

The Pandemic, Birth Pains,
and the End of the Age

Thomas W. Finley

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Contents

The Biblical connection between the coronavirus, birth pains, and the end of the age	1
Is God behind the coronavirus pandemic?	2
What are God’s purposes in the pandemic?.....	6
Is this pandemic one of the birth pains of the end of the age?.....	12
What should the Christian’s response be?	20
Seriousness needed concerning the Judgment Seat of Christ.....	20
Arm yourselves with a mind to suffer.....	29
A plea for humility and tolerance	30
Eagerly await His coming / Watch and pray / Be ready	34
The “signs of the time”	36
About the author.....	40

The Pandemic, Birth Pains, and the End of the Age

The Biblical connection between the coronavirus, birth pains, and the end of the age

The current coronavirus pandemic would be termed a “pestilence” (or “plague”) in most English Bible versions. Significantly, Jesus uses the term pestilence in His description of end-times “birth pains” recorded in what is termed the “Olivet discourse” in Matthew 24 and Luke 21. The word shows up in Luke 21:11 and the KJV also shows it in Matthew 24:7. Most modern translations do not show it in Matthew due to ancient manuscript preferences. However, since Luke 21:11 is a parallel verse, there is no doubt that pestilences are part of the end-time birth pains preached by Jesus in the last week of His ministry before His crucifixion. Since pestilences were used many times by God as judgments in the Old Testament (OT), we can certainly see a possible connection between the current pestilence as a judgment, and the coming period of end-time judgments noted by Jesus in His prophecies of the end-time. In this booklet, we will see how Jesus ties pestilences together with other events in the “birth pains” as indicators that this age is at its consummation.

We should note that in the Bible God’s harsh dealings with men can be of a remedial nature, designed to turn men or societies to God in repentance, leading to a harmonious relationship with God. God used many judgments in the OT in order to bring His chosen people Israel back to faithful fellowship with Him. On the other hand, God can also use devastating judgments upon

men and societies as a final judgment upon them for sin. Such judgments are not designed to restore men to fellowship with God but to deal finally and fatally with unrepentant people. We see such examples in Noah's flood and upon Sodom and Gomorrah. God's actions of judgments upon men today give us a foreshadow and a warning of what is coming at the end-time of this age.

Is God behind the coronavirus pandemic?

Many people are reluctant to attribute the current deadly pandemic of 2020 as an action from the hand of God. After all, would God be behind such awful suffering coming upon the people of this world? Erwin Lutzer, the well-known and respected pastor of Moody Bible Church, addressed this same question after the tsunami in late 2005 swept over islands in Indonesia, killing over 200,000 people. In his article titled, "God and Natural Disasters," Lutzer states that the Bible shows that God is in control of this world and does have His hand behind natural disasters.¹ We cannot deny God's sovereignty over the forces of the natural world from a Biblical standpoint. Yet, if God willed the tsunami, why would He do it? Lutzer says we do not have all of the answers, but he does suggest three lessons God is trying to make clear to us: (1) our mortality (with all of its implications Biblically); (2) disasters are a picture of the future judgment that is coming (just read the book of Revelation); (3) our need of repentance. The article reminds us that although nature can show us that God is gracious, the disasters of nature also remind us that He is a God of justice and has anger against sin.

Some may say that natural disasters and calamities are simply the product of the natural forces of nature.

¹ Erwin Lutzer, "*God and Natural Disasters.*" (This author's website has posted Lutzer's article with Moody Media's permission.)

That is, earthquakes are simply the result of tectonic plates under stress, or that epidemics are simply the result of nature's biological accidents or mutations. Some agree that God created all things, but they see the created world (now fallen) as just a mechanism put in place by God that runs on its natural laws, including both normal and abnormal occurrences (calamities). Such explanations do not do justice to the picture of God's sovereignty revealed in the Bible. He is the God who controls the wind (Ps. 147:18; Lk. 8:25), the lightning (Job 36:32), insects (Ex. 8:16-19; 2 Chron. 7:13), earthquakes (Is. 29:6; Mat. 27:54; 28:2) and pestilences (2 Chron. 7:13). In summary, God rules over all the earth and is the One "who works all things after His will" (Eph. 1:11).

Such a picture of God's absolute rule over the earth is also presented in John Piper's book, "*Coronavirus and Christ*."² Similarly to Lutzer, Piper gives us a Biblical picture of God that displays both His goodness and His righteousness. He warns against any erroneous conclusion about God that He is unrighteous because He has willed the coronavirus upon the world in this hour. The Bible clearly teaches that God is righteous in His works and is pure and flawless in His holiness. Piper says that this is not a time for sentimental views of God. Such views would wrongly hold that God only exists to "bless us" and do good things for us. No, the God of the Bible is not only merciful and gracious but He is also wrathful against sin. Wrath is God's constant attitude against sin due to His holiness, but at times He displays His wrath in specific actions against men and nations.

In the OT we see God using pestilences many times. He told His people Israel that pestilence would be one of the curses He would place upon the Israelites if

² John Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

they were disobedient to Him (Deut. 28:20-22, 58-61). When the Israelites began to intermingle with the Moabites, worshipping their gods and engaging in sexual immorality with their women, God was angry and sent a plague among them. The plague was only stopped after Phinehas took a spear and killed an unfaithful Israelite who was with a Midianite woman, likely a cult prostitute. This plague of God's anger killed 24,000 Israelites. The prophet Ezekiel prophesied that the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem would include a judgment of plague due to Israel's blatant disobedience to God (Ezek. 5:5-8, 12). There are other instances of God using plagues to discipline His people in the OT that could be cited.

The OT also shows God sending pestilence upon various other nations besides Israel. For example, God judged Egypt with pestilence, not only to leverage them to let His people go but also as a judgment upon the gods of the Egyptians (Ex. 9:8-17; 12:12; Num. 33:4). God judged the Philistines with pestilence for taking His holy ark and attempting to profane it by bringing it into subjection to their god, Dagon (1 Sam. 5:1 – 6:6). God judged Sidon for its idolatry, a rejection of the true and living God (Ezek. 28:20-24).³

The book of Ezekiel records that God has four especially disastrous means of judgment He used in the OT: “For thus says the Lord GOD: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, **sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence**, to cut off from it man and beast!” (Ezek. 14:21). These

³ Dr. Merrill Unger explains that Sidon was judged for its idolatry (Judges 10:6; 1 Kings 11:33). God's judgment upon the Sidonians would be the manner by which God would be glorified among them, and then they would know that only Yaweh of Israel was the Lord. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), p. 1554.

same four means of judgments appear again in seals two, three, and four, as the red, black, and pale horses of judgment are summoned (Rev. 6:-8). Revelation 6:8 reads: "And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with **sword** and with **famine** and with **pestilence** and by **wild beasts** of the earth."

