

Born to Win

About the Last Days #2

by Ronald L. Dart

What did the first Christians believe about the last days? Forget the expression “the end of the world”. The end of the planet is a long way off—like, maybe three or four billion years from now. But nevertheless, it’s plain that the first Christians believe there was to be an “end of the age” (however one might take that) because that’s what they asked Jesus about one day on the Mount of Olives. They were familiar with the Old Testament prophets. They understood their view of the last days and of this system. Peter cited Joel with clarity on the day of Pentecost. And he would have been less than human if he had not seen taking place in front of his eyes what looked, for all the world, like the initial phases of the end times. And yet, Christ would not come in his lifetime or for some two thousand years to come—and, for all we know, more yet.

The prophets were told of a “day of the Lord”—a day of God’s wrath. And while they saw it as a near-term thing, there’s good reason to think they also saw it as a distant event—an end-of-the-age event. It would be so cataclysmic that the destruction would boggle the mind, and they also saw it ushering in a new age. Not only did the first Christians have the prophets, they had Jesus’ Olivet message to make them, well, a little hyper-sensitive to prophetic events or anything that appeared to be an end-time deal. Peter and the others thought they saw it coming, but they were also quite careful to avoid crying wolf. They had good reason for that, as well. On the Mount of Olives, after they asked Jesus:

Matthew 24

NIV '84

³ [...W]hen will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?

Jesus gave them a lot to think about. He had already warned of a future destruction of the Temple standing before them. He also said:

Luke 21

AKJV

²⁰ And when you shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is near.

²¹ Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the middle of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto.

Now, that would be enough warning (it would come in AD 70) that the saints would have gotten clear of Jerusalem before it actually took place. History tells us they did. They actually cleared out of that city—possibly as long as two years—before the Romans finally took it down. So they saw, perhaps, Jerusalem encompassed with armies. Who knows what else they saw. And who knows what else their own prophets revealed to them. They got out. Well, Jesus went on, in Matthew 24, to say this:

Matthew 24

AKJV

²² And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect’s

sake those days shall be shortened.

Now, he's not talking about being "saved" like you are at a tent camp revival. He's talking about flesh being saved alive—human beings. I don't know what the disciples thought about this. The idea of the destruction of *all flesh* was a little beyond their horizon. We thought we could see it coming in the days of the old Soviet Union, when we had enough nuclear weapons and hydrogen bombs between us to really wipe out *most* of the population of the earth. But even then we couldn't have brought about the end of all flesh.

One example I ran across on the Internet some time ago. I saw a graphic laid out of what might happen in the event of a nuclear exchange between Pakistan and India, both of whom have nuclear weapons. And what it showed me was, if all of the known weapons that Pakistan would have were all used against India, they showed in a pattern on the map of India the extent of the loss of life from each of them. Now, when you consider a country the size of India and the population of India, it would have been a terrible disaster. But it would not have been the end—not even the end of India, much less of all flesh. The loss of life? Who knows—10, maybe 15% of the population of India. But you still got *a lot* of human beings left to carry on after that.

So, you've got to understand: As bad as nuclear weapons are, they don't necessarily herald the end of all flesh. The Russians and the Indians are *rational* people. And no one has died under a nuclear weapon for more than 50 years. Now, that led me to contemplate the creation of something *new* for a while (although I had no idea what it might be). But now we have an irrational, arguably insane, leadership emerging in Persia, and all bets are off. Now, living in Texas as I do, I worry more about an al-Qaeda operative smuggling *biological* weapons across the Rio Grande than I do about nuclear. A mere...what, five years ago, none of us gave a second thought to the reality that's now on our threshold. But Jesus went on to explain to his disciples:

Matthew 24

AKJV

²³ Then if any man shall say to you, See, here is Christ, or there; believe it not.

²⁴ For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; so that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.

