

When Will Jesus Christ Return?

Rich Nathan

November 10-11, 2007

And Then The End Will Come Series

Matthew 24:1-31

Back in 1988 a long-time member of our church came to me and said, "Rich, I've got this fantastic new book that we've got to get into the hands of every single person in the church. It is titled "88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be In 1988."

This book, by Edgar Whisenant, was actually sent to almost every pastor in America. I received a free copy. It eventually sold 4.5 million copies in bookstores. Edgar Whisenant was an amateur Bible prophecy fanatic. And in his study of scripture he became convinced that 1988 was the year that Jesus Christ would return.

Now, as I read through this book, I could not believe that anyone would be convinced by his reasons. Let me share with you a few of the 88 reasons:

America was founded in 1776; water boils at 212°; $1776 + 212 = 1988$

Reason Number 16:

According the chronological Bible, Adam was created by God on Friday, 3975 BC. The chronological Bible states that Adam was created at approximately 30 years of age. So $3975 \text{ BC} - 30 \text{ years} = 4005 \text{ BC}$ as the year Adam would have been born had Adam been born of a woman. From 4005 BC to 1995 is 6000 years; or six days with God with each day being equivalent to 1000 years. So the millennium was supposed to start in 1995. If you subtract out 7 years for tribulation, $1995 - 7 = 1988$.

Of course, all of this is predicated on Adam being created in 3975 BC; something that virtually no reputable Bible scholar would support.

Well, I'm probably not telling you anything new, but in case you were wondering, the Rapture did not occur in 1988. So Edgar recalculated things and followed up with later books predicting the Rapture in 1989, 1993, and 1994. These later books didn't sell quite as well. But amazingly, Edgar just kept going.

Wrong predictions

Now, at every bookstore in the country, you can find a shelf of books written by some Christian pastor or televangelist attempting to prove to you that the return

of Christ is just around the corner. Otherwise very bright, very talented people buy into this stuff as did the church member who wanted me to give the 88 Reasons book to every single member of the Vineyard Church.

Let me tell you a story. In April 1981 James McCullough, who was a successful Arizona surgeon terminated his medical practice. His wife sold her Nevada boutique and they parted with their Porsche in anticipation of the Second Coming. Together with other members of the White House Gospel Tract Foundation of Tuscan, Arizona, they were preparing to be lifted up to heaven on the date predicted by their leader, Pastor Bill, which was supposed to be June 28, 1981.

Then the Tribulation would occur and the Anti-Christ would rule until Christ returns to set up his millennial kingdom which Pastor Bill calculated for May 14, 1988. A fellow church member, Bob Bowman, said, "We're ready for the Rapture. My little one sort of wants a 3-wheeler before it happens, but we told him that we are ready to go and that we won't be able to take the 3-wheeler with us."

About the same time, a totally fallacious news item was being reprinted in several Christian publications concerning a purported incident involving the Internal Revenue Service. Supposedly the IRS had sent out a number of social security checks that banks were instructed not to cash unless the bearer had proper identification – a mark on their right hand, or on their forehead. The fallacious news item then said that when contacted, the IRS official said the checks had been erroneously circulated prior to their intended effective date, which was 1984.

So there sat surgeon James McCullough, his wife, his whole little group in the desert waiting to be raptured on June 1981. It didn't happen.

Wild predictions of the Lord's return are not just an American phenomenon. In Korea members of a huge Korean church called "Mission for the Coming Days" were told that Jesus would rapture the church on October 28, 1992. Members of the church spent vast sums of money printing full page ads not only in Korea, but all over the world. There was a full-page ad in USA Today announcing that Jesus would come during the Feast of Trumpets and rapture his church. Believers quit their jobs and sold everything to prepare to go to heaven. The Associated Press wrote an article the next day titled, "Believers Go Home Grumbling As Deadline for Rapture Passes." One angry church member said, "God lied to us." A woman was walking home weeping with her 4-year old daughter saying, "We don't know what we should believe anymore."

