

WHAT THE “SIGNS” TELL US

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September 18, 2010

If it is true that the dead are asleep until the resurrection (the Bible teaches it crystal clear), and *if* it is also true that the resurrection cannot take place until Jesus Christ returns (He alone is the Resurrection and the Life! Jn. 11:25), then the commonest common sense can see that the judgment must take place *before* He returns.

Otherwise, how could any meaningful decision be made as to *who* should be resurrected glorified when He comes? Jesus seems to say it clearly: “Behold I come quickly; and My reward is with Me, to give every person according as his work shall be” (Rev. 22:12).

At the same time He says in Luke 21:34, 35 that “*that* day” (of judgment) may come upon us “unawares, for as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth.” The “all them” will be the last generation on earth, all 8 billion or so, who “will be alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord,” who will not die until they see Him coming in the clouds of heaven—happy or sad (1 Thess. 4:15; 2 Thess. 1:7, 8). A child can figure it out like making $2 + 2 = 4$.

The next big *if* is whether Jesus is coming soon: He gave us “signs” to let us know when “it is near, even at the doors” (Mk. 13:29). Pick up any newspaper, any news magazine, look around you. Rip Van Winkle, wake up: it’s clear: the end is near. The only conclusion possible: “Watch therefore, for

ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping” (vss. 35, 36). *that* coming is when He “comes” on our individual final judgment, and on a church’s final judgment, too. Rather solemn. Sounds scary.

But hang on to some Good News: that “Master” is more concerned that we be saved than even we are! He loves us. What to do? Stop resisting His grace. “Whatsoever He saith unto you, *do it*” (Jn. 2:5). He will prove His love to you by telling you what to do. On your knees!

On November 13, 1833 the shower of Leonids shooting stars turned out to be wildly spectacular, so much so that many observers thought the Day of Judgment had come. They knew what Jesus had said in Matthew 24:29: “Immediately after the tribulation of those days [the horrid persecutions of the Dark Ages, fresh in memory] shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven.”

Revelation also tells of the same thing: “And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; . . . and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind” (6:12, 13). Christian people of different churches saw the fulfillment of these prophecies: the worst earthquake of known history took place in Europe on November 1, 1755; people still living witnessed in New England the [to them] mysterious “Dark Day” of May 19, 1780; and people still living

after that saw this “falling of the stars” in 1833—all in one generation. And, on top of all that excitement, a simultaneous interest aroused all over the world in the prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation.

Science and history now debunk those miraculous events: there have been other great earthquakes; the “dark day” was caused by forest fires; and the falling of the stars was merely the cosmic debris of a comet that whacks us every 33 years. Those people were naive, says science. But wait a moment: those events were spectacular. The seven seals of Revelation did make sense; to those people in their context those events did fulfill the prophecies in a remarkable way; the result was not fanaticism, but sober, disciplined study of the Bible and reformation of life, and a phenomenal world-wide interest in the second coming of Christ. God used an almost incredible succession of natural events to arouse multitudes to serious spiritual revival.

Now today, we don’t need a meteor shower or an earthquake to wake us up. Any sober person can realize that the end of the world must be near. But the history of those “signs” laid the foundation for faith in the second coming of Christ. It makes sense.

Jesus said in Lk. 21:26 that just before His second coming “the powers of heaven shall be shaken.” That, together with “men’s hearts failing them for fear and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth.” It’s only the superficial, non-thinking people who are not fearful of what is

coming. That is, parents’ hearts; yes and the childrens’ hearts themselves who are afraid to go to school. This nameless fear is gripping mankind, and drugs, alcohol, gourmet dining, entertainment and toys and shopping malls cannot dissipate it. Does God care? Is there a refuge?

Yes, but not a selfish one. “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. . . Thou shalt not be afraid . . . Because thou hast made the Lord . . . thy habitation, there shall no evil befall thee . . . [nor] come nigh thy dwelling. For He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways” (Ps 91).

