

Covenant Pulpit



Preparation
In the Fullness of Time
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I recently read a stunning article about the cyclone that struck Myanmar this past year. Days before Cyclone Nargis slammed into the coast, officials were made aware of its devastating potential. As the gathering storm took aim at the country's heavily populated delta, the ruling military junta received minute-by-minute updates that became increasingly urgent. Yet the government did not issue a single warning or evacuation order.

Their failure left millions of people at the mercy of 160 mile-an-hour winds and twelve foot storm surges. More than 100,000 people died within hours. Another 2.5 million were left homeless. Incredibly, these same leaders refused to let global relief leaders go in with aid, lest the world discover the full horror of their failure to warn their people. As a result of their cover up, thousands more died from hunger and disease that followed.

We have been given the warning signs of Christ's return. In our Bibles are 333 predictions of Christ's first coming that were fulfilled with pinpoint accuracy. Yet there are three times as many prophecies about his Return. Like the politicians of Myanmar, will we keep those warnings to ourselves, leaving millions unprepared for the apocalypse? Not if we understand that:

History is *His* Story.

Galatians 4:4 says, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman..." The original language could be translated at the *right* time, or the *perfect* time, or the *exact* time. God controls history. History is *His* Story. There is an *appointed* time for everything. What he says will happen, *will* happen. It's just a matter of time. The ultimate issue is whether we will be ready. Galatians 4:4 teaches four things about *His* Story.

1. Heaven runs on a different clock.

If you want to see how most folks look at history, read Ecclesiastes. Solomon wrote this book about a midlife crisis when he abandoned God. He called it life "under the sun." He lived life as if nothing existed *above* the sun. Life "*under the sun*" is to live as if God is irrelevant. But if there is no Master Designer, there is no Master Plan. If history has no ultimate direction, it just goes in circles. But those who know *His* story know differently:

1) God's timeline is linear, not circular.

In Ecclesiastes 1:4-10, Solomon sees history as repeating circles: "Generations come and generations go...the sun rises and the sun sets...the

wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes...What has been will be again; what has been done will be done again." It's so depressingly repetitive. Isn't it interesting that our clocks are circles? Circles go round and round. History repeats itself because we never learn. People do the same stupid things again and again. George Santana wrote, "Those who don't learn from history are condemned to repeat it." We think we have forever to correct things in this never-ending circle of history.

But Galatians 4:4 says, "When the time had fully come, God sent his son..." God's history moves inexorably in a straight line toward the birth of his Son, and now moves relentlessly toward his Return. Every event in history is calculated to move us forward to a conclusion. Solomon says, "What has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." But Lamentations 3:23 says of God, "His mercies are new every morning." When history moves in a straight line, the future is always exciting and new.

2) God's timeline is purposeful, not meaningless.

Galatians 4:4 says that history moved purposely toward the birth of Jesus. Everything happened for a single purpose: "...to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." The ultimate end of history is that God might save a people and redeem his creation. Everything in history moves relentlessly to that end. Compare that to history that goes in circles. Solomon concludes that "Everything is utterly meaningless." (Eccl. 1:2) If nothing is moving toward a great conclusion, then nothing in life is conclusive. But when history moves toward a final judgment, everything has meaning. What we do with our lives matters. How we treat others matters. Where we end up in eternity especially matters.

3) God's timeline is controlled, not a product of chance.

Galatians 4:4 lets us know that God controls history, even things that are so evil that they make no sense. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. He spent 12 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. Later, through a set of amazing *coincidences*, he became the Prime Minister of Egypt and saved it from a famine. Had he not been in his position at the perfect time, the Jews would have died of starvation, Moses never would have been born, Israel couldn't have become a nation, Jesus wouldn't have come to Bethlehem, and we wouldn't be here 4000 years afterwards.

When his brothers later stood before him, Joseph was able to say to them in Genesis 50:19&20, "Don't be afraid. Am I not in the place of God? You

intended to harm me, but God meant it for good to accomplish what is now being done for the saving of many lives." One day we will stand in glory and look back over all the turmoil of this world and the tragedies in our own lives and see them as perfectly fitting into the timeline of history that moved inexorably toward the end that God had in mind all along.

2. Jesus came at the perfect conjunction of history.

Galatians 4:4 says, "When the time had fully come..." Everything that happened in thousands of years of history beforehand had set the table perfectly for that moment. And everything since sets the stage for his Return.

1) The solar systems were aligned perfectly.

