



COUNTDOWN TO THE APOCALYPSE

WHY ISIS AND EBOLA ARE ONLY THE BEGINNING

ROBERT JEFFRESS



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New York Boston Nashville



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To Jack and Kay Brady:

*Thank you for your many decades of faithful service to our
First Baptist Church in Dallas.*

*I will be eternally indebted to you for introducing me as a
teenager to the subject of Bible prophecy and for partnering
with me in spreading God's Word throughout the world as we
anticipate Christ's return.*

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The Beginning of the End?

There's a sense possibly that the world is spinning so fast and nobody is able to control it." That's what President Obama said in October 2014 at a fund-raiser in New York City.¹ It's easy to see why. Check out some recent headlines:

Ebola Hits New York City
4 Jihad Attacks in 4 Days
Ukraine Could Explode in 48 Hours
ISIS Tortured Hostages Before Beheading Them
Muslim Terror Rivals Unite Under ISIS Banner
As Ebola Spreads, Asia Senses Vulnerability
Ebola Crisis "On Same Scale as AIDS Epidemic"
Houston Demands Pastors Turn Over Sermons
The Criminalization of Christianity Is Here

Then there was a column in the *New York Times* by veteran journalist Roger Cohen called "The Great Unraveling."² It begins this way: "It was the time of unraveling. Long afterward, in the ruins, people asked: How could it happen?"

The succeeding paragraphs each begin with the phrase "It was a time of..." followed by beheadings, aggression, breakups, weakness, fever, and disorientation, each one recording the ways in which the world is unraveling before our eyes. Here is the closing paragraph: "It was a time of disorientation. Nobody connected the dots... Until it was too late and people could see the Great Unraveling for what it was and what it had wrought."

It's fairly amazing to read something like that in the *New York Times*, which specializes in "All the News That's Fit to Print." As the "newspaper of record" for America, that's a sobering assessment of the state of the world at this moment in history. Most telling is the assertion that no one connected the dots. In a very deep sense, Roger Cohen is right.

We all see the problems in the world.

We understand that something has gone badly wrong.

We all wait to see what will happen next.

Never in my lifetime have I sensed so much unrest in the air. It seems that every day brings another set of unsettling headlines. Everywhere I go, I hear people saying that they expect "something" is about to happen but they don't know what it is.

Will there be another 9/11-style attack on America?

Will ISIS create a Muslim Caliphate in the Middle East?

Will an Ebola epidemic or an outbreak of some other super virus spread across America?

Will Christians be jailed for their faith?

Will we ever trust our own government again?

Is the world itself unraveling before our eyes?

Author David Jeremiah frames the question this way:

The events unfolding in today's world are ominously threatening to unsettle institutions, reorder national political alignments, change the balance of world power, and destabilize the equitable distribution of resources. People everywhere are beginning to live in a state of fear and anxiety. Serious people are asking, "If these things are happening today, what will the future be like for my children and grandchildren? Do current headlines give us any signs about what is coming next?"³

Two well-known Christian leaders recently addressed these questions. After recounting the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis 19, psychologist and author Dr. James Dobson explained the connection to current events:

Why have I chosen to recount this biblical story from so long ago? Because I am convinced that America and other Western Nations are sliding in the same direction. We have not yet reached the depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah, but that appears to be where we are headed. Judge Robert Bork, the brilliant jurist who was shamefully denied a seat on the Supreme Court, wrote a book about this danger 18 years ago. It was titled, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*. I think he had it right.⁴

In looking at a world in crisis, Billy Graham used words that sound very much like what President Obama said:

Today the world is being carried on a rushing torrent of history that is sweeping out of control. There is but one power available to redeem the course of events, and that is the power of prayer by God-fearing, Christ-believing people.⁵

Then Reverend Graham added this analysis, which sounds very much like James Dobson's comments:

Even though America is just as wicked as Sodom and Gomorrah ever were, and as deserving of the judgment of God, God would spare us if we were earnestly praying, with hearts that had been cleansed and washed by the blood of Christ.

If Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire and brimstone from heaven (Genesis 19:23-29), what can we in America expect?

President Obama is right. The world does seem to be spinning out of control.

Dr. Dobson is right. We are in trouble morally and spiritually.

Billy Graham is right. As a nation, we desperately need to turn to God.

That's why I have written this book. I want to examine the world situation today in the light of

Bible prophecy. If we understand where we are on God's calendar, then we will realize that we are closer to the "end of days" than we have ever been.

In the pages ahead, we will examine ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), Ebola, the Middle East crisis, the breakdown of the family, the redefinition of marriage, the loss of religious freedom, and the moral decline that has led to an avalanche of immorality in our day. I think you'll be amazed at how many things that are happening today were predicted in the Bible. I believe we are living in a specific period of time the Bible calls "the last days." Although I have no idea where we are on God's clock, the "countdown to the apocalypse" has begun.

What Difference Does It Make?