Misreading prophecy is not just a contemporary problem. It has been a problem in every age of the church. During the Reformation because of the momentous political and religious changes that were happening throughout Europe. Many

began to speculate on the end of the world. One radical Reformer, a man by the name of Melchior Hofmann, said that his own day was the time of the end. Hofmann believed that the armies of Muslim Turks which had been menacing Europe for decades were the biblical Gog and Magog. And so he confidently asserted in 1553 that he would be imprisoned for six months in the city of Strassburg and then the Lord would return.

The first part of his prediction was fulfilled. Hofmann was imprisoned. The second part of his prediction, the Lord's return, didn't happen.

Probably the most famous American prediction was made by William Miller, who studied the book of Daniel for two years, and concluded that Christ would return in 1843. It is hard to know how huge Miller's following was. It was either in the 10's of thousands; some say it was in the 100's of thousands. When 1843 passed, Miller readjusted his dates to October 22, 1844. Tens of thousands of people in America fled the cities, sold their belongings, waiting for the Lord's return. When October 22, 1844 passed without the Lord's return, it was labeled the Great Disappointment. Many, many people were disillusioned and walked away from the faith. Some of Miller's followers reinterpreted the date spiritually as the time when Christ entered the heavenly temple to inaugurate a new phase of his saving work. And this reinterpretation figured in the rise of what is called "Seventh Day Adventists." They can trace their origins back to William Miller's 1844 prediction of the Lord's return.

But we can't be too hard on Seventh Day Adventists because every denomination and every religion has wrongly predicted the return of Christ. Martin Luther believed that the Lord's return would happen in his lifetime because the world was headed to Armageddon and a gigantic war against the Muslim Turks of his day. Cardinal Nicholas de Cusa lived back in the 15th century and who was a brilliant scholar predicted that the Lord would return in 1700. There have been numerous Baptists who have predicted the return of the Lord. So have Mennonites, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, and the Assembly of God church, and Episcopalians, and the founder of Calvary Chapel. Orthodox Jews have regularly predicted the coming of Messiah. So have Muslims.

Now, there is one thing you can tell about all of these predictions. They have had a failure rate of exactly 100%.

In fact, Jesus knew that we would have a failure rate of exactly 100% concerning our predictions of his return. That is why he said, "Don't do it." For example, in Matthew 24:36 we read this:

Matthew 24:36

"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

In v. 42 we read this:

Matthew 24:42

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

In Acts 1:7 we read this:

Acts 1:7

He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

At least ten different times in the gospels and in Acts Jesus told his disciples that you do not know when I am going to return. But are there signs? Are there indicators that the Lord is near?

I’ve been doing a series on the End Times. Today I’m calling my message When Will Jesus Christ Return? Let’s pray.

Matthew 24:1-3

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. 2 “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” 3 As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

Not only do we make wrong predictions, but the disciples in this case were operating with wrong values

Wrong values

The setting for this discussion about signs of the end was the disciples leaving the Temple complex in Jerusalem. They were terribly impressed by the building. It was an extraordinary complex. In fact, the Jewish Temple was said to be more beautiful than any temple in the ancient world. In fact, the Jewish Temple was renowned throughout the world for its magnificence, its beauty. And Jews across the world were devoted to the Temple. No matter where Jews lived in the Mediterranean world, they gave money to support the Temple. In fact, if you flip over to the parallel text in the gospel of Mark, you see how impressed the disciples were with the Temple.

Mark 13:1

As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

Now, what do we learn from Mark 13:2?

Mark 13:2

“Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

Jesus is not impressed by the same things we are. There are so many things that we look at and we say, “WOW! Isn’t that amazing? That is really important. That is really significant.” It is so important for you to remember that Jesus Christ is not impressed by the same things that we are. Think about all the things that we American hype as the most spectacular, the most stupendous, the greatest ever. Think about the Academy Awards. There are hundreds of media types from around the world waiting breathlessly for movie stars to get out of their limos to walk the red carpet. Do you think Jesus Christ looks at the Academy Awards with baited breath as he waits for a particular starlet to walk down the carpet in her designer gown, dripping in diamonds.