We read in Matthew 2:1&2 last week that the Magi "...saw his star in the east and came to worship him." We learned that these Magi were the astrologers of ancient Persia. They were as far from God as any pagans could be. Yet God drew these stargazers to his Son by using the stars they worshipped. Last week we learned about the amazing journeys of planets through the constellations that lit up the night skies from 7 BC to 2 AD. The conjunction of the solar systems lined up with the Magi's astrological charts, showing them that the greatest king of all had been born in Israel. Scholars tell us that two years after Jesus was born, that solar alignment shone brightest over Palestine. These pagan astrologers didn't know the Scriptures, but they did know the stars. God, who determines even the movement of planets, will use anything at his disposal to draw lost men and women from every tongue, tribe, and nation to his Son.

The greatest astronomers in history—the ancient Mayans—were able to plot the solar systems so accurately that their stone calendars have predicted planetary movements 3,000 years later so precisely that they have never been off by more than 33 seconds. The scientific world is abuzz today at their prediction that a solar alignment on December 12, 2012 will cause cataclysmic changes on earth. In past history, such changes in the solar system have produced ice ages, destroyed species, brought famines, earthquakes, and tsunamis. In predicting the Second Coming, Jesus said in Matthew 24:7, "There will be famines and earthquakes everywhere." He also spoke of great terrors in the skies. The book of Revelation speaks of massive global warming, seas rising, islands disappearing, ecological disasters, famines, and pandemics. Just as God lined up his stars to draw the Magi to Christ, he will use his solar system to shake the earth, bring in the final harvest of lost souls, and destroy his and our enemies.

2) The nations were in perfect sync.

We often pass over Luke 2:1&2 as a “throwaway” part of the Christmas story: “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.” It was this census that forced Joseph to go to Bethlehem with his pregnant wife Mary. Who would have thought that Roman politics would be part of redemptive history? Nor would anyone have guessed that Julius Caesar’s assassination on the floor of the Roman senate would have anything to do with Bethlehem 44 years later or in the spread of Christianity over the next several hundred years.

Julius Caesar’s assassination plunged the Roman world into 15 years of civil war. His ruthless godson, Octavian, emerged from that titanic struggle. He neutralized the power of the senate, and Rome ceased to be a republic. He became the first emperor of Rome and its virtual dictator. He then changed his name to Augustus, which is Latin for “I am the Greatest!” He then proceeded to build the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. He instituted a census of the Roman world in order to keep tabs on everyone. He also wanted to register everyone for a new round of taxes to build larger armies, bigger cities, and the greatest road system in history. The Rome he built was the iron beast that Daniel saw centuries before.

There are striking parallels to Christ’s second coming in his first. Caesar Augustus is a perfect picture of the Antichrist to come. His dream was to build a one-world government insuring peace on earth. He called it the *Pax Romana*—the Peace of Rome. In the same way, a charismatic leader will arise in the last days to offer peace to a troubled world. He will cobble together a global political and economic system, and be worshipped as a god. Caesar Augustus also was deified as a god. His registration of the whole world in a census is a frightening foreshadowing of the final Antichrist who will require that the “mark of the beast—666” will be placed on all people. And in Caesar Augustus there is a final shadow of the Antichrist to come: the Rome that Augustus recreated crucified Christ and tried to eliminate his followers. In the same way, the Antichrist will martyr countless believers.

But history is *God’s* story. God used Augustus’ system to crucify his Son for our salvation. Later, persecutions scattered the followers of Christ across the Roman world, using roads that they had built, going to cities they had established, and using a common language that everyone spoke in that one-world government. Scholars say that at no other time in history were the conditions so ripe for such a rapid spread of the gospel. The story of kings and kingdoms in the end is really *His* Story.

3) The pursuits of kings line up with the pursuit of *the King*.

Russian revolutionary Alexander Herzen bitterly wrote, "History is the diary of a madman." About half a century after Augustus, a madman named Nero was the emperor of Rome. He was the antichrist of his day. It was during Nero's insane reign that St. Paul wrote 1 Timothy 2:1-4,

"I urge you that prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone; for kings and all those in authority, that you may live quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Savior who wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth."

You can almost hear the gasps of the Christians in Ephesus when Pastor Timothy reads those words. I have stood in the arena among the ruins of Ephesus where Christians were fed to the lions on Nero's orders. Why would God even allow a pervert like Nero to be a king, much less ask us to pray for him? It is because God uses people like Augustus, and King Herod, and Nero, and every other king, president, dictator, strongman, and anyone else in authority to open and shut doors at just the right time for his gospel to go to just the right places at the right times. Who would have thought to pray for Chairman Mao with prayers of "thanksgiving" when he was closing down churches and killing Christians by the hundreds of thousands? I would have prayed for the free access of missionaries. Yet after 200 years there were only 4.5 million believers when the foreign missionaries were thrown out of China. After 50 years of Communist oppression there are 200 million Christians in China. God wants all of his elect to be saved. *His Story* is about the redemption of people from *every* tongue, tribe and nation. So we thank God for the recent elections in America. And we pray for God to move kings and dictators and prime ministers and presidents like pieces on a cosmic chessboard so that, even though they might be flawed and evil, he will use them to bring about the salvation of everyone. We even pray with "thanksgiving" as we intercede in prayer because we know everything is lining up for that great "hallelujah" day of his Return.

