

Born to Win

About the Last Days #1

by Ronald L. Dart

What did the first Christians believe about the last days—the end time of man on the earth? Actually, they may not have been a lot different from what some of us believe today, because I’m getting the impression that a lot of us have been disquieted by events in the Middle East. Even if we don’t fully understand all the implications of biblical prophecy, we know somehow that the Middle East looms large at the end time, along with *serious* loss of life. And with the Iranian regime *certain* to develop nuclear weapons, and with the stated *intent* to destroy Israel... Well, you kind of have to take this seriously. And it tends to make you wonder: How much longer are we going to be able to go on this way?

But, you know, we’re not really seeing a lot more than those first Christians did, and they can be excused for thinking the return of Christ would be in their lifetime. There were prophets among those first Christians but, strangely, they seem (as far as the record is concerned) to express little interest in the far horizon—perhaps because they thought it wasn’t that far away. But they show up from time to time in the New Testament narrative. For example, one of them shows up in Acts, the 11th chapter. Barnabas went over and found Saul in Tarsus, and brought him back to Antioch (because they had a growing little congregation there and they were very aggressive).

Acts 11

AKJV

²⁶ [...] And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch. [*That’s where the name came from.*]

²⁷ And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem to Antioch.

Aha! Now we have the prophets who are going to tell us about the last days, right? Well, not exactly.

Acts 11

AKJV

²⁸ And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth [*famine*] throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar.

²⁹ Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers which dwelled in Judaea[.]

Now, when they say “throughout all the world”, I think they must be using it in the Old Testament sense of “the land”—*Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel)—otherwise, if it’s everywhere, how can you be of any help to *anyone*. And, generally speaking, famines were really relatively local or regional. So there were prophets in Antioch. Another occasion, in Acts 13:

Acts 13

AKJV

¹ Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

² As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.

So, I presume it was through the prophets of this group that this commission was made toward the apostle Paul. Notice that all this stuff is still short-term. It's dealing with immediate problems. It's dealing with things in the around at the time—not going off like Revelation does into the apocalyptic, end time, everything coming unstuck.

Later, still in Antioch... This time Paul had had his first missionary journey; they had come back to Antioch; then they went down to the Jerusalem Conference and got some decisions made about Gentiles in the church. Still all very current stuff.

Acts 15

AKJV

³⁰ So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter:

³¹ Which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation.

³² And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brothers with many words, and confirmed them.

But the prophets here seem more concerned with *exhortation* than with the far-off, distant future, end time, last days thing. Another example shows up late in Acts chapter 21, verse 8:

Acts 21

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⁸ And the next day we that were of Paul's company departed, and came unto Caesarea: and we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven; and abode with him.

⁹ And the same man had four daughters, virgins, who did prophesy.

¹⁰ And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judea a certain prophet, named Agabus.

Here's Agabus, back again. I guess it's the same guy.

Acts 21

AKJV

¹¹ And when he was come unto us, he took Paul's belt, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus says the Holy Spirit, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owns this belt, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.

¹² And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, begged him not to go up to Jerusalem.

¹³ Then Paul answered, What mean you to weep and to break my heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

And Paul went to Jerusalem, and he did get bound just like Agabus said. So the activities of the prophet, in the early church, seem to be very timely—that is, concerned with the events of the

immediate future—but that doesn't mean *at all* that there was not a broader view of prophecy in general and of the last days in particular. In fact, you are probably already thinking, as I go through this, about the Book of Revelation. We'll go there if time permits, but I already have a full set of programs on Revelation. (I'll tell you in a moment how we go about getting them.) But it's plain that they had a belief system about the last days which was at first somewhat off base. To some extent, this is accounted for by something Jesus said. You'll find in Matthew 24, and verse 29. He's talking about a time of tribulation, and he makes this statement. He says:

Matthew 24

AKJV

²⁹ Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken:

³⁰ And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

³¹ And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Well now, these fellows, when they heard all that, it must have made their hair stand on end to consider it. And the way he put it to them, they may very well have thought, "This is going to happen right in my own lifetime." And he said:

Matthew 24

AKJV

³² Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near:

³³ So likewise you, when you shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.

