

NEEDED: A RATIONAL APPROACH TO BIBLE PROPHECY

Many have made the mistake of setting dates for the Second Coming of Christ, and the results have never been positive. Yet, failed predictions have not deterred the date-setters. Noel Mason was right when he wrote, “The history of Jewish and Christian ‘date-setters’ with all its bitter disappointment and disillusionment has not curbed the desire of many Christians to calculate the end” (*Good News Unlimited* magazine, September 1984, p. 4). Edgar Whisenant’s *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Is in 1988* didn’t stop the author from resetting his prophetic clock when the supposed date of Christ’s return came and went. He recalculated, revised, and rewrote. The end result: *89 Reasons Why the Rapture Is in 1989*. Enough said!

In 1970, popular evangelical writer Hal Lindsey stated that the 1948 rebirth of the nation of Israel was “the most important sign” of the nearness of Christ’s coming for His saints. Lindsey, citing [Matthew 24:34](#), reasoned that the “*this generation*” Jesus spoke of was “the generation that would see the signs—chief among them the rebirth of Israel.” He then stated, “A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a ‘correct deduction, then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place. Many scholars who have studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so” (*The Late Great Planet Earth*; Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI; pp. 53,54).

Others have also seen the 1948 date as the starting point for the final forty-year “countdown” to the “rapture” of the saints. That’s why some expected to be “snatched out” in 1988—forty years, supposedly a biblical “generation,” from the 1948 “sign.” Often, such highly speculative interpretations, especially when they are mingled with date-setting and sensationalism, become foundational to the faith of many, especially unsuspecting novices of the Christian faith. Unfortunately, failed predictions result in damaged foundations and shattered faith—and the author is left looking foolish.

Surely the prediction in the introduction to the 1967 edition of Herbert W.

Armstrong’s *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy* didn’t gain any credibility for the author. He wrote, “A STAGGERING TURN in world events is due to erupt in the next four to seven years. It will involve violently the United States, Britain, Western Europe, the Middle East.”

That was over forty years ago, and that “STAGGERING TURN in world events”—he was speaking of the Great Tribulation—has *still* not taken place!

In the same introduction, Mr. Armstrong wrote, “The events prophesied to strike the American and British peoples in the next four to seven years are sure!

“That is why events of the next four to seven years may prove this to be the most significant book of this century.

“God says: ‘Surely the Lord ETERNAL will do nothing, but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets’ ([Amos 3:7](#)).

“These colossal world events, shrinking the first two world wars into insignificance, WILL COME, on schedule, but not until the WARNING has been made AVAILABLE for those whose eyes are willing to see.”

The prophesied “colossal world events” failed to arrive within Mr. Armstrong’s “four to seven years” schedule. Obviously, his prediction was not a “secret” the Lord Eternal had revealed to His servants the prophets.

Nothing New

The old saying, “There’s nothing new under the sun,” certainly applies to the way people interpret Bible prophecy. Attempts at setting a date for the Second Coming go as far back as I the second century. Some set specific dates, right down to the hour in some instances; others were less specific, but still tried to calculate the general time of Christ’s return.

In the second century, a man named Montanus claimed to have fallen into a trance and, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, prophesied the date of Christ’s return and the place the New Jerusalem would be established. Two women who also claimed the gift of prophecy joined him, and this new “charismatic” movement spread rapidly through Asia Minor. Montanus was excommunicated by Asia Minor bishops, but his movement survived until the sixth century. Of course, in order for Montanism to survive, the failed predictions of its founder had to be revised by his successors.

The famous apologist Tertullian joined the Montanist movement in A.D. 210. Some of his writings reflect the apocalypticism of Montanism, though he apparently left the movement and founded his own. He attempted to calculate the time of Christ’s coming based on the books of Daniel and Revelation. Like Montanus before him, his predictions failed.

The Italian scholar Joachim of Fiore, who lived from 1135 to 1202, carved world history into three dispensations. The Old Testament period represented the age of the Father; the New Testament period introduced the age of the Son; and the last period is the age of the Holy Spirit, when spiritual churchmen will proclaim the everlasting gospel to the world. The final period, the age of the Spirit, was supposed to start in the year 1260—apparently related to the number mentioned in [Revelation 12:6](#).