3. Jesus will come again at the perfect conjunction of history.

In Revelation 4:1, John heard these words: "Come up here and I must show you what must take place after this." Notice he says, "...what *must* take place after this." *His Story* has no choice but to fulfill itself. The ending has already been written down by Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jesus, Peter, Paul, and John and several other lesser prophets. We try to interpret what they said

according to the headlines of our day. You would like me to tell you where America fits in, or the European Common Market, or Israel, or Barak Obama, or Russia, or Iraq and Iran. You want to know when the rapture will occur or my take on the millennium. But there will be a lot of prophecy experts with egg on their face someday. I can give you three things to look for in the future. I think you will see that they are already lining up for the Second Coming.

1) Babylon resurrected and Rome revised

Around 550 BC Daniel predicted four empires that would rise up like beasts to conquer and control the earth: Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. These kingdoms all tried to establish a one-world order. They all offered world peace and security in exchange for freedom. They all deified man and shook their fists at God. They were all led by charismatic strongmen who were antichrists. They all warred against God's people. In Daniel 7:20 Daniel saw the final one-world beast rising out of the ruins of Rome. It was a ten-nation confederation. Is this the European Common market? Is it a union of other nations? I don't know. I only say this: watch out for the forces of globalism, economic unions, and one-world currencies. Particularly look for what happens within the boundaries of the old Roman Empire. And watch how this global force responds to Israel and Christianity. Daniel says this power "waged war against the saints." (Daniel 7:21)

2) The Antichrist who would be king

In Daniel 7:20-27 we read about a final king of the great one-world government. Jesus speaks of his as the Antichrist. St. Paul calls him the "Man of Lawlessness." He will be a charismatic leader; a man who sees himself as a messiah; one so gifted that a world in turmoil will look to him as a savior. He will turn boastful, and then murderous, and finally declare himself to be god—like Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander the Great, Augustus Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Mao and a thousand other demigods before him. In the end, he will make war against the saints because they will not worship him. In a world desperate for a savior, watch for the emergence of such a leader. Beware of the cult of personality in our age that is preparing the stage for his rise to power. Above all, keep your eyes focused on Jesus lest you fall prey to the seduction of the antichrist who is to come.

3) The Great Apostasy and Mark of the Beast

St. Paul speaks of the *apostasy* or "falling away" of many professing believers in the last days. In 2 Thessalonians 2 he speaks of the antichrist and a new religious system that will deceive many believers with all kinds of

“counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders” (2 Thess. 2:9). In Revelation 13:11-18 St. John describes this false one-world religious system that deludes people. Watch out for the amalgamations of world religions in the name of tolerance and unity. Already we see the spirit of “all-ways-equally-get-to-God” even among many evangelical Christians. Revelation 13:16 ff says that a mark will be placed on those who follow this new religion. It is 666. Six is the number of man in Jewish symbolism and three is the number of God. Three sixes equal man as God, or the deification of man. Revelation 13:17 says, “No one could buy or sell unless he had the mark which is the name of the beast.” In an age of biometrics, the scanning of fingerprints, irises, and faces, when microchips can be implanted under the skin and identified by scanners, this is no longer farfetched. Watch what is happening in the religions of the world and you will know when the end is drawing near.

4. We must live in the light of his *soon* coming.

In 2 Peter 3 the Apostle talks about the end of the world. He reminds us to look at the time left with **perspective**. He says in verse eight, “But do not forget this one thing dear friends. With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day.” God doesn’t count time the way we do. It may be a thousand years before he comes again. We have to be prepared for the long haul. Or it may be a day. We have to be ready for his coming in the next instant.

And we have to see the time left with **potential**. Why does God delay his coming? Peter says in verse nine, “He is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” God has a people yet to be saved. He could not come until December 5, 1965 because I had not yet come to him. How many, whose names were written in the *Lamb’s Book of Life* before the world was created, are yet to be saved. When the last of his elect come to him, the Lord will return. So we should be sounding the warning, and sharing the gospel with the time we have left.

And we have to see the time left with **purpose**. In verses 11&12 he says, “You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God...” He is coming soon. Will you be ashamed at his coming? Or will he find you living a life worthy of him? Will you be ready to appear before his judgment seat? Will he say, “Well done good and faithful servant”? Will *His Story* be your story?