I realize that many people react with skepticism whenever anyone mentions Bible prophecy. In our sense, it seems unrelated to modern life. Who cares about the Mark of the Beast when we still have bills to pay and meetings to attend, not to mention making sure the kids get to soccer practice on time? Life is already so full that we don't have any extra energy to study the meaning of some obscure vision in the Book of Revelation. It might be fascinating to ponder the strange statue in Daniel 2, but we're just too tired to think about it. Plus the headlines we see are frightening enough without wondering about the "last days."

What difference does it make?

Knowing the future ought to make a big difference in the way we live today. Consider what happens when the National Weather Service issues a tornado warning. That happens every year in Texas and Oklahoma. A warning means that severe weather is imminent and you must take cover immediately. Every year people are injured or killed because they did not take the warning seriously. Sometimes they didn't get the message, but in many cases they ignored it. You disregard a tornado warning at your own peril.⁶

We can apply this principle to Bible prophecy. As we will see, Jesus gave us some very specific signs of the "last days." We ignore those signs at our own peril. Those who know what is to come can be prepared. I'm convinced that the Bible has given us information about the future that applies to the twenty-first-century world.

It helps to remember that Bible prophecy is a major part of the Bible. In Bible study there is a principle referred to as "The Law of Proportion." This law simply says that you can tell the importance of a certain subject in Scripture by how much space is devoted to it. Applying this principle to prophecy, we discover that more than one-fourth of the Bible is predictive prophecy. In the Old Testament there are over eighteen hundred references to the return of Christ. Of the 26 chapters in the New Testament, there are more than three hundred references to the Lord's return—one out of every thirty verses. Twenty-three of the twenty-seven New Testament books give prominence to this subject. For every prophecy in Scripture concerning the first coming of Christ, there are eight on Christ's Second Coming. Both the proportion and prominence of the prophetic theme in Scripture argue for its importance.⁷

Over the years I've heard people say things like, "The Bible isn't clear about the future" or "You can't understand what the Book of Revelation means" or "Lots of people have tried to set a date for the Second Coming and they've all been wrong." Too many people who otherwise respect the Bible tune out when it comes to the whole topic of Bible prophecy. They think they've heard it all before.

No One Knows the Date!

I realize that some so-called experts have misled people because they claimed to know the date of the Second Coming of Christ. Jesus warned us that “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone” (Matthew 24:36). This verse plainly says that no one will know the precise moment of Christ’s return. No one can know the day or the hour. The best we can do is to read the signs of the time and conclude that we may be nearing the end of the age. But even then we can’t be certain. If anyone tells you that they have pinpointed the year or the month or the day or the hour of Jesus’s return, do not believe him. That person is either a false prophet or a seriously deluded Bible student. Jesus strictly forbids setting dates for His return.

People have been predicting the end of the world for thousands of years. Sometimes they arrived at these dates through calculating certain astronomic events (think Mayan Apocalypse) or because of a natural disaster (the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 is a good example) or because they think they know what 666 means (I remember when people thought Henry Kissinger was the Antichrist because they thought his name equaled 666) or because of the “four blood moons” (a popular theory today) or because of intricate manipulation of certain Bible passages.

History is filled with those who have made false predictions about when the end of the world would occur:

- Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) thought the world would end in 1656: “There are but 150 years left... at which time... the world will come to an end,” Columbus prophesied.
- Martin Luther (1483–1546) didn’t think the world could exist past three hundred years from his time.
- The psychic Edgar Cayce (1877–1945) predicted the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in 2000.

Concerning that last one, it’s worth recalling that a man named Harold Camping made a widely reported prediction that the world was going to end on May 21, 2011. He arrived at that precise date through a series of arcane calculations that involved the Bible, certain dates in history, and a system of interpretation so complex that few people could easily understand it.⁸ Because he had a daily radio program, he was able to garner widespread attention.

As the day approached, his followers erected billboards in major cities, warning that the world would end on May 21, 2011. They went “all in” on Camping’s prediction. They didn’t say (and many of us might have done) “The world is ending soon” (a prediction sufficiently vague that no one could prove it wrong) or even “We know when the world is ending but we’re not telling” (as if to tease the public). Harold Camping and his followers weren’t using the date as an excuse to sell something. They truly believed the world was coming to an end on a particular date, and they weren’t shy about saying so.

No one could doubt the sincerity of their convictions. A few followers even went so far as to sell everything and spend their last few days spreading the word.

The idea that the world was coming to an end caught fire in the mainstream media. CNN and Fox News picked it up. *Time* magazine reported on the movement. The mainstream media gave it big play as “the day” approached. It hit social media in a big way. On the day before (May 20), Twitter reported that #iftheworldendssaturday was trending around the world. It was big in the United States but also in Brazil, South Africa, Germany, and even in India. It was as if for a brief moment people

around the world stopped and wondered, “What if the world ends on May 21?”

Why Study Bible Prophecy?