³⁴ Truly I say to you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

Actually, in a manner of speaking, that was true of that generation. Because when this destruction of the Temple in AD 70 is fulfilled, a great many of the things that Jesus talked about here came to pass. *But* they didn't see the sign of the coming of the Son of Man, did they? Because he didn't come in that era. So, basically, teachers take this as a *type* of the end time—what happens in AD 70—not the final. And Jesus goes on, though, to say this:

Matthew 24

KJ2000

³⁵ Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.

³⁶ But of that day and hour knows no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.

³⁷ But as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

That is, it will come totally without warning. Now, you would think that put a damper on speculation by the disciples as to timing. Yet, he had told them things that they were to watch for. So you can forgive them for thinking this is all going to happen, really, within this generation. They had *no idea*—they hadn't got a clue—that history would continue for 2,000 years after that day. They didn't need to know that. In fact, knowing that would have taken *a lot* of the wind out of their sails. So, what did the first Christians believe about the last days, and how did that affect the things that they did and they said?

There was an interesting question they put to Jesus. This was after the crucifixion, after his resurrection, after they kind of got their mind around the fact that he wasn't dead—he was alive. They came to him and they said:

Acts 1

AKJV

⁶ [...] Lord, will you at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?

This is in Acts, the first chapter—in that short period of 40 days when Jesus was still appearing to them, and teaching them, and helping them to re-orient themselves to a new time and a new era. When they asked the question this way they betray their expectations about the Kingdom. “Will you at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” They were thinking all the way back to King David, the united Kingdom of Israel, all the 12 tribes, all of them in the land, all of them living under God's authority and not under the Romans. They looked for this. They thought that this was the kind of kingdom they were going to be looking for.

Acts 1

AKJV

⁷ And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father has put in his own power.

You know, it's funny; I've heard people say, “Well, Jesus said, ‘No man knows the day or the hour’, but it doesn't say you may not know the month...or are the year.” Give me a break, fellas, really. When he said that, and then he adds this in and says:

Acts 1

AKJV

⁷ [...] It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father has put in his own power.

⁸ But you shall receive power, after the Holy Spirit has come upon you: and you shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

Wow. Now, this is kind of fascinating. They were not to know the time of his coming, but they were told what they *had to do*. You know, this statement all by itself should have given them a clue: “Hey, this is going to be a while.”

Acts 1

AKJV

⁹ And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight.

¹⁰ And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up [*No doubt with their mouths hanging open.*], behold, two men stood by them in white apparel;

¹¹ Who also said, You men of Galilee, why stand you gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven.

Now, I doubt that these fellows ever looked at the Mount of Olives quite the same way again, because they realized one of these days they're going to see him come back to the Mount of Olives. I think it took a while for them to settle in and understand that the Kingdom of God was not a mere restoration of

the Kingdom of Israel. Because, after all, he had told them they were supposed to go to the far corners of the earth and to take this gospel *everywhere*. Now they have a little time to settle down and think through some of the things Jesus had told them.

It's rather interesting, I think, to realize that—after the resurrection, after the three days and three nights, after the *incredible* emotional shock of Jesus' resurrection and his appearing to them—they really *needed* Jesus with them for a few days to, kind of, get their act back together again, to get their heads on straight again. And so he stayed with them, appearing from time to time, for 40 days after that.

Then he went off and was ascended into heaven. They still had 10 days before Pentecost. I think they needed that 10 days. They needed a period of time to go off by themselves, if necessary; to talk to one another; to sort this thing out; for them to figure out, “Where are we? What’s going to happen? What’s coming next? How long is it going to be before the Master’s return? What are we going to look for?” Well now, Peter’s interpretation of the prophet Joel, that he gave on the day of Pentecost shortly following this, is of special interest for the question we’re asking today: What did the church—the first Christians—believe about the last days?