False Christs. False prophets. What are we supposed to make of this kind of a statement—that they could show signs and wonders? Good grief, if they can show signs or wonders, isn't that of God? No, not necessarily. All the way back in the Law of Moses [**Deuteronomy 13**] we are warned that if a man performs great miracles in your sight and then says, "Let's go serve other gods.", not only don't you follow him, you put him to death. We can't very well do that today, but at least we can ignore them. Jesus said:

Matthew 24

AKJV

²⁵ Behold, I have told you before.

²⁶ Why if they shall say to you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not.

²⁷ For as the lightning comes out of the east, and shines even to the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

Hey, what is he saying to us? He's saying the coming of the Son of Man is *not going to happen in secret*. *No one* can avoid it.

Matthew 24

AKJV

²⁸ For wherever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.

What a strange thing to say. If I didn't know better, I would say it's out of context. But when you look at it in context, what he is saying is, "Don't worry. When I come, we will all be together. You won't have to be told about it." So all these *idiots* who want to tell you that Christ has already come, or he's over here, or he's over there, and giving you all this stuff about Christ this and Christ that...If you're a Christian, and you're not *with* Christ, he isn't here.

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:

Now, this is a *huge* astronomical event. We haven't seen anything like this, nor do we know about anything in recorded human history like this. It seems to be describing a *huge* meteor shower. Later, in Revelation, it will tell us:

Revelation 6

AKJV

¹³ And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, even as a fig tree casts her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind.

Now, if he was here in East Texas, he would have compared to a pecan tree shaken by the machine they use to harvest pecans, which leaves little pecans falling all around your head. If it's meteors, of course, that's going to be rather another story. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to visualize the disaster—that enough meteors of size striking the Earth could come close to ending human life on the planet. And the spooky thing about this is: We know it has happened before—just not while humans were here. In fact, if you've got a pair of binoculars, go outside on a nice moonlit night and look at the moon, and you will see signs of just exactly this kind of devastation.

Matthew 24

AKJV

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.

My, you would sort of think people would *rejoice* at the return of Christ, in that it would *save* them from the disaster they brought upon themselves. But no, most of the world, it seems, is going to be very unhappy about the sign of the Son of Man in heaven.

Matthew 24

AKJV

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

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.

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

Now, the disciples can be forgiven for thinking that this was an event that would come in their lifetime, but it appears that Jesus meant that the generation that sees these things *start* will see them end. But then he throws a caution in their direction.

So here's Jesus, standing in middle of his disciples (all of them with their eyes as big as saucers because of what he's just told him) and then he says, "But..."

Matthew 24

AKJV

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

Now, that is an *awfully* comprehensive statement, because Jesus at this point seems to even not include himself in it.

Matthew 24

KJ2000

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

³⁸ For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark,

³⁹ And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

So what we're visualizing here is complete normalcy, right up to a point. He then said:

Matthew 24

AKJV

⁴⁰ Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

⁴¹ Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

It's this passage that underlies the *Left Behind* books and the whole idea that, "In the event of the Rapture, this car will be driver-less." (You may have seen those bumper stickers on cars from time to time. Frankly, I would think, maybe, instead of putting the bumper sticker on a car, people ought not to be allowed to *drive* the car. But nevermind; I'll go a different direction.) And one could wonder, with all the events preceding, how would anyone still be working or getting married. I think part of the problem arises with the interpretation of the word rendered "taken" [*paralambanó*, παραλαμβάνω, Strong's G3880]. I think it's a reasonably good translation, but taken *where* and taken *how*? Well, Jesus made this statement in another place—Luke 21:20:

Luke 21

KJ2000

²⁰ And when you shall see Jerusalem surrounded with armies, then know that its desolation is near.

²¹ Then let them who are in Judea flee to the mountains; and let them who are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the country enter into it.

In another place, Jesus said:

Luke 17

KJ2000

³¹ In that day, he who shall be upon the housetop, and his goods in the house, let him not come down to take it away: and he that is in the field, let him likewise not return back.