So, if it is impossible to know when major prophetic events will unfold, why bother to study Bible prophecy at all? The answer is, God has given us a clear indication of what to look for so that we will not be deceived by those false Christs that have appeared in every generation and would lead us in the wrong direction.

On that point, I need to make one thing very clear. I don't know when Christ is coming back. I'm convinced we are living in the “last days” according to the Bible, but I don't know exactly where we are on God's calendar. No one does. If anyone ever tries to set an actual date for the end of the world, that's a sign you need to run in the other direction! Please don't read this book thinking I will give you a “secret date.” God has not given me any special, inside information. I try to follow Billy Graham's advice. I take the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

The newspaper tells me what is happening in the world.

The Bible tells me what it means.

This book is my attempt to apply the teaching of the Bible to current events. I believe that when we do that, we will discover a remarkable correspondence between the ancient words of Scripture and the alarming events happening in our world. Even though many things may frighten us (and there are good reasons to be frightened these days!), I take comfort in the Bible that this world is God's world and our history really is His Story.

We live in amazing times when the ancient prophecies of the Bible are being fulfilled before our own eyes. In order to set the scene, we'll start with an overview of Bible prophecy so that we can get the big picture of God's plan for the future. Then we'll look at three specific “signs of the times,” and in the last chapter I'll answer the question, “If we are living in the last days, what difference should that make in my life?”

After writing this book, I am more convinced than ever that we are living in the period of time that the Bible calls “the last days.” If that is true, then we may be the generation that sees the Second Coming of Christ. If that sounds exciting, turn the page and let's get started.

Jesus on the End Times

Will you be left behind?

That's the question posed by a recent movie starring Nicolas Cage based on the book series that has sold over 65 million copies. The film dramatizes the Rapture (the sudden disappearance of all Christians from the earth), which will plunge the world into seven years of chaos, culminating in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Before you label such a belief system as “kooky talk” (as Kramer from *Seinfeld* would say), consider that, according to Pew Research, 47 percent of American Christians believe that the end of the world as described in the Bible will occur within the next forty years. Add to that many more Christians who believe that the apocalyptic prophecies of the Bible will be fulfilled at some unspecified time, and you have tens of millions of Americans who believe the end of the world could be around the corner.

For purposes of full disclosure, I am one of those who believe in the biblical account of the end of the world, though I have no idea when it will happen.

I have written several books on the topic; I teach a doctoral-level class on end-times theology at one of the most respected seminaries in the world; and I also appear in a new documentary about the Rapture by the producers of the new *Left Behind* movie. However, as a “Bible prophecy insider,” I'm in a unique position to warn against three extremes when it comes to any discussion of the end times

- **Fanaticism.** Since the beginning of the world, people have been predicting the date it will end. A Wikipedia entry called “List of Dates Predicted for Apocalyptic Events” contains over 150 different dates for “apocalyptic events such as the Rapture, Last Judgment, or any other event that would result in the end of humanity, civilization, the planet, or the entire universe.”¹ The list starts in 634 B.C. (many Romans feared the city would be destroyed in its 120th year) and ends in 2013 (with a failed prediction of Christ's return). Such a list reminds us both of the dangers of date setting and of the truth that only God knows when the world will end. Remember that Jesus said no one except the Father in heaven knows the day or the hour of His return. If God has not revealed to His own Son the date for the end, I'm not surprised He didn't tell Harold Camping.

- **Fatalism.** Frankly, this is a more prevalent and dangerous reaction from Christians anticipating the end of the world. Some people wonder, “If the world is going to hell in a hand basket anyway, why try to improve the world in which we live?” Why try to stop the aggression of ISIS or the outbreak of Ebola if these threats to the globe are simply catalysts for Armageddon and the return of Jesus Christ?

Just because something is inevitable doesn't mean it is immediate. For example, I know that I'm going to die one day and that something better awaits me. But the knowledge of my ultimate demise doesn't prevent me from exercising and going to the doctor. I want to prolong my life—not because

fear death, but because I want to fulfill God's purpose for my life.

Similarly, Christians should be at the forefront of pushing back against evil, injustice, and sickness in order to prevent the premature implosion of our world, because once the world does end, there will be no more opportunity to share the message of Christ with anyone. Knowing that the end is certain should spur Christians to *action*, not inaction. C.S. Lewis claimed that "if you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next."

- **Cynicism.** This is the most dangerous reaction to any discussion of the end times. Before you allow the fanaticism and fatalism of others to cause you to dismiss the biblical teachings about the end of the world, consider Jesus's own words. While sitting on the Mount of Olives with His disciples (Matthew 24-25), Jesus gave a detailed outline of the end times and His return: "For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the West, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matthew 24:27).

Unless you believe that Jesus was just off His meds that day, you have to give serious consideration to His predictions. It is intellectually dishonest to embrace Jesus's teachings from the Sermon on the Mount but dismiss His words about the end times on the Mount of Olives.²

Final Questions

Matthew chapters 24 through 25 contain the Olivet Discourse, the second-longest sermon by Jesus Christ. The only longer recorded message is the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 through 7). It is also the longest prophetic section in the New Testament outside the Book of Revelation. For those reasons alone, it deserves our careful attention. However, when you consider the setting of the message, its importance is magnified even more.