The current pestilence (pandemic) has not fully played out yet. It will not likely exceed the number of deaths of the Spanish Flu. The Spanish Flu (1918-1919) killed an estimated 40-50 million people. Some other great natural disasters of the last few centuries (such as some earthquakes and floods) also killed a great number of people. However, the death count is not the only factor to be considered in this calamity. It seems probable, as noted by some experts, that the economic fallout will be very great. The societies of the world have been brought to a halt as respects normal operation, whole economic sectors are being dramatically affected, and bankruptcies are multiplying. Many workers, including day workers on the margins of society in third world countries, have stopped working, and some countries' efforts to keep their economies on pace are causing an unprecedented, rapid rise in already unsustainable debt burdens.

The idea of a "return to normal" in the near future seems like a fairy tale to thinking people. And, this pandemic is truly worldwide, touching every corner of the globe. It is not causing just localized damage to only one country or region. By any measure, this pandemic looks like a colossal catastrophe in the making, one with multiple effects causing great devastation.

So, we must ask: "Why would God wreak such devastation upon the world?"

What are God's purposes in the pandemic?

As Erwin Lutzer declares in his article on the tsunami, we may not be able to determine all of God's purposes in a particular calamity, including this pandemic. However, it seems from Scripture that there are some identifiable things God is doing in every calamity. He is surely at work to gain the attention of people so that they will respond to Him in an appropriate way.

One important passage on God's purposes in calamity is in the book of Amos. The reader should carefully read Amos chapters three and four. In that passage, God is indicating that His judgments upon His people Israel have the aim to cause the people to repent and return to loyal faith in Him. Using seven rhetorical questions in Amos 3:3-6, God instructs the people through Amos that certain events have a sure connection. Something happens in each of these events because of a prior event that leads to it. The conclusion is that God's judgment is coming as prophesied by Amos because of Israel's unfaithfulness.

Notice Amos 3:6b: "Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?" Here we see that God causes disaster or calamity, and Amos chapter four gives us the reason. In Amos 4:6-11 God declares to His people that He has sent calamity after calamity, "yet you did not return to me." The disasters God sent upon His people were: famine (4:6); drought (4:7-8); crop devastation (4:9); **pestilence** (4:10); military defeat (4:10); and even total devastation as at Sodom and Gomorrah (4:11). Although these remedial judgments were severe, they were aimed at producing an ultimate good—the restoration of true spiritual fellowship with God. Even so, **we must declare that God has a good, ultimate purpose in the pandemic**, one beyond the real pain of the moment and the heart-breaking things we see in the news.

In their book, *The Mystery of Catastrophe – Understanding God’s Redemptive Purposes for the Global Disasters of the Last Days*, authors Joel Richardson and Nathan Graves trace the ways of God in Scripture as respects catastrophe. Graves has been a longtime missionary in the Balkans. He was there when the catastrophe of regional wars tore the area apart. He was there when thousands of Muslims were forced to leave the Middle East for Europe because of catastrophe. He saw what God was doing and worked together with God for a harvest of Muslim souls, the hardest hearts on the planet against Christ.

Graves pens Part 1 of the book, which covers “A Biblical Theology of Catastrophe.” This book is very worthwhile reading, especially Part 1. Part 1 is 68 pages long, so I can only quote a few sentences here and summarize the arguments. Here are some points:

“When catastrophes overtake people’s lives, they are humbled by their losses and weakness. It is then they will cry out to the God who cares: ‘Yet does not one in a heap of ruins stretch out his hand, and in his disaster cry for help?’ (Job 30:24, ESV).”⁴

“This pattern of God’s people stubbornly putting their roots deep into this world, clinging to all they hold dear in this life has been one of the greatest obstacles for completing the Great Commission and filling the earth with the glory of the Lord. Because this is true, God *must* bring catastrophe even to his beloved church. Had the early disciples not experienced severe persecution, it is unlikely that many would have ever ventured far beyond the gates of Jerusalem with the message of salvation.”⁵

⁴ Joel Richardson and Nathan Graves, *The Mystery of Catastrophe* (Winepress, 2018), p. 16. This book is available in pdf form for free download at www.joelstrumpet.com

⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

“So to strengthen, purify, and embolden the early believers to be his witnesses, and to keep them trusting in Him, God brought a great persecution to the church: ‘And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles’ (Acts 8:1, ESV).”⁶

In the chapter titled, “His Way is in the Whirlwind,” Graves writes:

“The notion that God would ever do anything that would cause harm to another is anathema to most people. In this Laodicean age where human rights have become the manifesto of a new global, humanist religion, there is no room for the God of the Bible, especially a God who would cause harm. It is a mantra even the church has picked up on and run wild with. Aren’t we supposed to have our best lives now? Actually, no.”

... [Graves continues]

“He is not oblivious to the plight of the physical refugee, just as He is not to ours. His heart is touched by their grief and pain. He hears their anguished cries and sees their downcast faces. He looks on them with deep and caring compassion. His desire is to bring healing to their wounds and to rescue them from their sorrows. His ear is attentive to their slightest cry and is ready to receive them with outstretched arms at their smallest movement toward Him. It is for this purpose that He

⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

wounds and strikes and tears to pieces. He does so that He might heal and rescue and give life.

‘See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring life, I have wounded and I heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand.’ (Deuteronomy 32:39, NIV)

‘The Lord will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and he will heal them. They will turn to the Lord, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them.’ (Isaiah 19:22, NIV)

‘Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.’ (Hosea 6:1, NIV)

The Lord strikes, then heals. He injures, then binds up the very wounds He inflicts. He tears to pieces, then restores to health. He puts to death, then gives life. It is a perfect paradox. God does the thing that makes no sense—the opposite of our logical perspective. Humanly speaking, it is a mystery too difficult to understand, a contradiction to common sense, an illogical display of all we think about God. Regardless of how harsh or fallacious this all may seem, it is altogether true.”⁷

“I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things.’ (Isaiah 45:7, NIV)

‘When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?’ (Amos 3:6)

Though it goes against all our culturally or even our theologically shaped reasoning, we must accept and embrace this hard truth if we are going to better understand God and His ways. If we want to have wisdom and insight about our role in bringing about

⁷ Ibid, pp. 25-26.

salvation and the glory of God to the nations, we have to allow God to reshape our understanding of who He is and what He is doing in His world. His ways are not only declared to be in the stillness and serene (see Psalm 46:10). Much more so, they are also to be found in the whirlwind and the storm:

‘The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.’ (Job 38:1)

‘You will be visited by the Lord of hosts with thunder and with earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.’ (Isaiah 29:6, ESV)

‘I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and the pleasant land was made desolate.’ (Zechariah 7:14, ESV).⁸

“It really comes down to two fundamental truths: God is holy and men are sinful. God loves man, but man hates God. So we see that when God purposefully brings catastrophe, it is not because He is unjust, and man is a victim. It is because of man’s very rejection of God that He must bring about not just hardship but large-scale calamity to turn man’s heart to Him.”⁹

“If God loves the world and sent his Son to die for the world (see John 3:16), then we should expect that He will make a way for people to hear. Throughout history, we see God’s primary method for waking up the

⁸ Ibid., p. 28.

⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

nations to repentance is through man-made and natural disasters.”¹⁰

“It is shortsighted to see catastrophes only as judgments from God. It is clear throughout the Bible that God has brought disaster for the purpose of judgment, but that is only as a last resort. James declares that ‘mercy triumphs over judgment’ (James 2:13). In his deliberate and constant pursuit of man, God seeks after lost sinners to bring them in to His fold. His plans are to use things that confound us to find those who will come to Him and lay their lives down at the foot of the cross in submission to Jesus Christ.”¹¹ (I believe what Nathan Graves is saying here is that we should not see catastrophes simply as something punitive from God upon sinful men, but as something sent from the heart of a loving and merciful God seeking to bring lost sinners to Himself.)

In summary, this book explains that God uses catastrophe to bring men—*through the experience of loss*—to Himself. And, He uses it to purify the church and move her forward in His task for them. Even now, in this pandemic, reports are coming out of people openly praying on the streets in repentance to God. Some prayer bands are being raised up. Some believers are being awakened afresh to the call of God to holiness in light of Christ’s coming. Believers are also being motivated to serve others in the name of Christ during this pandemic.

Aside from the basic purposes of bringing men to Himself and purifying the church, God may also be at work on other purposes. For example, in this pandemic, God is also likely using it in an ancillary way to judge America further for her sin of moving away from a

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 62.

foundation of Biblical morality (Jer. 18:7-10). In addition, God is likely changing the global landscape of powers during this pandemic. In 2011, God seemed to shift gears prophetically through the “Arab spring.” As a result, the powers of the Middle East saw a radical change, one that is likely significant for the fulfillment of end-time prophecy. Similarly, other powers and nations will probably be greatly affected through this pandemic to set the stage for the prophesied events of the end-time.

Is this pandemic one of the birth pains of the end of the age?

“Birth pains” are used in the Olivet Discourse as a figure of the heightened painful and exceedingly stressful times that consummate the age. This term is used in Matthew 24:7-8: “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.” The parallel account in Luke includes “pestilences”: “Then he said to them, ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and **pestilences**. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven’” (Lk. 21:10-11). Although the account in Luke does not use the term “birth pains,” it is clear that at least the first part of verse 11, as a parallel to Matthew 24:8, is speaking of the birth pains.

Jesus used the figure of “birth pains” in Matthew 24 in response to the disciples’ question concerning “the arrival of the Messiah and the end of the age.” The four disciples wanted to know *how they could recognize* that this age was at its close.¹² The idea of “birth pains”

¹² Mark 13:3 identifies the four disciples as Peter, James, John, and Andrew.

pictures the end of a long pregnancy with the beginning of the short birth process that leads to the birth of a new life. Jesus' answer indicated that there would be a short period of great trouble and stress just before the end of the age and the beginning of the Messiah's earthly kingdom.

We need to look carefully at the answer Jesus gave to His disciples in Matthew 24:4-8 in order to understand the sequence and timing of end-time events. The parallel accounts in Mark and Luke will help us understand this sequence. The texts of these three gospels show that the first part of Jesus' response in verses 4-6 speaks of a different set of events and timeframe than the beginning of birth pains in verses 7-8.

Matthew 24:4-6: things to happen before the end-time begins

“And Jesus answered them, ‘See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, “I am the Christ,” and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, **but the end is not yet.**” (Matt. 24:4-6)

Mark's account uses almost exactly the same wording.

Luke's account: “And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for **these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.**” (Lk. 21:9) The NASB reads: “**but the end does not follow immediately.**”

It should be clear that Jesus here tells his disciples that *before* the end-time begins there will be some stretch of time characterized by false Christs and wars

and rumors of wars. In verses 4-6, Jesus is apparently giving a prophetic precaution to the early disciples that such events would not signal that the period of the end had arrived.¹³ The text of these verses shows that Jesus did not want His disciples to be alarmed by these events, thinking that these signaled “the end.” Jesus knew that Jerusalem was destined to be destroyed in the coming days but that was not going to be the end of the age.

History tells us that there were indeed tumultuous times between the ascension of Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. Rumbblings of revolt against Rome grew increasingly commonplace in these years. At one point (39-40 A. D.), the Roman Emperor Gaius was determined to place a statue of himself in the temple, demanding worship, and the Jews were preparing to resist this abomination at any cost. Robert Govett, a noted Bible prophecy teacher, writes: “During the time [of Gaius’ threatened action], so great was the terror of this rumor of war, that the Jews left their land untilled for fifty days: Josephus’ Wars, ii.; x. 1-5; xi. 1-4; xiii. 7. Ant. xx.6.”¹⁴ The placement of the statue never happened as Gaius was dissuaded from his planned action by Herod Agrippa (a ruler for Rome in the holy land) and finally assassinated.

By 66 A. D., the matter of revolt against Rome by the Jews was on an irreversible course after Roman forces killed 3,600 Jews in Jerusalem. This slaughter was in response to a Jewish protest against Rome’s

¹³ Some Bible teachers hold that verses 4-6 show general characteristics of the time between the two comings of Christ, still making a distinction between Matthew 24:4-6 and the final end-time period in verses 7-8. Other teachers include verses 4-6 as part of the birth pangs of 7-8, but the text does not support this inclusion in my opinion. Further analysis will be made on this point under verses 7-8.

¹⁴ Robert Govett, *The Prophecy on Olivet* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing Co., Inc., 1985), p. 15.

attempt to obtain gold from the temple treasury as a tribute. The period of roughly 40-62 A. D. also saw several Jewish prophetic and messianic figures who sought followers among the populace.¹⁵

Matthew 24:7-8: the beginning of birth pains, the start of the final end-time period

“For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.” (Matt. 24:7-8)

“Then he said to them, ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.’” (Lk. 21:10-11)

The wording in Luke—“Then he said to them”—shows clearly the intended break between the events presented in verses 4-6 and those of 7-8. Pestilences are added in Luke, and these appear to be an addition to the list in Matthew of the beginning stage of birth pains.

Many expositors have written that the first four seals of Revelation chapter six parallel the “birth pains.” These expositors give charts similar to the *first two columns* of the one displayed on the next page. However, as explained earlier, I do not agree that Matthew 24:4-5 is part of the list of birth pains and that it parallels seal one, as some hold it does.

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 340.