Joachim’s idea of a final spiritual age was adopted by the dominant wing of the Franciscans, an order founded by Francis of Assisi in 1209. It was in this mixture of mystic spiritualism and apocalypticism that speculation about seven church eras (based on Revelation 2-3) arose. The “seven eras” theory has emerged again and again in the history of Christendom, and is generally accepted by modern dispensationalists. Attempts at identifying the seven churches of Revelation with various ages of church history often lead to attempts at establishing a date for the final age.

The sixteenth century mystics and Anabaptists saw signs of the end all around them.

Even the famous reformer Martin Luther believed that the Second Coming drew near. He wrote, “For it is certain from the Holy Scriptures that we have no more temporal things to expect. All is done and fulfilled: the Roman Empire is at an end; the Turk has reached his highest point; the pomp of papacy is falling away and the world is cracking on all sides almost as if it would break and fall apart entirely” (from Stephen Travis’s book, *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus*; Grand Rapids, MI; 1982; p. 118).

Luther came short of setting a date for the end of the world, but contemporary reformer Michael Stifel didn’t. Stifel’s date was set for October 19, 1553, at 8:00 a.m. Needless to say, he missed!

In about 1530, Melchior Hofman, a Lutheran pastor turned Anabaptist: began proclaiming that he was the prophesied Elijah ([Malachi 4:5,6](#)), and that he would lead

the 144,000 ([Revelation 7:3-8](#)) as they proclaimed the gospel to all the world before the return of Christ. Hofman declared that Strasburg would be the “New Zion.”

Hofman died in prison in about 1543, but his brand of apocalypticism was kept alive through new Anabaptist claimants to special prophetic offices. Jan Matthys replaced Melchior Hofman, and was thought to be the second of the two witnesses (Hofman was the first). He claimed that God had rejected Strasburg as the New Zion, and had chosen Münster instead. Matthys was replaced by John of Leiden, who had his own ideas about the final order and his unique place in it.

In the nineteenth century, William Miller of Massachusetts proclaimed that Christ would return in 1843 or 1844, finally settling on the date of October 22, 1844. He based his prediction on prophecies from the book of Daniel, and created chronological charts showing the flow of prophesied events leading up to the Second Coming. Miller’s preaching and prophecy charts grew exceedingly popular. Many, persuaded by Miller’s convincing arguments, sold their property and possessions. When October 22, 1844 arrived, thousands gathered expecting to meet the returning Lord—but met great disappointment instead. Many were able to recover quickly, but many others lost faith and abandoned their study of the Bible.

We could go on and on, but the point should be clear by now: Throughout its 2000-year history, the sea of Christendom has rippled with wild speculations about the end-time. There has been no shortage of “anointed” individuals and movements proclaiming dates, whether general or specific, for the end of the world.

And all were wrong!

Plagues: Past and Present

Numerous groups and individuals regularly report on modern plagues, such as the Ebola virus and AIDS, and either imply or state outright that the occurrence of these diseases directly fulfills Jesus’s prediction, “And there shall be...*pestilences*” ([Matthew 24:7](#)). The increase of such pestilences, they tell us, is a sure sign that the Great Tribulation is rapidly approaching.

While the “new diseases” of our time are deadly and should certainly be taken seriously, their death toll is not nearly as great as the horrifying plagues of centuries past. Some of the earlier plagues are difficult to identify, but based on the descriptions of witnesses from those periods, there is a fair degree of certainty that the most devastating plagues involved diseases that still exist. They include smallpox, malaria, cholera, and the bubonic plague, which was later called the Black Death. Of course, they are far less threatening today because of the tremendous advancements of medical science.

In his book, *Plagues and Peoples* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1976), Professor William H. McNeill documents the plagues that have visited human societies during the past 2000 years. Here is a brief survey of some of the worst:

In the second half of the second century, A.D., a plague (probably smallpox) spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire, killing up to a third of the population in affected areas. A century later, the empire was again plagued by a rampaging killer disease.