Well, on this day of Pentecost, in the second chapter of Acts, the story is told. The Holy Spirit fell on them. They all spake with tongues of different nations. The tongues are named. The people understood what they were saying. They were hearing them speak in their own languages the wonderful works of God. The message had content that was known. Okay. Some of them were, in doubt, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” Others said, “Aw, these guys have had too much to drink. They’re filled with new wine.”

Acts 2

AKJV

¹⁴ But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, You men of Judea, and all you that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words:

¹⁵ For these are not drunken, as you suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day.

¹⁶ But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel;

And then Peter proceeds to give us the full context of what the prophet Joel said, that Peter felt was what they were seeing.

Acts 2

AKJV

¹⁷ And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: [...]

And that's interesting all in itself. And I don't really understand why it took them so long to get their mind around the fact the gospel had to go to the Gentiles, but it did.

Acts 2

AKJV

¹⁷ [...] I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams:

¹⁸ And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy:

Notice we've got *women and men*—prophesying, preaching, spreading the gospel.

Acts 2

AKJV

¹⁹ And I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke:

²⁰ The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of the Lord comes:

²¹ And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Again, I hear this, and I ask myself: What was it that they didn't *get* about this? It was not that the Gospel was only going to go to the Jews; it had to go everywhere. Now, it gives us an insight if we go back to Joel (and you'll find the prophecy he's talking about in the second chapter of Joel, verse 28). If you look at what Joel wrote in a broader context, and then compare it with what Peter said, it's *plain* that Joel, in context, is talking about *the time of the last days*; and that's how Peter understood it. I know that because of one variation in the construction of it. Joel said:

Joel 2

AKJV

²⁸ And it shall come to pass afterward, [...]

Peter said:

Acts 2

AKJV

¹⁷ And it shall come to pass in the last days, [...]

And I think this is Peter's *interpretation* of what Joel said. He's not just citing the Septuagint or something, because the Septuagint agrees with our Old Testament version of Joel. Now plainly, in spite of any efforts to re-interpret what Peter was saying, Peter thought he was seeing the opening stages of the events of the last days. And there is no reason he should have thought otherwise. Jesus made it plain enough that only the Father knew the times. It was not for Peter to know. What Peter *did* know was this: He had just experienced the opening phases of the prophecy in Joel. For all he knew, the sun was going to be turned to darkness and the moon into blood in a matter of days or weeks or months or maybe years at the most.

Now, there's one aside here because someone is worried about the infallibility and the inspiration of Scripture. You should know this about Scripture in general, the New Testament in particular: It is the testimony of witnesses. Luke, here in Acts, is giving testimony to what Peter said and, indirectly, to what Peter believed. And all we have to do is just look at that and say, "This is Peter's testimony", and we can try to understand—grasp where he was in his head when he said it.

As Peter made his way through Joel's prophecy, he spoke of God pouring out his Spirit upon all flesh. "Your sons, your daughters, begin to prophesy. Your young men will see visions. Your old men will dream dreams." Nobody is left out. "On my servants and my handmaidens I will pour out of those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy." That's what Joel said. And Peter, looking around him...this is what he's seeing happen on this day. And I may point out that it was not just men who are speaking, apparently, on this day. There were 120 disciples, and my impression is everybody—man, woman, and child—was *full* of the Spirit on this day.

Acts 2

AKJV

¹⁹ And I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke:

²⁰ The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of the Lord comes:

Now, this matches up with what the old prophets had said about God's final intervention in the affairs of man. It also matches up with what John will see in the Book of Revelation. This did not happen in the days following Pentecost, and we aren't sure what Peter thought about that. On the day of Pentecost, he thought he was there. But then days went by. And then a year went by. And then *another* year went by. And I think what he may have come to see is that he was stepping through a process, and the remainder of this process was yet to come.