It is now Wednesday of Christ's final week. On this particular day, He goes to the temple and then pronounces final judgment on the religious leaders of Israel, publicly branding them as hypocrites who in the name of God lead others astray. They are "whitened sepulchers" who look good on the outside but on the inside are filled with all manner of evil. He pronounces seven "woes" of divine judgment upon the professional religious leaders who have led the nation to reject Him (Matthew 23). Knowing that His end is near, He offers this final word to Jerusalem: "You will not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' " (Matthew 23:39). Then He leaves the temple area with His disciples, crosses the Kidron Valley, and finds a place to sit on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. It is there, while looking across the valley at the temple and at the great city of Jerusalem, that Jesus begins explaining the world events that will lead to His return. It is a private message, intended for His disciples, a warning of what was to come after He returned to heaven.

As we read it, we should remember that even at this late date, the disciples have no idea that the Master is about to be crucified two days later, in spite of the fact that Jesus repeatedly told them He had to die. All the gruesome events of Good Friday are simply hidden from their view. Certainly they were keenly aware of the dark clouds of opposition swirling around Jesus, but they could not comprehend what was about to happen.

Even though Christ had predicted His resurrection, that, too, was a mystery to them. And regarding His ascension to heaven and His long absence from the earth, they simply had no conception about that whatsoever. It is against that backdrop that Christ speaks to His followers. His major message is

warning of a long delay before He returned and of difficult times they would face. The first part of the discourse emphasizes the persecution that true believers would face in the world. The last part of the discourse is a call to faithfulness in light of the delay in His return and the hard times that would come.

But make no mistake. Jesus clearly predicts His eventual return to the earth. Matthew 24:29-31 cannot mean anything other than a literal, physical Second Coming of Christ. The questions the disciples ask mirror their confusion about the future. When they comment about the beauty of Herod's temple, Jesus replies that a day is coming when the temple will be destroyed and "not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down" (Matthew 24:2).

If you visit the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, you can see a portion along the western side of the Temple Mount where researchers have discovered the very stones of the temple, still lying along the road where they were thrown by the Roman soldiers two thousand years ago. For hundreds of years they were covered by rubble. The recent excavation offers dramatic proof of the literal truth of Jesus' words.

When the disciples heard this prediction, they asked three questions: "When will these things happen, and what *will be* the sign of Your coming, *and* of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3). In their mind those events were tied together—the destruction of the temple, the coming of Christ, and the end of the age. In Matthew 24 through 25, Jesus doesn't directly answer the first question. He skips over two thousand years to discuss the events surrounding His Second Coming.

Five Signs of the Second Coming

In Matthew 24:4-14 Jesus reveals five "signs" of the times. As we study these verses, keep in mind that they have a double reference. These "signs" are true and present in every generation and they will be especially visible as we approach the end of this age.

Sign 1: Spiritual Deception

Jesus answered and said to them, "See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many."

Matthew 24:4

The first "sign" is a reminder that religious charlatans may be found in every age. In our own generation we have only to think of David Koresh and Jim Jones. Implied in the words of Jesus is the reality: As we approach the end of the age, spiritual deception will increase because spiritual gullibility will increase. Having turned away from the truth, people will follow anyone who speaks with authority and promises to help solve their problems and give meaning to daily life. And we should not be surprised that such teachers come "in My name."

Note carefully what 1 Timothy 4:1 says: "The Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons." Those "deceitful spirits" are in the world today and their evident success rate seems to be very high.

Recently the Catholic Church has warned of a rise in Satanism and the occult. According to Walter Cascioli, a psychiatrist and spokesman for the International Association of Exorcists, "The struggle against evil and the Devil is becoming more and more of an emergency." Last April, Pope Francis

urged the faithful to “Learn to fight the Devil... who exists even in the 21st century.”³ All the deception will come to a climax when the Antichrist displays the work of Satan by using “with a power and signs and false wonders” (2 Thessalonians 2:9). He will be so successful at mimicking the work of God through his “miracles” that millions of people will follow him to their ultimate destruction.

Sign 2: International Conflict

You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.

Matthew 24:6-7

The phrase “You will be hearing” means that we live in an age of unending commotion and upheaval. Leon Trotsky once commented that anyone seeking a peaceful world picked the wrong century to be born in. His words seem truer today than ever before.

Do these names sound familiar? Iraq, Syria, Ukraine, Hong Kong, the East China Sea, Crimea, Chechnya, Serbia, Kosovo, Lebanon, Iraq, Kashmir, Somalia, Yemen, Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. Those are just a few of the current “hot spots” scattered around the globe. Seventy years ago American troops were fighting Germany and Japan. Then American troops were sent to Korea, then Vietnam, then the Persian Gulf. Now we can add Afghanistan, Pakistan, and who knows how many other Middle Eastern countries to the list.