During its deadliest hour, the epidemic claimed the lives of about 5000 people each day in the city of Rome. By the middle of the sixth century, the massive death toll brought about by wars, famines, and disease outbreaks had reduced the population of the empire by about 50 percent.

In the early fourth century, a plague killed about 98-99 percent of the population of the northwestern provinces of China. A decade later, the plague struck other parts of China, killing 20-40 percent of the population.

In A.D. 542-543, the so-called “plague of Justinian”—later identified as the bubonic plague—wiped out approximately *half the population* of the Eastern Empire. Whole cities died out. Constantinople itself lost between 5000 and 10,000 people each day. The most infamous of the pestilences of history is the pneumonic/ bubonic plague, or Black Death, that killed millions in the fourteenth century. The plague swept Asia before arriving again in Europe in 1347. In the next three years, 25-40 million were killed in Europe alone! The plague claimed approximately one-third of Europe’s population, and, according to some estimates, may have killed up to *one-third of the population of the world!*

In the centuries that followed, syphilis, smallpox, cholera, measles, scarlet fever, typhus, tuberculosis, and influenza killed millions in one outbreak after another. All these diseases are still with us, but claim the lives of far fewer people today than in the past. Yet, according to certain prophecy “experts,” the worst pestilences of all are alive and well on planet earth, and are a “sign” that the prophesied Great Tribulation is near. Listen to what popular evangelical author Grant R. Jeffrey has to say about the AIDS plague: “The scourge of over fifteen sexually-transmitted diseases is a new form of pestilence which has now also introduced A.I.D.S., the *deadliest plague in mankind’s history* [emphasis added]. Thus far, this disease has developed a 100 percent death rate. It appears that A.I.D.S. is transmitted primarily through homosexual practices, but can then be transmitted from an A.I.D.S. carrier to a wider heterosexual group through shared intravenous drug needles, infected blood transfusions and to babies born to mothers with A.I.D.S. Studies indicate that over one and one-half million people in North America alone will die from this tragic disease, which so far shows no sign of a cure. In countries like Uganda, tragically, estimates are that up to 20 percent of the population is infected” (*Armageddon- Appointment With Destiny*; 1988, Frontier Research Publications, Toronto, Ontario; p.211).

New information about the disease has come to the attention of the public since the 1988 publication of Jeffrey’s book. Nevertheless, the claim that AIDS is “the deadliest plague in mankind’s history” is as outrageous as it was ten years ago! No one doubts the deadly potential of this and other “modern” diseases, but the truth of the matter is that *the pestilences of our time hardly compare with the rampaging killer plagues of the past!* We live in a world of ever-increasing medical knowledge. Already, people with the HIV virus are receiving treatments that help them manage their disease, and we have heard reports of some promising new drugs that may add many years to the lives of HIV carriers. True, they will eventually develop AIDS and die—unless a cure can be found—but let’s face it: As tragic as AIDS is, it doesn’t remotely compare with the horrifying Black Death that wiped out whole cities and killed off a third of the population of Europe, and possibly of the whole world, in the Middle Ages!

Don’t misunderstand! We are not saying that there are no more pestilences to be concerned about. The book of Revelation plainly indicates that some of the most devastating plagues imaginable will be unleashed in the time of the end. But at this point, there is no way of knowing whether today’s pestilences, including AIDS, will have anything to do with the plagues of the future. To dogmatically assert that the advent of

AIDS is “end-time prophecy being fulfilled right before your very eyes” is irresponsible sensationalism!

Anyone wishing to do his own research into the history of warfare, famines, and earthquakes will discover that the most destructive famines and earthquakes occurred in past centuries, and that some of the wars fought in previous centuries—the Thirty Years’ War in Germany (1618-1648), for example—were in some ways more devastating than the wars of our century. (Of course, there’s no denying that the *potential* for mass destruction is far greater today than in the past.) For this reason, it is impossible to know for sure whether the wars, famines, and earthquakes that have occurred in recent history are directly related to the start of the Great Tribulation.