Do you think Christ is impressed by the 8’ corporate check that is handed to the OSU Athletic Department on the 50-yard line at an OSU football game? People stand behind one of these mammoth checks and get their photos taken.

So many church activities are hyped as the greatest and the most stupendous, I think Jesus is not impressed.

What impresses Jesus? There is this most unfortunate chapter division between Mark 12 and Mark 13. By the way, the chapter divisions and verse divisions are not inspired by God. They were invented by Bible publishers back in the Middle Ages so that people could find their place in the Bible. There is the most unfortunate division between chapters 12 and 13 because in Mark 12:41-44 we read about something that impressed Jesus. Let’s look at that story:

Mark 12:41-44

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. 42 But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. 43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. 44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

A widow who gave two little copper coins, these shaved down very light pieces of copper that were almost worthless, impressed Christ. Because that was a mammoth sacrifice to that widow. More impressive to Jesus than 8’ checks on the 50-yard line at OSU stadium, more impressive to Christ than the magnificence of the Temple complex was that widow’s gift of 2 copper coins.

Friend, wouldn't you like one time this week or this month for Jesus to be impressed by something that you did? Just one thing...that Christ would sit back on the throne in heaven and say, "WOW! I'm impressed." What do you think would impress Jesus that would flow from your life? I'll bet it is not something grand. I'll bet it is not something stupendous.

Let me throw out a few suggestions. I wonder if Jesus would be impressed, husbands, if those of you, who are in challenging marriages, made a decision that instead of being defensive or avoiding talking about your bad marriage, what if you, husband, initiated marriage counseling? What if you didn't leave it to your wife to nag you about getting marriage counseling, but you decided to pick up a phone and you made an appointment with our counseling clinic? I don't know if Jesus would be impressed, but I will tell you, you will impress the socks off your wife.

Here's a suggestion: Dads, what if today you chose to turn off the football game after church and you got off the sofa and decided to actually go outside and play with your kids? Again, I don't know if Christ would be impressed, but I will tell you this – your kids will be!

What if today or tomorrow you chose to be obedient in an area where you've been regularly disobedient? You just said, "This time I'm going to obey your will, Jesus." I'll bet our small acts of obedience are more impressive to Jesus than lots of our grand religious activities.

But the disciples are still focused on the Temple even though Jesus regularly told the disciples that the Temple was no longer significant. After Jesus came, the meeting place on earth between God and man is Jesus Christ the God-Man. He told us over and over again in the gospels that the Temple was irrelevant once he came. For example, we read in Jn 2:18-22 these words:

John 2:18-22

The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." 20 They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" 21 But the temple he had spoken of was his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

And in John 4 Jesus said to a woman in vv. 21-24 these words:

John 4:21-24

"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You

Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

It is amazing, but the disciples never got it that the Temple was irrelevant once Christ came. And we believers today don't get it either. There are so many Christians looking forward to the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, reading prophecy books about the Dome of the Rock or the Temple Mount when Jesus said the Temple was irrelevant once he came. He is the meeting place between God and human beings. No more sacrifices. No more rituals.

So we have wrong predictions; wrong values; and wrong security.

Wrong security

Matthew 24:3

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

When the disciples hear Jesus' statement that the Temple is going to be destroyed, they take it to mean that the end of the world has come. They asked this question in v. 3.

Matthew 24:3

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

You know, we can so easily tie our security and our loyalties and trust to something or someone other than God. When we learn that that person or that thing has been taken away, we think it means the end of the world. And we are not the first people to think like this. Back in the early 5th century the city of Rome was sacked by an army of 40,000 barbarians led by the brilliant general named Alaric. Throughout the Roman world people thought that this meant the end of the world because Christianity was so intertwined with Rome. Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire. People thought that with the collapse of Rome, Christianity itself would collapse.

