

Covenant Pulpit



Procrastination
A Thief in the Night
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Dr. Robert Petterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church
6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108
(239) 597-3464
www.covenantnaples.com

Prophecy has gone hi-tech. One of the largest sites on the Internet is called **RaptureReady.com**. Todd Sternberg calls his website “the eBay of prophecies.” On this electronic candy store for prophecy freaks, Sternberg has something called the Rapture Index: a calculation of the number of signs and prophecies of the “end times” that have been fulfilled. According to Sternberg, any number over 160 means “fasten your seat belts and get ready to take off for heaven.” A month ago his Rapture Index zoomed past 161.

A 2006 poll of the *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* discovered that a third of American Evangelicals believe that Jesus will return in their lifetime. After the economic meltdown and presidential election this fall, another poll found that the number had jumped to more than 55 percent.

In one of his last public statements, an aging Billy Graham said that the coming of Jesus is near. Pope Benedict XVI recently said the same thing. The Chief Rabbi of Israel also stated that the coming of the Jewish Messiah is at hand. What would make the leading Protestant Evangelical, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, and the top Jewish rabbi agree on this one thing? Could it be that so many biblical prophecies are being fulfilled today with amazing accuracy and speed?

I wonder if this is the last Christmas that we will spend on earth. Jesus said that we should keep watch and be ready because he will come suddenly, like a thief in the night. Though Jesus doesn't reveal the times, he does give the signs of his coming. This is the principle we learn from Matthew 24:

**Plan like Christ's coming may be distant.
Prepare as if it might come at any moment.**

The Apostles passionately believed that Jesus would return during their lifetime. Two thousand years later we are still waiting. History is littered with those who set dates, only to be embarrassed or disillusioned. Christians across Medieval Europe were caught up in “end times” hysteria as the clock ticked down to 1000 AD. The most gullible were so sure that Jesus would come on the first day of the year 1000 that they sold or gave away everything they possessed, wrapped themselves in sheets and waited for the Jesus who never came. But that hasn't stopped folks from resetting the doomsday clock. The Jehovah's Witnesses have been embarrassed so many times that they've finally quit making predictions. But the beat goes on, and every few years another date is set for the end of the world.

But Jesus says in Matthew 24:36, “No one knows about the day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” We can't be

sure that he will come back in our lifetime. But we must be prepared that he may come back in the next 24 hours. Jesus warns us in Matthew 24:44, "You must also be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." So how do we balance remaining for a lifetime, but packing for a quick exit? Please allow me to share three Bible facts.

1. If he could be missed once, it can happen again

The Jews possessed 333 prophecies of Christ's coming. Yet the inn keeper at Bethlehem was blissfully unaware that the Son of God was being birthed in a cave out behind his inn. The angels filled the night skies with the first Christmas carol: "Glory to God in the highest..." and Israel slumbered on. The shepherds never would have guessed that the baby was the Savior of the world if the angels hadn't told them. They became the first evangelists when they spread the good news to everyone who would listen. Luke 2:18 says, "...and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."

Eight days later, when the baby was brought to Jerusalem for his ritual circumcision, old Simeon saw the child and cried out to God that he was now ready to die, "...for my eyes have seen your salvation..." (Luke 2:30) Anna had spent 70 years fasting and praying in the temple. When that 84-year-old widow saw Jesus, "...she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel." (Luke 2:38)

And yet Matthew's gospel tells us that, two years later when the Magi reached Jerusalem, no one knew about the child. Old Simeon and aged Anna had died, the shepherds moved on to other fields, and the townspeople forgot what those keepers of the sheep had told them. The Magi asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." (Mt. 2:2) The response is startling. Matthew 2:3 says, "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." The Greek word for *disturbed* speaks of high anxiety. Herod was paranoid about losing his throne, and the religious folk of Jerusalem didn't want their routine disturbed. But Jesus never goes anywhere without rearranging everything and disturbing everyone. Some 30 years later, the citizens of Jerusalem engineered the crucifixion of Jesus because he continued to *disturb* them. Two thousand later many Christians are just as *disturbed* about his Second Coming.

We wonder how Jews in Jerusalem could miss a Messiah only six miles down the road in Bethlehem. But Jesus says that many professing Christians

will miss him again. The warnings in Matthew 24 are not for unbelievers, but for his disciples. He says in verse 37, "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man." All those years that Noah built his ark, he preached that the flood was coming. The shocker is that the people who sat under Noah's preaching for 120 years were the ones who missed the boat when the deluge struck with awful suddenness.