“Dwelling in the secret place” with God is our only protection, but He is more than a selfish Insurance Policy while we who profess His name continue to “love the world, [and] the things that are in the world” (1 Jn. 2:15)? It’s even possible for a people so to “love the world” that it “insults the Holy Spirit” and grieves away His blessed presence. God loves us; but if we grieve His Holy Spirit away from us, He cries as He is forced to “give [us] up” (Hos. 5:15; 11:8). God is almost desperate to establish upon earth a “refuge” for fear-driven people whom He loves. Help us to become that.

What has always been thought to be solid biblical teaching is being “shaken.” Once Sabbath-keeping pastors now powerfully advocate Sunday-keeping; and the latest is a shaking of the very idea that the second coming of Christ is near at hand. Prominent Adventist voices are saying that there has been no delay in the time of Christ’s second coming, so 150

years of waiting since the pioneers believed His coming was “even at the doors” only seems like a delay when it is not. “Soon” doesn’t mean what human language and concept understand it to mean. Young people reared in the church say they have no idea that Christ will return during their lifetime. The “signs of the times” that have long been understood to indicate that we are living in a clearly demarcated “time of the end” were pseudo-exegetical exercises in immaturity strewn like wreckage on the sands of time. Now we are told that there is an “immanence/distance tension of the Advent” that soft-pedals any time prophecies of Scripture and affirms that in Matthew 24 “Christ offers no sign by which the ‘when’ [of the second coming] can be calculated. . . . What Christ explains is not the ‘when’ but the ‘what’ that will characterize the waiting time.” The implication is clear: the second coming was as “imminent” in the time of the apostles as it is today.

Well, take a little time to read (on your knees) Mt. 24 and Mk. 13 and Lk. 21, and ask the Holy Spirit to give you grace to believe what He is saying to us. Yes, and also read the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, just the naked Bible. What do they actually say? See for yourself. I count 13 “whens” and “thens” and time indicators in Mt. 24, 7 in Mk. 13, and 7 similar time indicators in Lk. 21. Yet we are told that Christ does not explain any “whens.” Doubtless many will be “shaken” by this erudite philosophy. Hang on tight to what Jesus says: “Let the fig tree teach you a lesson. When . . . it starts putting out leaves, you know that summer is near.

In the same way, when you see all these things, you will know that the time is near,” “even at the doors,” GNB, KJV.

We have long seen in “the Signs of the Times” the evidences that indicate the end is near, the coming of the Lord draweth night, etc. Those “signs” were the dark day, the falling of the stars, the increase of knowledge, “perilous times in the last days,” etc. But are there “signs” that through spiritual maturity the Lord is preparing a people for the final crisis? Here is where the possibility exists that “the latter rain may be falling on hearts all around us” and we be ignorant of the reality. Scripture warns us not to “despise the day of small things,” and that the latter rain may “come like the dew,” not necessarily like a cloud-burst or gulley-washer. At least, its beginning. We are right now walking on the enchanted ground that Pilgrim walked through in Pilgrim’s Progress, where the temptation to go to sleep is almost overwhelming. The economy is great, the Dow Jones is headed for eleven thousand (maybe is there before this goes out), SUV’s are getting bigger, more luxurious, more powerful, fun was never so widespread, and the church is doing great. But could it be that there are sincere and enlightened souls maybe seated next to you in church who are pinpointed in Ezek. 9:4 as those who “sigh and cry for all the abominations [being] done in the midst of Jerusalem”? It is only they who finally receive a “mark”, “the seal of God.” An angel is commanded to “smite” all those who do *not* “sigh and cry”! Sounds terrible, but there it is. All the rest end up ultimately taking the mark of the beast. That

passage in Ezekiel has so often been cited to strengthen “holier than thou” self-righteousness that it is seldom thought of today. But it does not encourage judging the person next to you in church as though you are more holy because you “sigh and cry” and he/she is not serious-minded. Those who sigh and cry negatively fall into the trap of self-righteousness; but those who sigh and cry positively realize that they are no better than anybody else by nature. They have no goodness of their own; their hearts (and eyes) are melted by the love of Christ and the realization that they are indebted to Him 100%. “Sighing and crying” positively reaches out in humble contrition to bless others, concerned more for the honor of Christ than because of our own personal fear for security, or for hope of reward.