It was to deal with this particular error linking Rome's fortunes with Christianity's fortunes that the great Christian thinker, St. Augustine, wrote his *City of God*. And he distinguished between the City of God and the city of man. He said that the city of man is temporal. It is going to pass away. The City of God is eternal. The city of man lives by its own strength. The city of God lives out of the strength

of God. The city of man loves itself. The city of God loves God and nothing and no one can ever injure the city of God.

Now, the disciples couldn't distinguish between the city of man and the City of God. They thought that if Jerusalem fell, that meant the end of the world. No more hope. And I believe that many Americans today have so intertwined America with the future of Christianity that we think that if America was to fall, Christianity would fall. If you want more on this, I did a talk in Washington that is on YouTube. All you have to do is type in Rich Nathan on YouTube and you will see a talk I gave for an audience in Washington at a CNN-hosted event.

Let me ask you a more personal question: Friend, what is it that if it was taken from you; who is it that if they were taken from you, would spell the end of the world for you? If you lost your health, would that mean the end of the world? Or if your child went to prison, would that be the end of your world? If your spouse died, would that mean the end of the world? Christians can be in the kind of relationship with Jesus that enables us to continue on in life even when precious things and precious people are taken from us. Some of you know this one – you have suffered an incredible loss. Yet you have experienced a security in Christ that is deeper than any loss in this world. Even in the midst of heartbreak when you weep, you have seen that our security and our joy is not anything or in any person in this world. Our security and joy is in Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul says this in Colossians 3:1-4,

Colossians 3:1-4

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Your life can't ultimately be touched if you are connected to Jesus by faith, because your life is now wrapped up with Christ in God. Why not ask the Lord to bring you into such a close relationship with him that you could weather any storm; that you can say whatever happens – "I don't like this; in fact, I hate it, but I will be OK because Jesus has me." Life has been really hard, but Jesus has been good to me.

Can you say that? If you can't, why not pray that you would be able to say that? Wouldn't you like to be able to say that? Life has been hard; but, Jesus has been good to me.

And note that the disciples ask at least two questions, possibly three in verse 3.

Matthew 24:3

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

They ask about the destruction of the Temple. And then they ask about the coming of the Lord. Many people interpret Matthew 24 as if Jesus only answered the first question: When will the Temple be destroyed? And other people, in fact many more people, read Matthew 24 as if Jesus only spoke about events that would take place thousands of years in the future, as if the only question that Jesus was answering was what would be the sign of his coming, and when will the world end?

I think Jesus answers both questions asked by the disciples. #1: When will the Temple be destroyed? And, #2: What will be the characteristic of this age until he finally returns? The way that I would break up the text, if you are outlining is, Matthew 24:4-28 – I believe is the entire period of time between the first and second coming with vv. 15-21 specifically referring to events around the destruction of the Temple. In vv. 29-31, Jesus talks about his return.

But vv. 4-28 are not about the very last days on planet earth. Vv. 4-28 are about the entire period of time between Jesus' first coming and Jesus' second coming with a specific focus on the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in vv. 15-21. So, let's read this together:

Matthew 24:4-14

Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many. 6 You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 7 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are the beginning of birth pains. 9 "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. 10 At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, 11 and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. 12 Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, 13 but whoever stands firm to the end will be saved. 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.

Jesus uses a really interesting metaphor to describe the period of time between his first coming and his second coming. He calls it "birth pains." V. 8

Matthew 24:8

All these are the beginning of birth pains.

These are the beginnings of birth pains. Now the reality is, friends, today there are so many books and popular novels written in which we focus on the labor pains.

We focus on the labor pains

I remember Marlene was pregnant with our first child, Daniel, and she went to a women's small group. I was at home. Marlene came home in tears. I said, "What's the matter, darling?" I was thinking – you went to this women's group; isn't that supposed to make you happy, not miserable? I said, "What happened?" She said, "Well, the women in the group when they found out I was pregnant, began to tell me the stories of the births of their own children." One dear friend said, "Rich, you have to understand this is women's equivalent to men's war stories. Many of us didn't serve in the military so we have to get into all the gory details and especially describe the horror for first-time pregnant moms.