Matthew 24	Seals in Rev. 6	Comments on Seal
Matt. 24:4-5 False Christs	Seal One – rider on white horse (6:1-2)	Details are given symbolically and need interpretation
Matt. 24:6-7a – War and rumors of war	Seal Two - rider on the red horse (6:3-4)	Judgment shown literally
Matt. 24:7b – Famine	Seal Three – rider on the black horse (6:5-6)	Judgment shown literally
Matt. 24:7b; Lk. 21:11 – Famine, pestilence, death	Seal Four – rider on the pale horse (6:7-8)	Judgment shown literally

To learn more about seal one, we should notice some things. The rider on the white horse is put in symbolical terms and is not named. It is a symbol of some conquering person or entity. Therefore, there is something distinctively different about this first rider, as the details of the other three riders have literal descriptions with no need for interpretation (war, famine, death). Some respected evangelical expositors see this first rider as a symbol of the antichrist, or perhaps a movement associated with him. The white horse here does not necessarily match the white horse ridden by the Lord Jesus in Revelation 19:11. White horses were ridden by Roman generals after their victories in battle. Thus, the white horse may simply reinforce the symbol of victory seen in this rider.

Other commentators, some of whom believe this seal has already been opened, interpret the rider of the white horse as Christ or His gospel. However, some of

these views run counter to the futuristic vision of the awful judgments of seals two, three, and four.¹⁶ Further, Revelation chapter nineteen places the appearance of the conquering Christ on a horse at a time *following* the period of cataclysmic judgments upon the earth, not at a time *preceding* such judgments (such as the *first rider* would represent). Also, the first rider, as one of the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” is surely linked to the other three riders, who are presented in the form of devastating judgments. To consider the first rider as a positive figure would be out of character with this group of riders. All of them should be viewed as *judgments* released by Christ as He opens the scroll in Revelation chapter six.

A final consideration regarding this matter relates to the basic question posed by the disciples: What will be the sign that the end period of the age is here? Jesus’ answer in Matthew 24:7-8 gives definite events that can be seen and identified, and the witnessing of such events will signal Christians that the birth pains have begun. The white horse rider is apparently *not* an easily discerned event, and this may be one reason it is not included in the list of birth pains (Matt. 24:7-8). If indeed the white horse depicts the rise to power of the antichrist, and/or his movement, then he comes into power and prominence before the point where the visible

¹⁶ The opening of the scroll by Christ certainly seems to be yet future at the time this vision was given to John. Most scholars believe this vision took place about 95 A. D. A number of careful expositors use Revelation 1:19 as a basis for this futuristic explanation. Revelation 1:19 is explained as follows: “Write therefore the things you have seen [consisting especially of the vision of Christ in 1:11-18], those that are [being the condition of the seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three at the time of the vision], and those that are to take place after this [events associated with the opened scroll; Revelation chapters 4-22]. It would be illogical for John to see Christ opening the scroll of chapter six as an event that had already occurred some 60 years earlier after Christ’s ascension.

birth pains suddenly begin. And, his rise to power is surely connected to the following riders of judgment. This seems most plausible.¹⁷

Jesus purposely uses the figure of “birth pains” to depict the end period of this age. The illustration suggests a long period of development (as in pregnancy) with a sudden onset of terrible pains experienced in a compact period of time. A normal pregnancy lasts 266 days. The average period of birth pains during a woman’s first pregnancy usually lasts 12-14 hours. Although we cannot demand an exact correlation, a development period of 2,000 years would yield a birth pain period of about four years. Most expositors believe that the “birth pains” as noted in Matthew 24 are contained within the last seven-year period of this age, a time known as the “70th week” of Daniel’s vision (see Dan. 9:27). A woman’s birth pains are unique and once they start they increase in intensity and frequency until the birth process is complete.

The “beginning of the birth pains” of Matthew 24:7-8—which equal seals two, three, and four of Revelation 6—constitutes a period of horrific events such as the world has never witnessed. The four horsemen bring us into the end of the age. The rider on the pale horse, the fourth horse, is “Death.” The judgments associated with this rider kill one-fourth of the earth’s population. Nothing like this has ever happened before. It certainly seems

¹⁷ It should be noted that Dr. John Walvoord, a renowned Bible prophecy expert, states that there are probably more differing views on Revelation 6:2 (the white horse and its rider) than on any other verse in the book of Revelation. John F. Walvoord, *Revelation* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2011), p. 124. I have tried in this brief booklet to touch a few pertinent points about the verse, but the reader should check a number of commentaries for more detailed explanations. In his commentary, Robert Thomas spends seven pages giving a good overview of the varying views on seal one and their lines of argument. See *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* by Robert L. Thomas.

that this rider has not yet come and belongs to the “time of the end.” It is no wonder that the prophet Daniel writes the following description of the “time of the end”: “And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time” (Dan. 12:1).

In light of the Biblical information provided above, the current coronavirus pandemic should not be considered as part of the Biblical birth pains predicted in Matthew 24:7-8. *That birth pain period is yet future, and this period will see various catastrophic events occurring together in a short timeframe.* Still, this current pandemic seems destined to cause great worldwide problems beyond just health consequences. Economists, think tank observers and academics are writing that this pandemic will continue to produce severe effects upon modern civilization, probably the greatest effect of any event since World War II. Therefore, *we should consider it as a very serious warning from God.* We may also view it as a kind of preview of the coming judgments of the end-time. God is doing something extraordinary and is calling men to wake up and pay attention.

Dr. David Reagan of Lamb & Lion Ministries is a well-known American Bible prophecy teacher. In an article titled, “A Warning,” he writes: “I have become convinced that the coronavirus is a remedial judgment of God upon the whole world to call the people of all nations to repentance before the return of Jesus.”¹⁸ By “remedial judgment,” Reagan means that the action of judgment is taken to remedy a situation of broken fellowship between God and man. Such a remedy calls for sincere repentance on the part of any person, believer or unbeliever.

Dr. Mark Hitchcock, another noted Bible prophecy teacher, also concludes that this pandemic is not part of the Biblical birth pains of Matthew 24. He believes that the birth pains are in the last seven-year period. Yet, he

¹⁸ David Reagan, *A Warning*, Lamplighter, Vol. XLI, No. 4, May-June, 2020, p. 2.

feels that this pestilence is prophetically significant and is a foreshadowing of what is to come. Like Dr. Reagan, he thinks that this pandemic is a wake-up call to men, perhaps even a final wake-up call, summoning them to turn to Christ and live in a way pleasing to God.¹⁹

What should the Christian's response be?

Seriousness needed concerning the Judgment Seat of Christ

God is warning us through the virus that Jesus is coming and that means the Day of Judgment is coming for all men, including Christians. Yet, the response of many believers is that they just want things to “get back to normal.” Meanwhile, they are only looking for God to help them get through this time of difficulty by meeting their needs and giving them comfort and peace in this time of uncertainty. We certainly need comfort and peace, but God is looking to accomplish much more in believers' lives during this time. God wants to purify our lives in various ways. He is looking for Christians to mature into the image of Christ through this trial in preparation for Christ's return (1 Pet. 1:6-7; 13-17). He also desires for believers to be more dedicated to serve Him, living in the constant expectation of Christ's coming (Matt. 25:14-30; Lk. 12:35-48; 19:12-26).