Just start walking. Don't try to carry a bunch of stuff with you. You're going to die if you do. And so, they were all supposed to just saunter off—nobody paying them any particular attention. If you were working out in the field, you'd just throw your coat over your shoulder and, humming a song, just head off toward the nearest foothills. So this separation of people takes place a little *before* the final judgment—the final destruction—of Jerusalem.

I can understand how that would be. All of us are still in Jerusalem, working away on our craft or doing whatever it is we do; and we see something, we hear something, we learn something that Jesus told us, “When you see this, get out.” That would be the point when we all begin to make our move, and so we are separated. We won't *be there* when the final calamity takes place. So, I can easily see, given everything that we've read so far, the first Christians developed a lot of expectations. You can't help yourself; you start imagining things and developing scenarios. Now, continuing in Matthew 24, though, Jesus wants us to understand something. “No man knows the day or the hour”:

Matthew 24

AKJV

⁴² Watch therefore: for you know not what hour your Lord does come.

⁴³ But know this, that if the manager of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up.

So this is going to be completely unexpected, *except* that those who know what to look for will start noticing things. Then he says something I think extremely important:

Matthew 24

AKJV

⁴⁴ Therefore be you also ready: [...]

Notice the choice of words. This is a small word, but think about it. He didn't say, “Therefore, *get* ready”, he said, “*be* ready.”

Matthew 24

AKJV

⁴⁴ [...] for in such an hour as you think not the Son of man comes.

Now, hey, he's talking to his disciples here. Of all the people you'd think would know when it's going to be, they'd be the ones. He says, “No. You're going to sit here, not thinking. You're going to be reasonably sure it's not right now, and this is when it is. So *be ready*.” So have you heard of anybody setting dates for the return of Christ? He's wrong—period, end of discussion, get away from him. So what were the disciples of Jesus to do about this information he had given them? Well, he went on. He said:

Matthew 24

AKJV

⁴⁵ Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord has made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season?

⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he comes shall find so doing.

⁴⁷ Truly I say to you, That he shall make him ruler over all his goods.

Now, you know, this sounds very mundane, doesn't it? “Live your life, do your job, take care of your family, and I will take care of you.” That's what it all means. He said:

Matthew 24

AKJV

⁴⁸ But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delays his coming;

⁴⁹ And shall begin to smite his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken [just to go living a riotous live with no consideration];

⁵⁰ The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looks not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of,

⁵¹ And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

There are two major errors that lurk behind this. One is to cry wolf, to set dates, to publish articles and booklets about earthquakes and famines and all these things that Jesus said would come, overlooking the fact he said there would be famines, be earthquakes, be wars and rumors of wars. “Be *not* disturbed. The end is not yet.” But there have always been those who did that, it seems, at any given time. They say, “Oh, this is a sign of the coming return of Christ.”

That’s one of the errors. The other error is to *assume* that it isn’t going to happen in your lifetime or anytime soon. I am persuaded that the first Christians, in the main, got this straight. They realized that they *did not know*. They thought they saw the signs, but they avoided crying wolf.

Now, here is what I take away from all this: Our job is to maintain a level of readiness that we can keep up over time—however long it takes. There is a risk in burning out. There’s a risk in crying, “Wolf!”, and becoming desensitized. There’s an interesting illustration of all this in a pair of letters from the apostle Paul.

Paul had been in Thessalonica. He had preached there for some time. Opposition arose; he went down to Berea. (It was trouble wherever it was that he went, it seemed like.) And after he got down to Corinth, as things developed up there, any number of the disciples in Thessalonica had been killed. Persecution was severe in that area. Paul learned about all this and he wanted to encourage them. And he wrote, in First Thessalonians 4, verse 13:

1 Thessalonians 4

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¹³ Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.