Acts 2

AKJV

²¹ And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

I don't know why Peter didn't see the implications of this at first. Because he would later have to be shown, specially, that the Gospel was not exclusively for Jews. God was kicking the door open for *all mankind*. Peter and the others, though, would finally, I think, when they thought this through, have thought back to what Jesus said about the last days in one of his great messages—the Olivet Prophecy. It's in Matthew 24, in case you didn't recall.

Matthew 24

NIV '84

¹ Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings.

I can see these bunch of country boys from up in Galilee—fisherman—and they must have been terribly excited by everything. Jesus said:

Matthew 24

NIV '84

² “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “I tell you the truth, 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?”

One important thing to note: They are not asking about the end of the *world*; they're asking about the end of the *age*. And this is what they would have meant by “the last days”. When Peter spoke of “the last days” in his Pentecost sermon, he's talking about the end of the age.

Now, I can't think of anything Jesus would have said on this day that have been more riveting. The Temple was the absolute center of these men's religious lives—just like all the Jews. They knew the history of the place. They knew they had been destroyed once before. So they couldn't have been totally taken aback to hear that it would happen again.

To understand what they understood about the Temple, a prophecy from Jeremiah might be helpful. Jeremiah was sent down to the city gates to preach to these people. (Sort of like going down to the courthouse steps. This is in the pre-television days, naturally.) And his job was to tell people what was coming. Jeremiah, chapter 7. He said:

Jeremiah 7*NIV '84*

³ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place.

What? “Reform your actions. Change the way you live, and I’ll let you stay here.”

Jeremiah 7*NIV '84*

⁴ Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!”

They were casting their eyes around and holding up their arms and waving at the different parts of the building—just like the disciples of Jesus. He said, “Don’t think you can say that.”

Jeremiah 7*NIV '84*

⁵ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly,
⁶ if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm,
⁷ then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever.
⁸ But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.
⁹ Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known,
¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things?
¹¹ Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? [...]

Oh ho! You’ve heard that before, haven’t you? That’s what Jesus quoted when he went right into the temple—knocking over tables, whipping animals, and sending them running through the money-changers tables, and upsetting everything in the temple. “Have you made my house into a house of merchandise?” **[John 2]**.

Luke 19*NIV '84*

⁴⁶ “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be a house of prayer’; but you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

Jeremiah 7*NIV '84*

¹¹ [...] But I have been watching! declares the LORD.

And then he says something fascinating. He said:

Jeremiah 7*NIV '84*

¹² Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, [...]

Many people seem to think, “Oh, God’s name was put in Jerusalem from the start.” No, it wasn’t. The Tabernacle was at Shiloh, and the center of worship stayed there for a very long time.

I was driving north out of Jerusalem one day. My wife and I had a rented Volkswagen going up north. As I drove along the road, I saw a sign on the side of the road that said, “Shiloh”, with an arrow pointing to the right. I slammed on the breaks; I couldn’t help but remember what Jeremiah said, “Go to Shiloh.” I said, “Okay, okay, okay. I’ll go to Shiloh.” And so we drove down, bounding over this little road for a ways, and kind of came to the end of the road, and there was nothing there. And then I realized: That was the point. “Go to Shiloh...”

Jeremiah 7

NIV '84

¹² [...] and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel.

There was *nothing* there. I tried to find something. I tried to imagine something. I tried to put something together in my own heart and mind. I failed.

What he’s trying to tell you is: There is no place you can depend on for sanctuary. The only safety came from repentance and the way they treated one another. Think *that* over for a while.

Jeremiah 7

NIV '84

⁵ [D]eal with each other justly,

⁶ if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm[.]

So, as Jesus told the woman at the well at Samaria [**John 4**], the worship of God was not tied to a place and a time. It is in the way we love him and the way we love our fellow man.

After this, Jesus said more...more next time.

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