“Those things must take place.” That means we will see war in many places around the world every generation. Because that is true, we need to be careful as we study current events in the light of Bible prophecy. I remember when John F. Kennedy was supposed to be the Antichrist. You don’t hear that theory today. Earlier, the prime candidates were Mussolini and Hitler. And so it goes. This world is marked by warfare, and we will not see the end of it until the Prince of Peace returns and men beat their swords into plowshares.

Sign 3: Natural Disasters

In various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.

Matthew 24:7b

Luke 21:11 (NKJV) adds the word “pestilence” to the list. *A pestilence is an outbreak of disease on a epidemic level.* In this connection, think of diseases like Ebola, anthrax, smallpox, botulism, or even the plague. Should anyone find a way to weaponize Ebola, that threat could kill tens of thousands of people. Does that seem unthinkable? A report in *Scientific American* says that during the Cold War the Russians investigated using Ebola in bioterrorism. In 1992 the Japanese cult group Aum Shinrikyo sent a team to Africa to try to obtain a sample of Ebola. They ended up releasing sarin gas in a Tokyo subway in 1995.⁴ A report from Stratfor Global Intelligence paints a more chilling picture of the possibilities of bioterrorism:

As far as intent goes, there is very little doubt that such a group would employ a biological weapon. As we noted last month when there was increased talk about the Islamic State possibly weaponizing plague for a biological attack, terrorist attacks are intended to have a psychological impact that outweighs the physical damage they cause. The Islamic State itself has a long history of conducting brutal actions to foster panic.⁵

The author notes that al Qaeda actually used large quantities of chlorine in vehicle bombs in 2002 and 2007 in an attempt to cause mass casualties among U.S. and Iraqi troops. Though the bombs killed more people than the chlorine did, it shows how far the terrorists are willing to go.

Francisco Martinez, Spain's State Secretary for Security, says that ISIS has considered using Ebola in some sort of bioterrorism: "The terrorists could do anything to kill people in the West, including stabbing people with needles poisoned with the virus, Martinez told the Spanish parliament."

The terrorists have discussed various forms of biological warfare that might be used against the West. "There are 'many examples' of such conversations," Martinez said, adding that "the use of Ebola as a poisonous weapon against the United States" was the topic of one of the conversations.⁶

Perhaps we are not as safe in the United States as we think. In early November, President Obama requested more than \$6 billion from Congress to fight Ebola. At the same time, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that it is increasing its national stockpile of protective gear after a sudden increase in demand.⁷ BARDA, the U.S. government's Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, has revealed it sees Ebola "as a bioterrorism threat."⁸ Writing for *National Review Online*, Matt A. Mayer offers this sobering assessment:

Knowing what the Ebola virus is exposing about our known deficiencies, imagine what will happen should a superbug appear or our enemies successfully weaponize a far deadlier virus. The mass casualties from the pandemic influenza bug a hundred years ago would pale in comparison, given modern air travel and far higher population densities.⁹

Note that as Jesus gives this list of signs, He calls them the "beginning of birth pangs." What do that mean? Famines, earthquakes, and outbreaks of disease have been with us since the beginning of time. They are with us today and will be with us tomorrow. These things, bad as they are, do not themselves point to the last days. They are like "birth pangs" or labor pains as one world dies and another one takes its place. That image is particularly useful to help us get the right perspective on contemporary events.

When a woman is pregnant, she knows from the calendar the general time when the baby is due. Her body begins to send specific signals as the day approaches. Those signals are called labor pains. They begin with low intensity and low frequency. Sometimes they can go on for several days and then suddenly stop. They may start and stop several times (so-called "false labor"). But eventually the labor pains start in earnest. Even then the tempo is slow and steady. As time passes, the pains come more frequently and with greater intensity. In the end, the pains come rapidly and finally in one great burst the baby is born. That is a perfect description of what will happen at the end of this age.

The crucial question is, how close are we to those end-time sufferings and ultimately to the return of Christ to the earth? Jesus warns us about the dangers of too much speculation. As bad as the current situation may be, things may get much worse in the days to come. Perhaps the terrorists will attack again with even more devastating results. Or possibly things may be much better in the world by ne

spring. No one can say with certainty.

~~The “signs” we see around us remind us that there is much evil in the world. And the picture of the “birth pangs” teaches us that there is a flow or tempo to world events that is controlled by our Heavenly Father. In the last days before Christ comes, the world will seem to disintegrate before our eyes. The very systems in which we have placed so much confidence will utterly fail; chaos will spread across the earth as men and women cry out for a leader to bring them peace and safety. In those frightful hours, a man of peace will rise up with a promise of deliverance for those who follow Him. Millions will do so to their eternal regret because that man will prove to be the ultimate false Christ, or as he is commonly referred to, the Antichrist.~~

Sign 4: Fierce Persecution

Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name.