We should understand that although Christians will be judged at the end of this age, that judgment is *not* for the determination of eternal salvation. It is for reward, not salvation. Our salvation was secured for us by Christ as our substitute for God's judgment upon our sins. This happened at the cross. When we believed in Him, we were delivered from eternal judgment. We passed at the moment of belief from death to life. “Truly,

¹⁹ Mark Hitchcock, *Corona Crisis* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2020), pp. 29, 39, 60, 71, 74.

truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (Jn. 5:24). We will never come into judgment as respects our eternal destiny, but our lives will be evaluated by Christ the Judge for determining our inheritance—our place, privileges, and responsibilities—in the coming kingdom of Christ (the coming **1,000-year kingdom** in Revelation 20:4-6, which precedes the **eternal kingdom** of Revelation 21 and 22).

The love of God is the greatest motive for believers to live unto the Lord’s will (2 Cor. 5:14-15). But, it is most instructive that in the same chapter that we see *another great motive—preparation for the Judgment Seat of Christ*. Paul the apostle writes:

“Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (2 Cor. 5:9-10, NASB)

The word rendered above as “recompense” is a word that means in Greek to “receive back” or to get “what one is due.” In other words, each one is paid back what he is due according to the deeds he has done. Therefore, we can say that the principle here is *reward according to works*. We see a similar thought in Matthew 16:27: “For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.” In the New Testament (NT), there are two great principles of truth. First, there is the GIFT principle, which reflects the fact that our eternal salvation is a free gift from God, received by faith, *apart from works* (Rom. 4:1-5; Eph. 2:8-9). Secondly, there is the REWARD principle, which is *based upon works* (Matt. 16:27; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 22:12). At the Judgment Seat of Christ, the deeds we have done since we have been born again (not before) will determine our recompense, our reward.

Notice the verses 2 Corinthians 5:9-10 quoted above. Paul tells us that his great ambition, the thing he was diligently striving for, was to be pleasing to the Lord. He did this *because* he was so conscious of his future appearance before Christ's Judgment Seat. Paul was keenly aware that his life would be evaluated there and he would be recompensed according to that evaluation. It is also clear from the verses that the recompense can turn out positively or negatively, according to our doings in this life. Thus, we may say that Paul's life was controlled by his constant awareness of this future evaluation by Christ.

Some believers question whether the sins or failures of believers could be counted against them at the Judgment Seat. The Bible shows a distinction between God's dealing with our sins (including any judgment for them) as respects our salvation **in eternity** and His dealing (judgment) with our sins **in time** according to His moral governance. Our sins are removed as respects the eternal realm of salvation by Christ's work on the cross (1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18). However, God can still exercise discipline upon a believer for his sins because of His moral government. Note the following examples: God's judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11); upon the Corinthian believers (1 Cor. 11:29-34); upon believers in adultery and fornication (Heb. 13:4); upon His erring children in Hebrews (Heb. 12:4-8); and upon some believers in the church of Thyatira (Rev. 2:20-23). This same principle of moral government applies to the Judgment Seat of Christ, as clearly noted in 2 Corinthians 5:10, which states that we will be repaid according to the deeds done in the body, whether good or bad.²⁰

²⁰ As Dr. Paul Benware argues, we do not "pay for our sins" at the Judgment Seat because that was accomplished at the cross. However, just as a believer can experience some negative discipline from God in this life, so this principle is also true at the Judgment Seat, and it is supported by the

The prolific and profound writer among the Plymouth Brethren, C. H. Mackintosh, describes this distinction in these words:

These, and numberless other Scriptures in the Old Testament, as well as many similar passages in the New Testament, unfold to us the deeply important subject of God's moral government. Now, to be merely a subject of God's government is one thing; to be a subject of His unchangeable grace is another. We should never confound them. To elaborate this point, and to refer to the various passages which illustrate and enforce it, would demand a volume: we would here only add our full persuasion that no one can understand the Word of God who does not accurately distinguish between man under government and man under grace. In the one case he is looked at as walking down here, in the place of responsibility and danger; in the other, he is looked at as associated with Christ above, in the place of inalienable privilege and eternal security.²¹

I would like to mention two great servants of God in recent centuries who demonstrated such a life-controlling consciousness of the Judgment Seat of Christ:

Scriptures. Paul N. Benware, *The Believer's Payday* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), pp. 88-94).

²¹ C. H. Mackintosh, *The Mackintosh Treasury – Miscellaneous Writings by C. H. Mackintosh* (Neptune, N. J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1976), p. 650.

George Whitefield: A biography of Whitefield noted that his awareness of the accounting at the Judgment Seat of Christ greatly affected his behavior. He constantly lived with this guiding principle in mind.²²

George Müller:

He kept continually before him *his stewardship* of God's property; and sought to make the most of the one brief life on earth, and to use for the best and largest good the property held by him in trust. The things of God were deep realities, and, projecting every action and decision and motive into the light of the judgement-seat of Christ, he asked himself how it would appear to Him in the light of that tribunal. Thus he sought prayerfully and conscientiously so to live and labour, so to deny himself, and, by love, serve God and man, as that he should not be ashamed before Him at His coming.²³

Great gain or significant loss may be the result of our review before Christ at His Judgment Seat. Those believers who have lived faithful lives of discipleship will

²² Details are noted in Arnold Dallimore's biography titled *George Whitefield*. See Vol. 2, p. 518. Whitefield was a mighty evangelist much used by the Lord in "The Great Awakening" of England and America in the 1700s.

²³ Arthur T. Pierson, *George Müller of Bristol* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, no date), p. 299. Müller was one of the most famous and influential believers of the late 1800s. He was known for his prayer life. Without any public appeals for money, the Lord used him to found an orphanage that eventually served over 1,000 orphans in Bristol, England. All funds for the orphanage were raised solely by dependent prayer to God.

be considered “overcomers” who will reign with Christ in the next age, just before the eternal age (Lk. 19:16-19; Rom. 8:17b, 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26-27). The reward crowns reflect this reign (1 Thess. 2:19-20; Jas. 1:12; 1 Pet.5:1-4; 2 Tim. 4:8). Of course, such overcomers do sin, but practice confession (1 Jn. 1:9). The overcomer’s reward will also include a magnified enjoyment of Christ as eternal life (Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30; Jn. 17:3). Paul exercised great self-control so as not to be disqualified for the “prize,” which is the kingdom reward granted to the overcomers in the next age (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

On the other hand, Christians who give way to living sinful lifestyles will forfeit their potential rich inheritance in this future kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-5). And, sins are not the only threat to our possible future inheritance. Living in self-indulgence for the riches and pleasures of this life can cost us this millennial age inheritance. Esau is given as an example of this. He lost the birthright of the firstborn due to his desire for the temporal pleasures of this world (Heb. 12:16). The birthright of the firstborn in the Old Testament included an extra portion of the estate given to the firstborn son. However, the son could lose this extra portion because of wrongful actions. Esau’s action of disregarding the value of his future inheritance by choosing to live for temporal pleasure cost him his birthright. All believers have an inheritance in God’s **eternal** kingdom. That is a matter of grace. But, the inheritance in the next age (**the 1,000-year** kingdom) is an extra inheritance of the firstborn. It is a matter of reward and requires our cooperation with the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives.²⁴

²⁴ More detail on the rights of the firstborn and its application to New Testament believers may be found at <https://www.seekersofchrist.org/BIRTH/birthright.html>

There are other possible negative consequences at the Judgment Seat of Christ but these details are beyond the scope of this writing.²⁵

I would like to add a word about the “good works” of believers which the Lord can deem worthy of reward at His Judgment Seat. Too many believers think that any deed which *seems* good or helpful to the cause of Christ will be rewarded. However, this is not the view of the NT. The illustration of the Vine and the branches in John 15 is most instructive. God wants us to bear fruit, including good deeds. However, such good deeds must come from Christ as the source, not our natural life with its intentions and self-efforts. Good deeds worthy of reward are those which come from the source of Christ Himself.