Almost all Christian churches are now talking about the second coming of Christ, and the possibility of the imminent end of the world is widely talked about. Yes, it does make good sense to talk about preparing for such an event! The people living on the Coast in the Atlantic Seaboard preparing for hurricanes think it makes good sense. Can't we apply good sense to preparing for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ?

There are many pastors and theologians who tell us that there is no special preparation—just live a good life and do the best you can and you'll be ready either to die or to meet Jesus and be translated when He comes. But even a child can see that there is something special involved: there is a final exam coming, a great test that Revelation

13 says is “the mark of the beast” that in one final issue will divide the sheep from the goats forever. The “mark of the beast” will involve “great signs and wonders, insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Mt. 24:24). Never in history have God's people met such a test! Jesus said, “Ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake and then shall many be offended and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another” (vss. 9, 10). In other words, many who now profess to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus will then turn traitor and accept the mark of the beast. And Paul sobers us even more when he warns us, “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Peter was cocksure he would never “fall,” but a girl in or barely out of her teens overthrew him.

The Good News is that there is an alternative to the mark of the beast: the seal of God (Rev. 7:1-4). That involves a special work of purification of the heart: “When [Christ] shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure” (1 Jn. 3:2, 3). On this great cosmic Day of Atonement, that precisely is the work of the great High Priest. Don't stop Him, don't resist Him. Cooperate with Him!

It's a troublesome text, and if it hasn't troubled you it's because you haven't thought about it. For many serious-minded people, it threatens the belief that the second coming of Jesus is imminent. In Mt. 24:34, Jesus says to those who live in the last days, “When ye shall see all these things, know that it is

near, even at the doors. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.” The problem is that for 150 years Adventists have believed that the coming of Jesus is so near that it is “even at the doors,” and the stalwarts who pioneered what is known as the Great Second Advent Movement worldwide steadfastly believed that the “thousand years” of Revelation 20 would for certain be the next millennium. God’s people who are ready for Jesus’ coming would spend it in heaven. But now the world seems set for spending it here on earth.

The problem with the disturbing words of Jesus is this: What are those “all these things” that “this generation” sees? The answer is clear: the “signs” in the heavens, the end of “the tribulation of those days” when “the sun shall be darkened,” “the stars shall fall from heaven,” and “upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity . . . men’s hearts failing them for fear” (Lk. 21:25, 26). The last of “the signs in the heavens” was the falling of the stars of 1833, and the generation that saw that has for over a century been sleeping in their graves. There has to be an answer, or for thoughtful young people, the idea of imminence will crumble away. The answer is: the unbelief of God’s people has delayed the Lord’s coming, even as that of Israel delayed their entrance into the Promised Land. But the answer is Good News, for the solution is repentance; and repentance is a gift of the Holy Spirit that *can* be accepted! Jesus also told us to pray, “Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.” Let’s stop hindering the fulfillment of that “will.”

Is the second coming of Christ “imminent,” or is it “near”? Is there a difference? “Imminent” is from a Latin word that means some menacing evil hanging over one as a threat. The Bible never uses that word in relation to the coming of Jesus! Rather, His coming is spoken of as “the blessed hope” of “the glorious appearing of . . . our Saviour Jesus Christ” (Tit. 2:13). The presently popular doctrine that the second coming has been “imminent” ever since the time of the apostles is not biblical, for it tends to weaken or even destroy “the blessed hope” in human hearts. That “hope” is not a selfish one, but an unselfish concern for the suffering in this world, and God’s suffering. Must it go on and on, the rich getting richer and the poor ground down ever deeper in poverty and despair? Is there no “hope” for the world itself other than the wars and bloodshed and suffering of the last 2000 years? Must we look forward now to a third such thousand years of on-going injustice? The books of Daniel and Revelation teach a time-frame of prophecies fulfilled that has brought us up to a point in time beyond a vague “imminence” to “even-at-the-doors” nearness. While it is true that we cannot know “the day nor the hour,” that does not deny that the fulfillment of time-frame prophecies clearly reveals a “this generation” nearness. The 1260 years of papal oppression of Dan. 7 and Rev. 12, 13 have brought us to “the time of the end” (Dan. 11:35, 12:4), a “time” distinct from that of the apostles. The “signs” of Mt. 24:29, Lk. 21:25 have been fulfilled in pin-point accuracy historically. Only one “sign” remains to meet complete fulfillment, that of Mt.