Matthew 24

This is a verse no one likes to read or memorize. I’ve never known anyone who chose it as a verse to model their life after. It’s too negative to be very popular. Yet there it is, clear and easy to understand, right from the lips of our Lord. Jesus told His disciples to expect the worst. A time will come when the followers of Christ will be hated by all nations because of our relationship to Him.

Here are a few recent examples:

In Pakistan a Christian couple was tortured and then burned to death by a mob of fifteen hundred Muslims for allegedly burning a copy of the Koran. “Reports say the Christian woman was pregnant at the time of her death, and clung to the arm of her husband.”¹⁰

In China, Wenxi Li, a Christian bookstore worker from Beijing, was arrested for helping open a Christian bookstore in Taiyuan in the Shanxi province. He is currently serving a two-year prison sentence. When he was arrested, one of the security workers allegedly shouted, “Don’t you dare bring Christian culture here. This is our turf.”¹¹

In Nigeria the Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram kidnapped 276 teenaged girls, most of them from Christian families. After cease-fire talks broke down, the leader of the group released a video with a chilling message. First, he boasted of the superiority of Islam: “Allah has proved too difficult for the infidel, Allah has proved too difficult for the tyrant, Allah has proved too difficult for the United States, Allah has proved too difficult for a plane called drone, bastard. Allah has proved too difficult for everyone. Allah is mightier than everyone.”

Then he addressed the plight of the kidnapped schoolgirls:

Don’t you know the over 200 Chibok schoolgirls have converted to Islam? They have now memorized two chapters of the Koran. They have seen themselves in the Books of Luke and John that Christians have corrupted the Bible. Girls from Chibok confessing Islam is the true religion! A six-grader, liars.

We married them off. They are in their marital homes. (Laughter)¹²

In a column called “A Global Slaughter of Christians, but America’s Churches Stay Silent

Kirsten Powers recounts instance after instance of the persecution of Christians in the Middle East and Africa. Here is one particularly chilling example from Syria:

In Syria, Christians are under attack by Islamist rebels and fear extinction if Bashar al-Assad falls. This month, rebels overran the historic Christian town of Maalula, where many of its inhabitants speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus. The AFP reported that a resident of Maalula called her fiancé's cell and was told by a member of the Free Syrian Army that they gave him a chance to convert to Islam and he refused. So they slit his throat.¹³

At the end of her column she quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." Then she adds, "That pretty well sums it up." Sadly, we must say that her indictment is deserved. Jesus said that His followers would be persecuted for their faith. We see that happening around the world today.

Sign 5: Widespread Apostasy

At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold.

Matthew 24:10-12 NIV

These verses paint a picture of unprecedented religious apostasy (a word meaning "falling away from the truth") in the last days. They especially apply to so-called Christian leaders who depart from the Christian faith. These are the leaders who, in the name of religious unity, deny the truthfulness of the Bible, deny the necessity of Christ's death for our sins, deny the virgin birth of Christ, deny the reality of eternal hell, and deny that those who die without Jesus Christ are lost forever. They turn away after fads and popular social causes and pander to the powers that be. They support abortion, the redefinition of marriage, and the right of pornographers to practice their evil trade. They do not preach the message of Christ's salvation, because they do not even believe the gospel. They are wolves in sheep's clothing.

2 Timothy 3:1-9 (NIV) tells us that in the last days "terrible times" will come as men become lovers of pleasure instead of lovers of God. They will turn away from the truth because their minds are depraved. False teachers who cleverly counterfeit the truth will lead many others astray. Truly those "terrible times" are upon us—both in America and around the world. The worst is yet to come.

A Peek into God's Calendar

Although many people shy away from Bible prophecy because it seems both controversial and confusing, I believe we need a working knowledge of what to expect in the future. What events lead up to and follow the return of Jesus Christ to the earth?

I believe the Bible reveals a series of events that will take place at the "end of days" when Jesus returns to the earth.¹⁴

1. *The Rapture of the Church (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)*

The word *rapture* comes from the Greek word *harpazo*, which means “to snatch away.” That is what the Rapture is—a snatching away of all believers before the beginning of the Tribulation. The key passage in the New Testament that describes the Rapture is 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

2. *The Tribulation (Revelation 6–19)*

Following the Rapture of the Church is a time commonly referred to as the “Tribulation,” a seven-year period that begins when the world dictator, known as Antichrist, signs a peace covenant with Israel and ends with Armageddon and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The clearest picture of that seven-year period is found in Revelation 6 through 19. But many other passages in both the Old and New Testaments speak of it. Jeremiah 30:7 (NKJV) calls it “the time of Jacob’s trouble” because it is primarily for the nation of Israel, not for the church. I believe the church will be removed from the earth before that seven-year period of tribulation begins (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). In Revelation 3:10 the Lord says to true believers: “I also will keep you from the hour of testing” that will come upon the whole earth.