We see this truth in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, which is a picture of our doings and our future evaluation by Christ at His Judgment Seat. Our living and serving is our building upon Christ as our foundation. This passage warns us: “Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day [of Judgment] will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done” (1 Cor. 3:12-13). The “fire” pictures the penetrating judgment of Christ, and this judgment will determine the quality of the works done. “Gold, silver, precious stones” portray elements of God Himself, and speak of building according to His character, His ways, His truth, and His will. “Wood, hay, straw” picture doings that will be burned up—not accepted by Christ for a positive reward. Their source is natural, something produced by the natural man, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. Man has many “good ideas,” and is capable of *supposedly* “doing things for God,” but the source is not from the Holy Spirit. Today, there are many Christian works and ministries, but how many of these works are

²⁵ More details are presented in chapters 7 and 8 of this writer’s book, *Worthy of the Kingdom*. This book is online at <https://www.seekersofchrist.org/WORTHY/worthy.html>

fueled by the natural man's plans, ambitions, abilities, philosophies, ways, or self-effort ("flesh power")?

One of the great lessons to be learned in the Christian life is to put aside our ideas, plans, and efforts and wait upon the Lord for what He is doing. When we have an intimate walk with the Lord, then we can see what He has planned and is doing. We can then walk by faith in those good works, and, by His power, complete them (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12-13; 2 Thess. 1:12).

I suspect that many of these details about the Judgment Seat of Christ are new to most readers. This is mainly because these truths have not been adequately taught by preachers or teachers these days. Dr. Earl Radmacher (1931-2014) was a highly respected theologian, professor, seminary president, conference speaker, and author. He used to say, "The doctrine of rewards is the most under-taught major New Testament doctrine today." He also said: "The matter of rewards is everywhere in the New Testament. I don't know how we keep missing it."

Yet, the fact is that most believers, and probably most preachers, simply do not see it, or they do not understand most reward passages in the Bible. They often try to squeeze these passages into the matter of eternal salvation. This is a mistake that leads to a works-based view of salvation or other erroneous views. Most believers see many passages, especially warning passages, simply in terms of heaven or hell. They do not have a perspective of positive and negative recompense at the Judgment Seat. Yet, the truth is that rewards are a significant part of God's plan and are to be a great incentive for believers to be faithful.

It is my concern that many believers will be in shock when they appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ. They are not expecting this thorough evaluation of their lives and will not have prepared for it. These believers will shrink in shame at the review and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth in regret over the way they lived their Christian lives casually (1 Jn. 2:28; Matt. 25:30). Their recompense will be a great loss.

It is a comfort to know that a believer's sins, if confessed and repented of, will not disqualify the believer from receiving some positive reward for good works at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Jn. 1:9 [cf. Pr. 28:13]; Rev. 2:3-7; 16-17; 3:3-6; 19-22). We should note that although Christ's judgment will be righteous, He can also show mercy to those believers who have shown mercy to others (Matt. 5:7; Jas. 2:12-13).

This present pandemic presents a great opportunity for us to be serious about our review at the Judgment Seat of Christ. God is calling all believers at this time to be serious about preparing for that day by growing in Christian character and our service to God. I highly recommend that you read more about the Judgment Seat of Christ and rewards. See the footnote for what I consider to be the two best books about the Judgment Seat of Christ.²⁶ Also, I want to mention two books on how to live a victorious Christian life. These books give valuable help based upon time-tested lessons learned by godly believers who have gone before us. The emphasis in these books is on *living by Christ's life*, not by self-effort (see the footnote).²⁷

²⁶ I have read a number of books and articles on the Judgment Seat of Christ. The two books I feel present the most accurate picture of this momentous event are: 1) *The Believer's Payday* by Dr. Paul Benware. It is balanced, and is quite readable. Dr. Benware is a modern author and a Bible professor. 2) *The Judgment Seat of Christ* by D. M. Panton. https://www.seekersofchrist.org/PANTON/JS/judgement_seat.html. This book is a classic work on the topic. It was written over 70 years ago so the style of writing is harder to read. But, the book is crammed with Scripture and insights. It is a very valuable work and every Bible teacher should read this book. In his day Panton was called "the prince of prophecy."

²⁷ See this author's website for the two books: *The Victorious Christian Life*, and *Romans 5-8: The Believer's Sanctification—A Commentary with Help for Living the Christ-life*. https://www.seekersofchrist.org/vic_contents.html

Arm yourselves with a mind to suffer

“Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God” (1 Pet. 4:1-2). Our Lord Jesus Christ willingly suffered rejection and persecution in order to carry out God’s will for Him on the cross. Peter tells us in these verses that we must prepare ourselves mentally to also accept suffering. The suffering noted in the context of Peter’s epistle here especially focuses on the suffering of persecution for Christ’s name and righteousness.

We are living in dark days that are growing increasingly darker. The “mystery of iniquity is already at work” (2 Thess. 2:7) and unrighteousness will increase. Part of this unrighteousness will be increasing intolerance and even open persecution of Christians. Believers who live in many parts of the world have already experienced persecution because of their faith in Christ. Those who live in North America have not experienced this as much, but in the last few years, we have seen Christians become increasingly maligned by unbelievers. Now the righteous beliefs of Christians on sexual morality and the sin of abortion are the targets of increasing hostility by unbelievers and even governments. This will only increase.

As we approach the return of Christ, we must be those who arm ourselves with a mind to suffer for doing what is right. It is not a time to shrink back and hide from our identity with Christ. Rather, it is a time when God is testing us and our discipleship. Are we willing to suffer for His name, even to lose all for His sake? I challenge myself, along with you, to take this matter to God in prayer so that we can be prepared for the days ahead. It would be most beneficial to meditate upon Luke 14:25-33.

A plea for humility and tolerance

As we consider the many prophetic Scriptures related to the return of Christ, I would like to offer a plea for humility. It is my experience that today, at least in America, believers who hold differing views of future events are sometimes quite adamant about their views. Sometimes, they even seem to consider others worthy of disdain or instant attack for holding different views. Brothers and sisters, it ought not to be this way.