The truth is, we don’t know how much time we have left; we don’t know the day or the hour—or even the decade—of Christ’s coming; we don’t know how many days, months, years, or decades we have before the Great Tribulation strikes. *We don’t know!* The conditions we see in the world today could change almost overnight—for better or for worse! So the best thing we can do is make sure we are prepared *at all times*.

Our job is to continue doing the work Jesus Christ has commissioned us to do: “Go therefore and *make disciples of all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” ([Matthew 28:19,20](#)).

Making disciples and teaching them to observe all things Jesus commanded includes encouraging watchfulness, or spiritual preparedness, by instructing them in the ways of God, by urging them to stay close to God in prayer, and by continually providing them with the spiritual food they need for growth in godliness.

Spiritual Preparedness

Jesus said, “But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day [the Day of the Lord] come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. *Watch* therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy [or, *may have strength*, according to some texts] to escape all these things [the things associated with the Day of the Lord, or time of God’s wrath] that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” ([Luke 21:34-36](#)).

While keeping informed of what is going on in the world is something all of us should be doing, that is not what Jesus is speaking of when He tells His disciples to watch. The command to watch is simply another way of saying “be ready” at all times ([Matthew 24:43,44](#)). Watchfulness is *spiritual preparedness*. It is contrasted with “carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life.” A person cannot be in a state of preparedness if he is engaging in these things, no matter how much headline watching he does.

The term translated “watch” in this and other passages in the Olivet Prophecy is the same term translated “be vigilant” in 1 Peter 5. Notice: “Be sober, *be vigilant* [or, *watch*]; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” This simply means that we are to be prepared at all times; that we are to never let our guard down; that we are to remain close to God, praying daily for the strength to resist temptation should it come our way; and that we are to avoid situations that invite temptation to sin. *It does not mean, either here or in the*

Olivet Prophecy, that we are supposed to go about trying to read prophetic fulfillments into the daily headlines!

Some have ridiculed this kind of watching, calling it “self-serving.” If keeping a check on one’s own spiritual condition is self-serving, then David must have temporarily slipped into a self-serving mode when he wrote, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” ([Psalm 139:23,24](#)); Jeremiah must have been thinking too much of himself when he admonished, “Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the LORD” ([Lamentations 3:40](#)); Paul must have been too inwardly turned when he exhorted, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless indeed you are disqualified” ([2 Corinthians 13:5](#)).

Will year after year of trying to read prophetic fulfillments into the daily headlines help a person stay close to God and keep him from falling into sinful behavior? It should be *obvious* to anyone that such so-called “watching” is *not* an indicator of spiritual preparedness.

Make no mistake! Jesus *was* speaking of spiritual preparedness when He admonished His disciples to watch. This means simply that we should *never* assume that we have all the time in the world I between now and the day we meet Jesus Christ. It means that we should *always* realize that we may be much closer to the tumultuous Great Tribulation than current news events might seem to indicate. It means that we should *never* let our guard down: turn to a life of sin, and assume that we will have plenty of time to return to God in repentance. And it means that we are to *always* pray fervently for strength to continue faithfully serving God and doing His will. That’s *real* watching!

Contrary to the claims of a few detractors, we have *never* advocated concentrating only on personal spiritual development while ignoring prophetically significant world events. We will certainly pay attention to events that truly *are* prophetically significant, and will continue urging our fellow- laborers to watch, or *BE READY*, at all times. But we will *not* shout, “IT’S END-TIME PROPHECY BEING FULFILLED RIGHT BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES!” every time we hear of a natural disaster, an earthquake, a disease outbreak, or a skirmish in some far-off land. These things reflect the “fallen” condition of the world in which we live, but do not necessarily relate directly to the future Great Tribulation.

Let’s avoid both the foolishness of sensationalism and the folly of assuming that we have all the time in the world before we meet Jesus Christ. Let’s just *be ready at all times*. The apostle Paul put it this way: “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand” ([Ephesians 6:13](#), New International Version).

All Scriptural quotations were taken from the New King James Version except as noted.