3. *The Second Coming of Christ (Revelation 19:11-16)*

The climax of the Tribulation will occur during the war of Armageddon, during which the major powers of the world will seek to defeat Antichrist and his forces. However, as the world forces prepare to destroy one another, the heavens will suddenly open and all attention will be directed upward as the entire world sees a sight they will never forget:

And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war... And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, “King of kings and Lord of lords.”

Revelation 19:11, 14-16

This passage describes the “Second Coming of Christ,” which is the *visible* return of Jesus Christ to establish His kingdom on earth. Although the word “apocalypse” has an ominous connotation for most people, the Greek word *apokalupsis* simply means “unveiling” or “revelation.” The coming “apocalypse” refers to the Second Coming of Jesus when He is unveiled and revealed to the world as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

While there are some similarities between the Rapture and the Second Coming, they are two

entirely different events. At the Rapture, the Lord comes secretly for His children. He appears in the clouds only to His followers, and His feet never touch the earth. However, at the Second Coming, believers and unbelievers alike will witness Christ's return to the earth.

4. *The Millennium (Revelation 20:1-3)*

“The Millennium” is the thousand-year period of time during which Christ will reign on the earth fulfilling God's promises to Abraham and his believing descendants. The Old Testament prophets anxiously anticipated this earthly reign of Messiah. For example, consider these familiar words from Isaiah:

*But with righteousness He will judge the poor,...
And with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked...
And the wolf will dwell with the lamb,
And the leopard will lie down with the young goat,...
They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain,
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
As the waters cover the sea*

Isaiah 11:4, 6, 9

There is a Millennium coming. Jesus is going to sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem. We are going to rule with Him, believing Israel is going to be in the land God promised, and God's laws will be written on each man's heart, and as a result perfect peace will rule.

5. *The Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15)*

The Bible describes God's final judgment of all unbelievers at an event known as the “Great White Throne Judgment.” Revelation 20 describes this judgment in detail:

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged every one of them according to their deeds... And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 20:11-13, 15

Whatever else we may say about this awesome scene, you don't want to be there because the people who are judged at the Great White Throne end up in the lake of fire. In Chapter 6 I will show you how to “settle your case out of court” so that you miss this final judgment altogether.

6. Eternity Future (Revelation 21-22)

After the Great White Throne Judgment, the present earth will be completely destroyed by fire. The apostle Peter wrote of that event in his second letter:

But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men... But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.

2 Peter 3:7, 10

Following the destruction of this present earth will be the unveiling of a new heaven and earth, witnessed by the apostle John:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.

Revelation 21:1-3

It is significant that John saw both a new heaven *and* a new earth. Many Christians have been taught that our eternal home will be in heaven. But *earth*, not heaven, will be our final destination. I don't know about you, but I get excited about that truth since floating around on a cloud for eternity has never had much appeal to me!

Putting It All Together

If that is the big picture, how do we connect the extraordinary crises our world is facing today with the promises God made? We have the outline of future events. Where do we fit in?

The Bible speaks of these days. 2 Timothy 3:1 warns us that "in the last days perilous times will come" (NKJV). Jesus spoke of a time so frightening that men would faint for fear of what was about to happen:

There will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth dismay among nations, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Luke 21:25-28

Those words seem more relevant today than they did when Jesus first spoke them two thousand years ago. They perfectly fit our day—the "Age of Anxiety."

But Jesus went on to say more about the world situation: “Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27).

Just before Jesus returns the world will be in a situation of unprecedented turmoil. Take the fear and turmoil over the Middle East and multiply it by a factor of 1,000 and you have the situation Jesus is talking about.

When You See These Things Happening

How will we know when His coming is drawing near? Jesus gives us the answer to that question: “But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28).

This verse indicates that the return of the Lord will not take place in a vacuum. There will be significant indicators, visible portents, great movements of men and nations that tell us that the time is at hand.

But Jesus is not finished yet: “Then He told them a parable: ‘Behold the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near’ ” (Luke 21:29-31).

How much clearer can it be? If you look at a tree and see the leaves sprouting, you know that summer is not far away. It may not come for several weeks or even for a month or two, but once you see the leaves, you *know* summer is coming. In the same way, there will be slowly unfolding signs of the return of Jesus Christ. As those things *begin* to happen, you may be sure that the return of the Lord cannot be far away.

Let me go a step further and say that in these verses Jesus encourages His followers to constantly examine the world in which they live for the gathering signs of His return. Let me make that stronger. These verses teach us that Jesus expects His followers to watch for His return.

Finally, I think these verses indicate that the signs will slowly unfold before us. Which is why it is impossible to say exactly how ISIS fits into the prophetic picture. The time frame is too short. We can't see clearly how this current crisis affects the flow of end-time events. Instead of thinking in terms of days or months when it comes to prophecy, we need to think in terms of years and decades and generations and even centuries.