The greatest tragedy on the day of Christ's return will be that many who have sat for years under the preaching of God's Word will be left behind. Like those in Noah's day, they will be too preoccupied with "...eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage..." (Mt. 24:38) In verses 40&41, Jesus says, "Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left." Don't suppose that the one left behind is not a professing Christian. The fact that they are together suggests that they share a common life. Most likely both go to the same church, sit under the same preaching, sing the same hymns and even belong to the same family or small group. But one will go, and the other will be left behind. Jesus looks each disciple straight in the eye and says in verse 44, "So you must *all* be ready..." We must never forget this first fact: if he could be missed once, it can happen again.

2. Everything is in place for his imminent Return

The disciples question Jesus in Matthew 24:3, "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?" Be careful at this point. You might be tempted to say that all of the signs have not yet been fulfilled, so his coming is still a few years off. You would be mistaken to make such an assumption as you shall see from these signs:

1) Antichrists and Apostasy

Jesus says in verse 5, "For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many." The word Christ comes from the Greek word *Christus* which means "the anointed one." It is the Greek word for Messiah. St. Paul wrote about the last days in 2 Timothy 4:3, "...men will not put up with sound doctrine...they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear..." There are approximately 4300 religions in the world today, a quadrupling of sects in the last century. From the Rev. Jim Jones who led his followers to mass suicide in Jonestown, to the Moonies' Rev. Sun Moon, the Buddhist Dalai Lama, and Jewish rabbi Menachem Schneerson, in the last four decades there

has been an explosion of charismatic leaders claiming to be the *Anointed One*. The ranks of their deceived followers number in the millions.

2) Talk of peace and increase in war

In verses 6&7 Jesus says, "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars...Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom." The original Greek word is *ethnos* meaning ethnic or racial wars. A recent editorial in *Time Magazine* reported that presently there are 67 wars being fought on planet earth, most of them ethnic wars. According to the National Defense Council Foundation, conflicts around the globe have more than doubled since 1989. There have been more wars since World War 2 than at any other time in recorded history. And though we hear a constant stream of peace talk, global terrorism continues to spiral out of control. Revelation 6:3 speaks of the second of the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* who ride across the night skies to bring God's judgment against earth in the final days: "Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and make men slay each other." Do you hear the hooves of the red horse thundering in the rat-a-tat-tat of machine gun fire in Afghanistan or the explosion of bombs in India, or the screams of women and children in Dufar? Or is it the footsteps of the thief at the door?

3) Famine, pestilence, and economic chaos

Jesus continues in verse seven, "There will be famines and earthquakes in various places." In Revelation 6:6 the third of the *Four Horseman of the Apocalypse* thunders forth on a black horse, and a cry goes up: "A quart of wheat for a day's wages and three quarts of barley for a day's wages..." This cry of anguish speaks of hyper-inflation and great shortages. Today the black horse rides roughshod through *Wall Street*, the auto plants of Detroit and across the global markets leaving behind economic wreckage.

A pale rider rides with the other three. Revelation 6:8 says that death by "...sword, famine, and plague..." follow in his wake. In the last century 70 million people died of starvation. According to an article in the *Los Angeles Times* more than a billion people suffer from serious malnutrition. *World Vision* reports that 21 children die of starvation every minute. The UN predicts that Africa will only be able to feed 25% of its population by 2025. In the wake of famine comes pestilence. The *U.S. Centers for Disease Control* says that worldwide the rate of infectious diseases has risen 58% since 1980. Many that were almost eradicated have returned in drug resistant form, and transcontinental travel increases the risk of runaway global pandemics. If

this weren't enough, the number of earthquakes measuring 6.0 on the Richter scale has increased to or beyond 6.0 from nine a year in the 1950s, to thirteen in the 1960s, to fifty-one in the 1970s, to eighty-six in the 1980s, to more than a hundred in the 1990s. In 2008 there were 168 such earthquakes.

4) Worldwide persecutions

Jesus continues in verse nine, "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me." In the last century 160 million Christians were martyred worldwide. There were more martyrdoms in the last 60 years than in all of recorded history before 1948. In the past ten years 1.6 million Christians have been killed in Sudan. Thousands of women and children have been sold as slaves to other Islamic countries for around \$15 a person. In a recent *New York Times* exposé, A.M. Rosenthal says, "There is an alarming and unprecedented rise in persecutions of Christians in every part of the world."

5) Immorality on a grand scale

In verse 12 Jesus says, "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of many will grow cold..." Genesis 6:5 says of people in Noah's day, "...every inclination of the thoughts of the heart was evil all the time." Connect this to the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:37: "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man." Do we need to focus on the immorality of a generation that legalizes homosexual marriage, where a governor tries to sell a U.S. senate seat to the highest bidder, CEOs steal billions from pension funds, and a recent study found that 73 percent of high school students brazenly admit to regularly cheating only to later say (by a whopping 93%) that their ethics are better than other people?