Firstly, our views on a number of prophetic events should be held loosely, and in humility, due to the very nature of prophecy. In his book, *Coming Events: An Outline of Bible Prophecy*, the respected British writer G. H. Lang notes that Bible prophecy is uniquely confirmed by five tests. One test is the “**Mystery of Contradiction**, so that the prophecy could not be fully understood until its fulfillment and, therefore, its fulfillment could not be humanly contrived. Yet, . . . [there is also another test, being] **Clearness of Forecast**, so that the fulfillment shall be seen to correspond to the prediction.”²⁸ The main point I wish to make here is that many prophecies *cannot be fully understood until the time of fulfillment*.

Some prophetic topics, especially “the rapture,” are not easily discerned with full clarity ahead of time. Thus, in my opinion, there is a *need for humility* about the way we hold our views, and especially the way we approach or evaluate the views of others. Let us take the prime example of the rapture. I believe that the full truth about the rapture is not easy to discern. Let me give a perfect illustration of this difficulty. I have a book in my library, which I have read carefully in its entirety. It is titled *The*

²⁸ G. H. Lang, *Coming Events – An Outline of Bible Prophecy* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing Co., Inc., 1988), p. 2.

Rapture: Pre-, Mid- or Post-Tribulational. This is an academic book, written by three seminary professors, each of whom presents his distinctive view on the timing of the rapture. Then, each of the other two professors responds to the presentation, attempting to point out weaknesses in the presentation.

All three of these professors are well-recognized scholars, who hold doctoral degrees and are highly trained in theology and Biblical languages. Believe me when I say that very few of us, including myself, who could ever produce such learned and sophisticated arguments. These men are conservative, evangelical theologians who were at the top of their profession when this book was published (1984).

Now, here is the shocking part: all three of these men were colleagues who served on the faculty of the same seminary (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School)!²⁹ Thus, they adhere to the same overall views of Scripture and the same methods of interpretation. Yet, they come up with three completely different understandings of when “the rapture” happens! The Preface of the book states that all three men are given to teaching the clear views of Scripture, but *they do not believe* that the timing of the rapture is indeed a “clear truth” of Scripture.

If these exemplary students of the Word of God, friends, and colleagues at the same academic institution, do not believe the timing of the rapture is a “clear truth,” then what about us? Yet, I regularly hear preachers, teachers, and other believers make dogmatic pronouncements about the “truth” of “the rapture,” as if it should be obvious what the real truth is. Too often they make these pronouncements with the attitude that those who don’t “see” their truth are unquestionably wrong, and that they are misleading the sheep. In other words, many hold their understanding of the rapture with an attitude of prideful contempt towards the views of others.

²⁹ The three professors are: Paul Feinburg (pre-trib); Gleason Archer (mid-trib); Douglas Moo (post-trib).

And, some circles make their view of the rapture a condition for school admission or church fellowship. Some preachers seem to make their truth of the rapture almost equivalent to a tenet of the orthodox faith. Thus, **tolerance** for differing views of a minor and *not easily discerned* doctrine has been lost. And that loss is to the detriment of the testimony of the Christian church.

I have eight books in my library that deal solely with the matter of the rapture. These volumes present the arguments for the five major views of the rapture.³⁰ As I have read them and tried to keep an open mind on the subject, I have found that each of the five views has some very persuasive arguments. In addition to these eight books, I have other books that contain sections on eschatology, and these books examine the strengths and weaknesses of the various rapture views. Yet, there are still verses in my mind that each view does not harmonize completely with its system.

Over the years I have also studied various Bible texts intensely to try to harmonize all of the relevant texts on the rapture. I can tell you that this is a very difficult task. And, even though I have come to some tentative

³⁰ These five views are: 1) Pre-tribulation. This view teaches that all believers are raptured before the last seven-year period. 2) Mid-tribulation. This view holds that all believers are raptured at the mid-point of the final seven-year period. 3) Post-tribulation. Those who hold this view see the rapture as happening near the very end of the seven-year period. 4) Pre-wrath. This view teaches that believers are raptured out just before God pours out His wrath upon the earth, starting at the sixth seal (Rev. 6:12-17). The view holds that believers live through the great tribulation (the fifth seal per this view), which begins at the mid-point of the seven years. 5) Partial, or selective rapture. This teaching holds that there is more than one rapture. The first rapture is of the "first fruits," being "overcomers" who are mature in Christ and are living holy lives. This rapture happens sometime before the great tribulation. The remaining saints are raptured later, with 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 seen as being near the end of the seven-year period and describing a "general harvest."

conclusions about the rapture, there are still some questions in my mind. My conclusion is that this is not an easy matter to discern, so we need to hold our convictions with an attitude of humility. None of us has all of the answers yet in my opinion. Some of us, for sure, will turn out to be wrong.

Besides the topic of the rapture, there are other end-time events on which there are varying opinions. Will the antichrist be Jewish or not? Will the fourth beast of Daniel chapter two be a revived Roman empire headed up in Europe, or will it be a renewed Islamic caliphate, or possibly some other new world order? Will the war of Ezekiel 38 involve a Russian/Islamic coalition, or is Russia not the Magog of this prophetic passage? What is the identity of Babylon in Revelation 17 and 18? All of these questions will have to await the future day of prophetic fulfillment for final answers. Meanwhile, those who are adamant that their teachings on these things are correct had best learn humility. Some of them are going to be dead wrong.

It is certainly important for every believer to study the passages related to the coming of the Lord, including the rapture. It is also recommended for believers to read the writings of teachers who support varying views *with an open mind*. With these prophetic matters being hard to ascertain with certainty, one should be cautious about just accepting what their favorite preacher says (without truly listening to the alternative explanations of others). All teachers are bound to make some mistakes and hold some biases (Jas. 3:1-2).

We all should be prepared for “prophetic surprises.” All things will likely not happen as you were expecting from your understanding of prophecy or the prophecy charts you have seen. You may even have to suffer more than you anticipated. Arm yourself with a mind to suffer.

Let us pray for the grace to be humble and tolerant toward the prophetic views of others. Let us admit that we just might be wrong. Let us put away pride and any wrong attitude towards others who differ from us in our

understanding of prophecy. Let us value the unity of the body of Christ and avoid division over minor or unclear doctrines that do not touch moral matters.

Finally, let us understand the emphasis of NT prophecy. The emphasis of the NT upon Jesus' return is not upon determining all of the facts about the nature and timing of prophetic events. Neither is the emphasis upon boldly "defending" certain views. Rather, **the emphasis of the NT is upon eagerly looking for the Lord, watching and praying, and being ready for the coming of the Lord with a life of holiness and service unto God.**

Eagerly await His coming / Watch and pray / Be ready

The NT gives admonitions to us to be eagerly looking for the Savior's return, even "loving His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8). Believers are told to "watch and pray" in order to be ready for Christ's coming, which will happen suddenly at an unknown day and hour.