One generation will see one thing beginning; the next sees something else. One generation sees the spread of liberalism among the mainline churches; another sees the rise of communism; yet another witnesses Hitler's failed attempt to exterminate the Jewish race. That same generation witnesses the establishment of the state of Israel. Twenty years later Israel controls Jerusalem. And twenty years after that we have war in the Persian Gulf. Twenty years later radical Islam advances in the Middle East and in Europe and now has struck in the United States and in Canada.

No single generation sees all these things, but over time, as the generations come and go, a flow and pattern becomes apparent. Some things that seemed important in one generation pass in insignificance in the next. But other events build on what has already happened to produce that flow and pattern evident to the thoughtful observer of world history.

Finding the Missing Pieces

If we can't know the precise date of Jesus's return, what can we know? In Luke 21, Jesus seems

indicate that as we approach the end times, we should see “these things” begin to happen. What are “these things”? They are the great movements of men and nations that Jesus talked about.

Understanding the signs of the times is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. The Bible gives us a general picture of what the last days will look like. If we put together all the information from various places in the Bible—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Matthew, Luke, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 2 Peter, and Revelation (to name only a few books)—we get a fairly detailed picture of the military, political, economic, spiritual, and moral situation in the days preceding the coming of Christ.

At any given point in history, we are invited (by Jesus Himself) to examine the world in which we live and to compare it thoughtfully and soberly with that general end-time scenario revealed in the Bible. When we do that, we will always find some areas of close correspondence and some areas of wide divergence. And yet, if our understanding of Jesus’s words in Luke 21 is correct, as we approach the last days, those areas of correspondence should begin to increase.

Reading the Signs Rightly

Although Jesus said His disciples could not know the date of His return (Matthew 24:36), He never rebuked them for wanting to understand the events surrounding His return. How close are we to the world-shaking events? No one knows with certainty, but Jesus did give us the “signs of the times” in Matthew 24. As we think about the world today in the light of what Jesus said, let’s keep two things in mind:

1. These “signs” will be present in every generation.

In every generation there will be false messiahs, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, strange diseases, persecution of believers, apostasy, and the preaching of the gospel. It would be a mistake to read about Ebola and ISIS and jump to the conclusion that Jesus must be coming in the next six months. Or to think that a national ID card means the Antichrist will soon be revealed. Or to suppose that the current crisis in the Middle East is the first stage in the Battle of Armageddon.

The Bible warns us of “perilous times” to come in the last days. But we must not make the mistake of reading too much into any one contemporary event, or even into a series of events. We need to have a longer time frame than that. The biblical writers routinely spoke of things that would take place over generations and centuries. That’s why it’s a mistake to allow any single “breaking news” alert on television or screaming headline on the Drudge Report to convince you that the end is near.

2. The tempo of events will increase as we approach the last days.

This is the primary meaning of the “birth pangs” reference in Matthew 24, verse 8. While all the “signs” will be with us in every generation, there will be an increase in tempo and in intensity as we approach the close of this age.

If you could graph it, I suppose it would look for many generations like a typical up and down graph, but as you approach the end times the line would slowly begin to go upward as events flow together leading to the return of Jesus Christ. It is that tempo or flow of events that we should look for as we anticipate the coming of the Lord.

Where are we in 2015? I would say the graph is starting to go straight up!

The “birth pangs” are all around us. We hear about them every day. In the next few chapters we take a closer look at three of those “signs of the times” that may indicate that we truly are living in the last days before the coming of Christ.

The Rise of Radical Islam

The radio host asked a simple question: “Can we expect more beheadings here in the U.S.?” The answer from Robert Spencer was equally direct: “Nothing is more certain than that.”¹ Mr. Spencer is the director of Jihad Watch, an organization devoted to alerting the world about the danger of Islamic terrorism, which comes directly from Islamic ideology. When Mr. Spencer predicts further beheadings in America, he knows what he is talking about.²

It was bad enough to read about the ISIS beheadings in the Middle East. As the gruesome videos spread across the Internet, most of us thought seriously about beheading for the first time. Then came this headline: Oklahoma Woman Beheaded By Islam-Evangelizing Co-Worker.³

Videos of the ISIS beheadings have gone viral on the Internet. Who took those videos? Where do they come from? We don’t have to wonder about this because the videos come from ISIS itself. They filmed their own people beheading Westerners, and then they made sure the videos hit social media.

Who are these people?

Where do they come from?

What do they believe?

In spite of credulous Western leaders who deny the obvious, the beheaders make sure we know about the connection. They go by various names:

ISIS: The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

ISIL: The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

IS: The Islamic State

The various acronyms all refer to the same group of well-armed terrorists operating in Syria and northern Iraq. They are all Islamic Jihadists who take their inspiration from their Muslim faith. There shouldn’t be any confusion on this point.

They are militant Muslims who follow the teaching of the Koran.

They take seriously the words of Sura 9:5, the famous “Sword Verse” that justifies violence in the name of Islam:

Then, when the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever ye find them, and take them (captive), and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush. But if they repent and establish worship and pay the poor-due, then leave their way free. Lo! Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.⁴

They kidnap in the name of Allah.

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