6) Worldwide evangelistic success

Jesus says in verse 14, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." In 1990 the *Christian Almanac* reported that the gospel had been preached to 4 billion people and churches existed in all 251 countries of the world. Every year over four billion gospel tracts and 120 million Bibles are distributed worldwide. The Bible, or parts of it, has been translated into some 2,062 languages, making it available to 98% of the world population. More than 2,000 radio and television stations beam the gospel to every area of the world. Christianity is the largest and fastest growing religion in the world.

More people have come to Christ in the past 25 years than in all of prior Christian history. Jesus' words have surely been fulfilled in our generation.

7) Antichrist revealed

Jesus goes on in verse 15 to say the end will come "...when you see standing in the holy place the abomination that causes desolation..." He is referring to Daniel's prophecy of the Antichrist who will one day rule the earth. St. Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day [the Lord's Return] will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed..." But has the Antichrist been revealed? It depends on what the word *revealed* means. God may have already revealed him; we just may not know who he is yet. Perhaps you see him on the news channel every day, or he is still an anonymous mid-level politico. But catastrophic events *will* thrust him onto the center stage of international power. There is a Messianic Fervor in the world today. It's not just Christians and Jews who look for a coming Messiah. When he last addressed the UN, Iranian President Mohammed Ahmadinejad spoke of the soon coming of the 12th prophet of Shi'ite prophecy. He is called the Imam Mahdi. The media in both Iran and Iraq speak of this one also called "The Just Leader of Humanity" who will sit on a throne in Jerusalem, make war on Christians and Jews, and bring about a one-world Muslim government. History teaches that whenever there is world chaos there is a deep longing for some charismatic savior to step forward as the *Anointed One*.

8) One-world government

In Matthew 24:15 Jesus quotes from Daniel 6 which prophecies a one-world government rising out of the ruins of ancient Rome. Eminent Australian history, Geoffry Blainy writes, "For the first time in human history, a total world government of some sort is now possible." At the G7 meeting on October 11, 2008, Alistair Darling, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, reacted to \$2.7 trillion of the global economy lost in seven days by saying, "We need to come together as one world to solve this problem." Last week Michael Brown, the Prime Minister of England, said in a speech, "We need a global system to solve this global crisis." Jacques Attali, the chief advisor to French President Nicolas Sarkozy said, "Some form of global government can't come soon enough. But we can't control the global financial markets without a global rule of laws." This past week the world was stunned when a column in the prestigious *Financial Times* touted a one-world system, arguing that no single government can solve 1) global economics, 2) global warming, or 3) global terrorism. In this groundbreaking column, Gideon Rachman argues for the world system to be based on the model of the European Union which has 27 countries with a

single currency, a system of laws, a huge civil system, a Supreme Court, and a combined military force. Don't forget the EU sits within the boundaries of what was once ancient Rome. Rachman sees the biggest obstacles as the United States and China, who both value national sovereignty instead of globalism. But he states that Barak Obama is an ardent globalist who not only shares this view in his *The Audacity of Hope*, but has also appointed committed globalist, Susan Rice, as the US Ambassador to the United Nations.

3. How shall we then live?

I believe that today's headlines match up with the predictions made 2000 years ago. The biblical signs are lining up this Christmas as surely as the stars that led the ancient Magi to Bethlehem. It must affect the way we live. In 1 Thessalonians 5 St. Paul tells us four ways to live in the light of the Lord's sudden return: 1) **Live with your bags packed.** He says in verse two, "For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." If you didn't know before today, you are now without excuse. How about it: have you trusted in Jesus alone as your Savior, are you following him as your Lord, and are you ready to meet him? 2) **Light up the darkness.** Paul says in verse 5, "You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness." In the days prior to his coming, the world will descend into a new Dark Ages. But as long as we are here, we are to light up the darkness by living holy lives. Imagine the utter decay that will spread when the salt is removed, and the utter darkness that will descend when your light is removed on the day the thief steals you from this earth! 3) **Be an early riser, not a night owl.** In verse 6 the Apostle says, "So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled." We only have so much time left. We can't sleep away the last days. There will be no second chances for those who haven't come to Christ. We must be *alert* for opportunities to share our faith and *self-controlled* so that others will see us live that faith consistently. 4) **Take a positive view of the Second Coming.** I love the promise in verse nine: "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." He says in verse 11, "Therefore encourage one another..." As we shall see in later study, God will take us out of this world before he pours out his wrath in judgment. We have no reason to dread or fear the future, but rather watch with joy and excitement as we know that each change in our world is moving us one step closer to our Lord's Return.