And so one woman said to Marlene, "Oh, Marlene, when I had my first child, I went through 35 hours of the most excruciating pain I ever experienced in my life. It was absolutely horrific. I thought I was just going to die." But because this woman was a Christian, she added, "Praise God, Jesus was there!"

And so instead of focusing on the baby, or giving Marlene assurance saying, "Listen, billions of women throughout history have gone through this; you will be able to get through it too; it is a little scary, but don't be worried; tell yourself the baby is coming and I am going to have so much joy when I get to hold my little baby; here are some of the things you can expect, but you will get through it, don't worry" – all the conversation focused on the labor pains.

And that is what all the prophecy books do right now. They don't focus on the new creation that is coming. They don't focus on the kingdom of God that is going to break into this world bringing with it healing and peace on earth. They don't say, "Hey, let's look – a baby is coming; a baby is coming; a new creation is breaking in; we're going to get to see our Lord face to face, focus on that."

No, instead, every prophecy book focuses on the labor pains. We get totally caught up with the labor pains. There is an organization that you can read about on the web. They put together what they call the Rapture Index. The Rapture Index is an index of about 45 different events that according to them indicate that the rapture is about to happen. It is sort of a basket of indicators, a mutual fund of different indicators that say the Lord is going to return. You see the same kind of perspective on numerous Christian TV shows – the sort of Bible in the news approach where someone reads a newspaper item out of today's news and they show that this is an indicator of the end. The rapture index, by the way, is at an all-time high; it is over 160 now. Anything over 140 is labeled by these Rapture actuaries as "fasten your seatbelts – the end is near."

Now, why is this approach wrong? Why do I think that this is not the way to look at the Bible? Let's focus on natural events for a moment. Natural events like earthquakes. How many of you have been told at some point that there is a major increase in earthquakes in the world and that is a sign that the Lord's return is near. Why is that wrong?

Look with me at vv. 6-8,

Matthew 24:6-8

You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 7 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are the beginning of birth pains.

What Jesus is telling us is that all of these things – famines, wars, and earthquakes are not signs of the end. They are just the beginning of the birth pains – the end is still to come. One Bible scholar puts it really well, he said, “these are the not-yet signs; they aren't the yet signs; they are the not-yet signs.” Jesus warns us against premature expectations of his return.

As a matter of fact, despite all the Christian voices to the contrary, all the rapture index measurements, the frequency and severity of earthquakes on planet earth have not increased in the last 100 years. We just have more measuring devices and we have many more people living in earthquake zones. But there aren't more natural disasters now than there was a hundred years ago. And there are, in fact, fewer famines than there were 100 years ago.

Our focus is not to be on the labor pains. It is supposed to be on the baby that is coming, the new creation. What will it be like when the Kingdom comes?

I'll tell you what it will be like. There won't be any hungry children in the world. There won't be any sick people. There won't be any more premature deaths. There won't be any wars. That's what you focus on; that's what you pray for; that's what you work towards in this age. Give me a little bit of that now, God.

What is another labor pain that will get people alarmed, that will cause people to run around saying that Jesus' return is just around the corner, but it is a not-yet sign? It is spiritual deception. Look at vv. 4-5.

Matthew 24:4-5

Jesus answered: “Watch out that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and will deceive many.

It says the same thing in v. 11,

Matthew 24:11

and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.

And in vv. 23-28,

Matthew 24:23-28

At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. 24 For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. 25 See, I have told you ahead of time. 26 "So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the wilderness,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. 27 For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 28 Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.