24:14, “this gospel of the kingdom . . . preached throughout the world as a witness to all nations. Then shall the end come,” says Jesus. The “delay” has confused many youth, and must be faced honestly: Christ Himself has not delayed His coming, but His church has done so. The root problem is understanding what is that “gospel of the kingdom.” Directly in respect of understanding “the gospel,” Jesus calls on His church in these last days to “be zealous therefore and repent” (Rev 3:19). Especially the leadership, the “angel of the church” (vs 14). A “rich and increased with goods” pride is the root problem. Repentance is the key factor. And there is the Good News: something can be done!

Appeals to fear are becoming heightened. It is true that natural and man-made disasters are becoming more frequent; wickedness in high places is more publicized and morality in general is discredited; the “signs” are unmistakable—“get ready,” the end is near! And it is near; and yes, the signs are clear. But can fear and egocentric concern produce the revival and reformation that are needed? Shortly after World War II a very wise and respected church leader expressed his hope that the disasters in Europe would lead to a spiritual revival and reformation in the church in Europe. Sadly he confessed that it didn’t happen as he hoped. In fact, all through sacred history we read how fear never produced lasting revivals.

What does work? The answer: the gospel. The reason? It reaches human hearts; it motivates as fear can never do. A wise writer said long ago that

when Christ approaches, He walks on a path of velvet lest His footsteps awaken fears when only the message of His love can motivate truly. We are at present in a little “tarrying time” when each of us is being tested to see how deep and thorough is our heart-appreciation of that much more abounding grace of Christ. Nothing short of that will enable any of us to endure the trials that all of us know will surely come before the end. In the time of the great cosmic Day of Atonement, God’s people must have a far clearer understanding of the gospel than any previous generation have ever been able to comprehend. This does not mean that God has withheld from previous generations that clearer understanding—He has never withheld it from anyone. The truth is simply that no previous generation were ever able to comprehend it. You don’t withhold from a flower girl at the wedding the privilege of being a bride; she is just not ready for it. But the time must come when she grows up. Ephesians 4:14-16 tells us that the growing up process is “speaking the truth in love” [*agape*], turning aside from “every [false] wind of doctrine.” The Good News is that the heavenly High Priest is more than ready to “shed abroad in our hearts” that precious gift of *agape* (Rom 5:5). And the *agape* will cast out fear (1 Jn. 4:18).

Can you conceive of the possibility that God may need someone to defend Him? That He could use a human being for that purpose?

Goliath was an arrogant, blaspheming Philistine giant who not only defied the armies of Israel but also for weeks publicly defied and

blasphemed “the God of the whole earth.” Israel and its army were not the primary issue; Goliath was challenging God’s existence and His authority to choose and to bless a nation through whom must come the Messiah, the Saviour of the world. Will God suffer this insult in silence, slinking away as it were, leaving Goliath to win the day?

God cannot strike Goliath with a lightning thunderbolt because He does not want to force a subservient worship based on fear. Goliath may himself be a big bully, but God cannot win the day by being a Bigger Bully. He can roar from heaven with a loud voice and frighten Goliath and the Philistines, but again that is not His way of doing things. Actually, as in the days of Job, God needs a human being to defend Him, because the battle is not “with sword and spear” (1 Sam. 17:45). Someone must speak up to maintain God's honor.

Enter into the arena the stripling, David, clad only in his shepherd's garb and armed only with a slingshot and a few pebbles. David was not principally a partisan contestant for national greatness; he had an understanding of God’s character of love and of the sacrifice of Christ for the world. He spoke publicly in defense of the plan of salvation itself. To demonstrate for all time to come how God works in cooperation with man, He blessed David’s skillful aim of a pebble from his sling shot, which caught the giant between his eyes, blinded and stunned him. Picture this lad jumping on the giant’s prostrate belly, wresting from its scabbard his huge sword to use it on him before the giant recovers. A teenager has learned to

appreciate the character of God, to trust Him, willing to face eternal death for His honor.

Can you conceive of 144,000 giant “Goliaths” blaspheming God in these last days? And 144,000 “Davids” challenging and conquering them? Get in training today.