eternity will commence. There is no hope for a sin-cursed earth to be healed from the result of Adam's sin through the presence of the Savior, Who will rule righteously over the earth from the throne of David in Jerusalem.

In fact, one branch of Christendom—known as the preterists, who likewise deny a literal millennial Kingdom and thus in essence are amillennialists—insists that

the book of Revelation was written before AD 70 and that all of the predictions of Revelation 4–19, usually associated with the tribulation period, were fulfilled with the destruction of the temple by the Romans in AD 70.

Gary DeMar, one of the most vocal spokesmen for this aberrant view, attacks the dispensational, pretribulational view held dear by millions of fundamentalists

and evangelicals in his books with such titles as *Last Days Madness* (1990) and *End Times Fiction* (2001).

In denying a literal reign of Christ on this earth, preterists, in effect, are depriving believers of an anticipation of the glorious rule with Christ (1 Corinthians 6:2, 3).

Likewise, postmillennialists dismiss prophecy as having no present relevance. Their belief that the world is getting better and better every day in every way anticipates a period of economic prosperity or evangelization of the world, preparing the way for the eventual return of Christ. Loraine Boettner, well-known Reformed theologian, wrote of the eventual Christianizing of the world in his standard volume, *The Millennium* (1957). I questioned Dr. Boettner during annual visits with him to see whether he still clung to his overly optimistic view of the Christianizing of the world. Dr. Boettner admitted that while progress seemed slow, given another ten thousand to twenty thousand years, Christ would come back to a world where mankind would be ready to accept Him. That which appeared to most believers as signs of the times seemed to him to be aberrations in a steady progress toward the salvation of mankind.

Finally, some evangelicals deplore the controversy surrounding end-time events. They shy away from prophetic teaching because of the multiplicity of opinions concerning the details of prophecy. While there may be minor differences in interpretation concerning end-time events, the serious Bible student will make every effort to glean prophetic truths that give help and hope in these tumultuous times.

Prophecy reveals the power and wisdom of a sovereign God. His magnificent plan for the future assures us that He is very much interested in the salvation of individuals for whom He is preparing a celestial home. A neglect of prophecy deprives believers of this blessed hope.

Notes

¹H. C. Read, "Mainline churches told: Recover basics of faith," *The Des Moines Register* (April 16, 1983), 9A. ■



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