Now in the text that we looked at last week in 2 Thessalonians 2 that had to do with the revelation of Anti-Christ, the apostle Paul also warns us about spiritual deception. He echoes the words of Jesus here. Look at this with me in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12,

2 Thess. 2:9-12

The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, 10 and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie 12 and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

What is it, friends that will keep you from being spiritually deceived during a time of stress? Throughout history there have been times of great distress where economies have gone into depressions, wars have broken out, natural disasters occur. And someone in the country arises and they say that they are going to save the country from the disaster that they are suffering. Everyone rallies around that person, the false savior. That's what happened in Italy with Mussolini. That is what happened in Germany with Hitler. That's what happened in China with Mao. False saviors; false prophets.

What will keep you from jumping on the bandwagon and going after one of these false saviors or false prophets if there is a time of great distress here in America? The apostle Paul tells us what our protection is in 2 Thessalonians 2:10, he says:

2 Thess. 2:10

and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

You see, we are not protected from being deceived by knowing the truth. We are protected from being deceived by loving the truth. When push comes to shove, our lives are not determined by what we know; but by what we love, what we delight in, what we crave in our heart of hearts. People who love the truth receive the truth when it is presented to them. But if you love something other than the truth, whatever you love will eventually be offered to you in exchange for a moral and spiritual compromise. Satan will come along to you at some point in your life and offer you what you love. If you love men's attention or women's attention more than you love the truth, Satan will offer you a man's attention or a woman's attention. If you love advancement in your career more than you love the truth, Satan will come along and offer you advancement in exchange for some moral compromise. If you love people's praise, you will be offered praise, you will be offered a position, you will be offered security. If you love drugs, you will be offered drugs. If you love sex, you will be offered sex. You will at some point be offered whatever it is you love. If you love the truth, you will turn down the offer because you don't want the advancement, money, or a person's attention more than you want God.

Have you ever heard the old saying that you can't con an honest man? There is truth in that. Someone who loves what's right more than they love anything else is someone who is very hard to deceive. Someone who loves the easy way, the quick way, the kind of person who is always looking to make a quick buck, that person is easily conned. Those are the people to whom you could sell the tapes to, the person who is looking to make a quick buck, is a person who all the fly-by-night business seminars are marketing to. If you are a person who loves the truth; if you are a person who says, "Hey, I know my Bible; Proverbs 2:10 says this...

Proverbs 2:10

For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.

You are protected from deception. See, false prophets, false Christs, earthquakes, famines, wars – these are all the not-yet signs. What is the great yet sign? Matthew 24:14

Matthew 24:14

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.

I'm keeping my eyes, friends, on the proclamation of the gospel around the globe. I believe in God for a triumph of the gospel. I am not rejoicing when I hear about hard times – oh the Lord is near; I'm rejoicing when I hear news that there is a Pentecost on earth every hour of every day, around the globe at least 3000 people place their faith in Jesus Christ for the first time.

Jesus mentions that there is a sharp birth pain.

The sharpest labor pain

This is a passage that is often misunderstood as referring the very last days. It actually refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple a generation after Jesus. He says this in vv. 15-21,

Matthew 24:15-21

“So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand— 16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 17 Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house. 18 Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. 19 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! 20 Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. 21 For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again.

Jesus is answering the disciples’ question: when will the temple be destroyed. He tells them what is going to happen – when will every stone be knocked down in the temple? He refers to an abomination of desolation from the book of Daniel. Back in the prophet Daniel’s day, Daniel writes about a Greek general who we know from history is named Antiochus Epiphanies, who abominated the Jewish Temple – how? In 167 BC Antiochus Epiphanies went into the Jewish Temple, into the Holy of Holies, and slaughtered the pig there. He erected a statue to the Greek God, Zeus, and then he outlawed the practice of Judaism throughout Judea. This Antiochus became a prototype of all the anti-God, anti-Christ rulers throughout history. He tried to shut down the worship of the true God

Jesus said there is going to be an echo of this Antiochus a generation from when he lived. And there was; within a generation of Jesus in 66 AD the Romans came into the Temple, they shed innocent blood there defiling the Temple. And then 3½ years later, the Temple was destroyed and violated even more terribly. After the Temple was burned, the Romans erected on the site of the Temple, their standards which bore the Emperor’s image and they put idols all over the Temple mount.