¹⁴ We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

Now, again and again, the biblical writers speak of death as a kind of sleep. And what the first Christians believed and practiced is revealed here. He said:

1 Thessalonians 4

NIV '84

¹⁵ According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

Now, it’s an odd thing, in a way. And I don’t know of any Christian doctrine today, certainly, that thinks that *we* go and then later on *those* people come. It seems rather the contrary. But that’s not really exactly what he’s driving at. What he is saying here is “that *we* who are alive and are left until the coming of the Lord”. This means that, while Paul couldn’t set dates, it certainly *sounds like* he expects to be alive when Christ comes back. And you can certainly feel that the Thessalonians could be excused for thinking that’s what he said. He said:

1 Thessalonians 4

NIV '84

¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

¹⁸ Therefore encourage each other with these words.

Now, one thing is abundantly clear: All categories of the saints, dead or alive, in all places, meet Christ at the *same time*. We don't go in waves to meet him. So any rapture of the saints comes at the same time as the resurrection of the dead, at the trump of God which Paul will later identify as the *last trumpet* [**1 Corinthians 15**]*—*which is when the resurrection takes place. And it's *only* at that time that the saints who are still alive on the face of the earth will be caught away (I think that's where that word "Rapture" [carrying away] comes from) to meet the Lord in the air.

Now, Paul *knew* what he had done here, so he went on with a caution. This letter was read to the congregation; they couldn't take it home with them. And what Paul has just written is *so profound*, I think a lot of people who were there did not hear what came next as the reader continued to read. Paul wrote:

1 Thessalonians 5

NIV '84

¹ Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you,

² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

Paul is saying, "I'm not setting any dates. I don't know when it's going to be. I just think it *could* be in our lifetime, and here's what I think will happen if it is." Paul wrote:

1 Thessalonians 5

NIV '84

³ While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

⁴ But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.

Now, I can see how they might have taken this to mean that, while the world at large would not see it coming, *they* would. But this is an allusion to the words of Jesus, which had to do with *permanent preparedness* and *being* ready, not *getting* ready because of what we see.

1 Thessalonians 5

NIV '84

⁵ You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.

⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.

⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.

⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

Now, he's really laying it on them pretty hot and heavy as he goes through here. He's doing his best to encourage a church that had suffered *severe* persecution. But there are always some who miss the point. It turns out that a *second* letter was needed to correct the mistaken impressions of the first. Second Thessalonians 2:

2 Thessalonians 2

NIV '84

¹ Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, [...]

He didn't mention the first letter, at this point, but that's what he's talking about.

2 Thessalonians 2

NIV '84

¹ [...] we ask you, brothers,

² not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come.

Now, I don't know what Paul had heard, but he obviously had gotten some feedback from Thessalonica about how people felt about that first letter. In fact, he had inadvertently alarmed them *himself* with the first letter, when they had not heard everything he said. He wrote:

2 Thessalonians 2

NIV '84

³ Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.

⁴ He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

Now, the Temple was still standing, so this is a natural allusion to that. From this, some people take it that a temple must be built before Jesus returns. To that, I can only say: Maybe. The apostle Paul wrote:

2 Thessalonians 2

NIV '84

⁵ Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?

⁶ And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time.

I have heard *endless* speculation about that verse. But that's all it is—speculation. The Thessalonians *knew* what Paul meant, because it was a reference to previous teaching that he gave in person that you and I don't have. We can try to construct it from what we know elsewhere, but we should not trust our constructs. He says in verse eight:

2 Thessalonians 2

NIV '84

⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.

Okay. We've now got a fairly complete picture of what this is all about, and it's all in concord with what Jesus said would happen. And it probably refers to what elsewhere is called "the Abomination of Desolation". Study this, remember it, and avoid trying to explain it on the data at hand. It will become clear to those in the know when it comes to pass.

Christian Educational Ministries

P.O. Box 560 ❖ Whitehouse, Texas 75791

Phone: 1-888-BIBLE-44 ❖ Fax: (903) 839-9311

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