I believe that the best way for the reader to enter more into these realities is for him or her to *meditate upon*, and *pray over*, some significant passages that present these matters. The best way to profit from the passages noted below is to open up to the Lord while meditating upon them, asking God to enlighten you and work in your heart with the truth.

Other passages also address our preparation for the Lord's coming, but I am suggesting that the reader meditate upon these particular ones as a start. You may also wish to memorize some of these verses.

Interestingly, the following verse indicates that the Lord's coming becomes more real in our hearts as we pour over such prophetic passages:

“And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet. 1:19).

Here are some Scripture references to stir you to look for His coming and to be ready through holiness of life and service for that day.

Matthew 24:36-51

Matthew 25:1-30

Mark 13:32-37

Luke 12:35-48

Luke 17:22-37

Luke 21:34-36

Philippians 3:20-21

2 Timothy 4:7-8

Titus 2:11-13

Hebrews 9:28

2 Peter 3:10-14

1 John 3:1-3

To “watch” in the NT literally means to stay awake. Yet, spiritually it means to remain alert to spiritual realities. It at least involves watching our own lives, watching what God is doing, watching for the work of our enemy, watching the progress of prophetic events, watching for the coming King, watching for the interests of others, and watching for opportunities God brings to us. Prayer is sometimes noted in connection with our watching. We should pray when we see something in our watching—perhaps our shortcomings—that we realize needs God’s involvement or His supply of grace.

May God increase the desire within each of us to love the appearing of Christ and to seek to be ready for that day.

The “signs of the time”

In closing, I would like to speak about our need to truly discern the “signs of the time.” The gospel accounts give two records of Jesus rebuking the Jews of His day for not being able to interpret “the signs of the time.” These accounts are in Matthew 16 and Luke 12. Here is the account in Matthew:

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” So he left them and departed. (Matt. 16:1-4)

The lesson is simple. At His first advent, Jesus showed Himself to be the Messiah by His words, His miracles, and the fulfillment of specific prophecies. Yet, the hearts of many Jews remained dull and hardened to these signs. Now, we are witnessing several signs which the Scriptures signal that we are in the “season” of Christ’s return. Here are some of the “signs of the time” that show us that the return of Jesus is near:

Israel becomes a nation in 1948: The nation of Israel was wiped away by the Roman armies in 135 A. D. There was hardly a Jew left in the land of Palestine. Never in history has a nation disappeared and then come back to life again. But, this happened in 1948 to

the nation of Israel. This rebirth of Israel in its land was a fulfillment of prophecy (Ezek. 36:24). Jesus also prophesied the rebirth of the nation of Israel using the parable of the fig tree, a symbol of the OT people of God (Matt. 24:32-35). That parable was spoken shortly after Jesus cursed a fig tree upon his journey to Jerusalem for its lack of fruit, signifying His judgment upon the nation for its rejection of Him as the Messiah.³¹ The return of the Jews to once again become a nation in the holy land is considered as the “super sign” of the nearness of the second advent by Bible prophecy teachers.

Preparations for a rebuilt temple: One of the most specific prophecies about the end-time is the prophecy that the antichrist will defile the Jewish temple in Jerusalem very near the end of the age (Matt. 24:15-16, 21; 2 Thess. 2:3-4). This prophecy certainly means that a Jewish temple will be rebuilt once again in its place in Jerusalem. Many preparations have already been made by zealous Jews who are eager to rebuild this temple and again carry out the sacrificial system of the OT. This work began in 1973. Plans have been drawn up for the building of this temple. Also, priestly garments, temple furniture, and temple implements have been reproduced and are ready for use. Additionally, many Jews have been trained to offer sacrifices and perform other temple services. There can be no doubt that all of these preparations have been ongoing due to God’s sovereignty. The zealous Jews are simply awaiting a final clearance for the rebuilding of the temple on the temple mount.

Mounting pressure for an Israeli/Palestine peace plan: Recent decades have seen a growing pressure

³¹ More details about the parable of fig tree are given in the booklet titled *The Return of Jesus is Near: Now Learn the Parable of the Fig Tree*. This booklet is available for free download at: <https://www.seekersofchrist.org/ESCAT/fig.html>

for a Middle East peace plan between the Jewish nation and their Muslim neighbors. The Bible prophesies that the antichrist “shall make a strong covenant with many for one week [a seven-year period]” (Dan. 9:27). Many Bible teachers see this verse as an agreement between Israel and the antichrist, and it is viewed as likely guaranteeing the nation of Israel peace for this seven-year period. This may be true, but this agreement may also just be limited to things concerning the temple mount or temple sacrifices per the immediate context of the passage in Daniel. In any case, the whole world is now pushing for an agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Apostasy in the church in the end-time: The Greek word for apostasy means defection or a revolt. In the NT it is seen as a religious revolt. Most Bible teachers interpret apostasy as a moving away from truth once held by the Christian church. We can see this principle in 1 Timothy 4:1-3 and 2 Timothy 4:3-4, as well as other passages. The last few decades have seen a *great shift* in Christendom at large. Many mainline denominations have moved away from their original stated beliefs to heretical positions or positions of significant compromise on God’s truth. This includes compromises on clear Biblical truths about sexual morality. Entire movements have sprung up that violate sound Biblical teaching, such as a “prosperity gospel.” This false gospel teaches that God wants all believers to be rich, “successful,” and enjoy all the pleasures of this world they can. Such teaching is in direct contradiction to the Bible’s teaching about self-denial and self-control, a willingness to be lowly, and acceptance of the trials and difficulties of life as God’s way to train us in holiness.

A colossal moral decline in society: Again, in just the past few decades, we have witnessed an astounding decline in morality. Actions that were formerly called evil are now called good by many societies (Isa. 5:20). What was once universally called

sexual perversion and was condemned by society is now celebrated. And, those who continue to hold to Biblical morality are condemned as intolerant and unloving. This is happening in nations that once held up a gospel light for the world to see (Great Britain, USA). We should note that sexual perversion, violence toward fellow men, and other gross evils are key factors noted for God's actions of devastating total judgment in the past: the Genesis flood (Gen. 6:1-13) and the judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 1:7).

From a Biblical standpoint, there is every reason to believe that this world is on the verge of God's end-time judgments as seen in the book of Revelation. On the one hand, we can always say that the Lord's coming is "imminent." That means that it will come suddenly, and could potentially happen at any time. Such passages as Mark 13:32-37 and James 5:7-9 show this imminence. On the other hand, when we see the factors noted above, we should further know that His coming is quite near. Its season has arrived. With a fresh desire, we should prepare for Christ's coming.

May we all take seriously the warning of Christ's words about the "evil slave": "But if that evil slave says in his heart, 'My master is not coming for a long time.'" (Matt. 24:48, NASB)

"Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake." (Mk. 13:35-37)

About the author

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