Jesus tells his disciples when you see this stuff happening, v. 16,

Matthew 24:16

then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

Get out of Jerusalem. The great church historian, Eusebius, tells us that Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem because they believed the words of Jesus fled the city and were saved. They ran to the hills of Judea and they were saved because they listened to the warnings of Christ. The rest of the Jews, who did not believe in Jesus or his word, were destroyed in Jerusalem. And it was a horrible time. He tells us about how terrible it will be for pregnant and nursing women. One contemporary historian named Josephus who was there in Jerusalem and watched the Roman destruction of the city tells us that not only did children die, but women were reduced to eating their own children. There was cannibalism being practiced. And while more Jews died during the Holocaust than during the destruction of Jerusalem, never has a city in history suffered more than Jerusalem did during the Roman siege. The description of what the people suffered during that siege is unimaginably horrible.

And that is what Jesus is referring to in vv. 15-21.

There are these events between the first coming and second coming that bring stress into the world. There are birth pains. But the end is not yet.

Well, how do we get through the labor? V. 22, and let's finish with this.

The practice of spiritual Lamaze

Matthew 24:22

"If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.

V. 22 tells us that this age, this age of evangelism and distress, wars, famines, persecutions, hatred, false prophets will be so bad that if it wasn't checked, no one would survive. And you know, in a century in which we've seen two world wars and numerous genocides, and we're being threatened now by nations acquiring nuclear weapons; in a century that has seen more Christian martyrs than all the previous nine centuries put together; Jesus tells us that God is still in control. God knows when to cut the time short. He is in control of history. Christian believers put their entire trust in God's sovereign control without trying to predict dates.

This is what the book of Revelation is all about. The book of Revelation is not just about the labor pains. The center of the book is Revelation 4-5 where John sees God seated on the throne. There is God the Father; there is Messiah the Lamb of God seated on the throne. And what is disclosed to John is that Rome is not the controlling power in the universe. God and Messiah Jesus are in control.

Is this the way you look at the world, friend? In all of the craziness, in all of the

seeming randomness, do you say that it doesn't matter what happens, I know that God reigns. Christ is in control.

Let me drill down here in closing. You say, "Rich, I believe in God's rule. I believe God has all the power there is and nothing and no one can compare with him."

Do you really believe in the rule of God? Do you really believe in the power of God over history? You can tell whether you believe in the rule of God by asking yourself two things: Is there anything other than God that ultimately determines my joy? Is there anything other than God that I ultimately fear?

If there is a person who can wreck your joy; if there is a circumstance that can destroy your joy; if there is something in this world that can rob you of all joy, then you still have not yet grasped the rule of God over all things. If there is something that you fear; you say, "If this happened my world would be over," and the thing that you fear, the person that you fear is anything other than God and being far from God, then you still don't understand the rule of God over all of history and the rule of God over every detail of your life.

Forget about trying to predict when the Lord returns. Forget about all of these books and prophecies about signs of the time and Bible in the news. Focus on these things, friends: Christ is returning. The Baby is coming. The Kingdom of God is being born in this world. And God is in control. Put your faith entirely in him. Let's pray.

When Will Jesus Christ Return

Rich Nathan

November 10-11, 2007

And Then The End Will Come Series

Matthew 24.1-31

I. We get it wrong

- A. Wrong predictions
- B. Wrong values (Mt. 24.1, 2; Mk. 12.41-13.2)
- C. Wrong security (Mt. 24.3)

II. We focus on the labor pains (Mt. 24.4-28)

- A. The Labor Pains (Mt. 24.7-14)
 - 1. Natural Events
 - 2. Spiritual Deception
(Mt. 24, 4, 5, 11, 23-26; 2 Thess. 2.9-12)
 - 3. The One Great Sign (Mt. 24.14)
- B. The Sharpest Labor Pain (Mt. 24.15-21)
- C. The Practice of Spiritual Lamaze (Mt. 24.22, 29-31)