

INTRODUCTION

This is the second part of the message "Back to the Future." Let's climb back aboard our time machine and go Back to the Future!

We don't need a high-tech car to go back to the future. All we need are the words of Jesus spoken 2,000 years ago. We can travel back in time faster than the speed of light; we can travel at the speed of thought. A few days before Jesus carried the cross to Golgotha to die for our sins, He uttered some amazing predictions about the future. Some of these predictions have already come true and can be verified by history. Last week we looked at the first 24 verses of Luke 21. Let's go back to 33 A.D. to review some of Jesus' predictions. We saw that in 40 A.D. a time of terrible persecution against Christians began and lasted almost 300 years, just as Jesus had predicted. In 70 A.D. the beautiful Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, precisely as Jesus predicted. Then, as Jesus predicted, in 163 A.D. the Jews were scattered from Israel into all the other nations. Jesus also foresaw Jerusalem would be under the control of Gentiles until "the time of the Gentiles" was fulfilled. We learned on June 6, 1967 at the end of the Six Day War, the Jews regained control of old Jerusalem for the first time in almost 2,000 years.

But Jesus didn't merely pronounce these mystical predictions; He also offered some practical advice about what our attitude should be when trouble comes. He told us, "Don't be afraid!" He also said, "Don't worry!" and we should "stand firm in our faith"

But, now let's go back to the future to see what else Jesus had to say. (vs. 25)

There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." He told them this parable, "Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near." I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Be careful or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life, and that day will come on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."

In this lesson, we'll look at the signs of Jesus' return, and the instructions for us during the last days.

I. LEADING INDICATORS OF JESUS' RETURN

Financial experts talk about “leading indicators” to try to predict what the stock market will do. Have you ever wondered why we give our money to people called brokers to invest it for us? There are some leading indicators of Jesus’ return also. We don’t have to wonder what God is going to do in the future. The only question is *when* it will all happen. Nobody knows the day or the hour, so when someone sets a date, you know they are teaching heresy. But Jesus said there are some signs you can look for to determine the general time. One reason this chapter is rather confusing is Jesus is answering three questions about the future. Matthew records the three questions Jesus addressed: “As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will (1) this happen, [destruction of Temple] and (2) what will be the sign of your coming and (3) [the sign] of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3) Last week we looked at the signs addressing that first question: the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. But Jesus is also giving signs of His return, and signs pointing to the end of the age. It doesn’t mean the end of the world, but the end of the world as we know it. Jesus listed three different kinds of signs:

1. Spiritual signs

In verse 8, Jesus predicted during the time leading up to His return there would be many spiritual deceivers claiming to be the Messiah. It was just 10 years ago this spring when David Koresh gained international attention after his Branch Davidians defied federal authorities near Waco. David Koresh claimed to be the Messiah. His twisted teaching of the Bible led to the fiery deaths of many gullible, innocent people.

There are other spiritual signs to look for before the return of Christ. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3: “There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents...having a form of godliness but denying its power.” (2 Timothy 3:1-2, 5) Read those adjectives again, and you’ll have to admit they are an apt description of our 21st century culture. There have never been more “religions” and “religious people” than today, but many of them are practicing a powerless form of religion that denies the power of God.

In the last days, moral decay will continue to increase, but at the same time there will also be a tremendous revival among God’s people. The prophet Joel wrote about it and Peter quoted it during his sermon on the day of Pentecost: “In the last days, God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.’” (Acts 2:17)

It’s amazing what God is doing in our church. He is performing miracles and changing lives. But it’s not only happening in Tyler, Texas. Right now, Jesus is building some of the most powerful, effective churches in the history of Christianity. It is mind boggling to think 7,000 attended church here on Easter, and we think Green Acres is huge. God is doing amazing things everywhere Jesus is honored. On Easter Sunday both Prestonwood and Fellowship Churches in Dallas two Baptist churches had over 20,000 in attendance. Rick Warren’s church in California had over 34,000 people attend the 12 Easter weekend services! It’s more than numbers, but somebody was counting in the book of Acts to report that 3,000 were saved on Pentecost, and later another 5,000 people were added. God is creating a great spiritual hunger and it seems as if

the Father is getting the church, the bride of Christ prepared to be taken home by our Bridegroom. Signs of the times are everywhere. There's a brand new excitement in the air!

2. Natural signs

In verse 11 Jesus mentioned there would be earthquakes and signs in the "heavens." Then in verse 25 He said there would be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. We've only been able to keep a record of earthquakes since about 1900. Would you like to guess the number of recorded earthquakes per year? Multiple choice: (1) 939; (2) 6,200 (3) 49,000 or (4) 365,000? According to the National Earthquake Center in Denver, over 1,000 earthquakes of at least 2 on the Richter scale occur everyday. Of course, you don't really feel an earthquake unless it registers about 4 on the Richter scale. Of those magnitude [4 or more] earthquakes here are the numbers: 1999: 20,832; 2000: 22,256; 2001: 23,534; 2002: 27,465. As you can see the frequency of major earthquakes has been increasing over the past few years. (Source: <http://neic.usgs.gov/neis/eqlists/eqstats.html>) You know I'm not some end times nut, but could signs in the heavens have something to do with our space program? Just keep looking for the signs.

3. Political signs

The main sign Jesus said to look for is found in verse 29. He gave a mini-parable of a fig tree, and all the trees sprouting leaves. He said when you see these things happening you know the Kingdom of God is near. When the nation of Israel was destroyed in 70 A.D., the Jewish people were scattered to all the nations of the earth. But in the early 1900s a few brave Jews started returning to the Holy Land. They had to live in fortresses called *kibbutzim* for protection. Then on May 14, 1948, the fig tree sprouted leaves. On that day, the United Nations chartered Israel as a nation.

The Old Testament prophesied a time when Israel would once more become fruitful as a nation. God said through the prophet Isaiah, "In the days to come Jacob (Israel) will take root; Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the earth with fruit." (Isaiah 27:6) God compared Israel to a tree that would one day take root and bud and blossom. This verse has literally come true because today Israel grows some of the best fruit in the world (ever heard of Jaffa oranges?). They export fruit to every continent on earth except Antarctic!

Some people say these Old Testament scriptures refer to Israel's return from Babylonian exile in 500 B.C. The only problem with that is they were uprooted again after that for 2,000 years! I believe this time God is restoring Israel for the final time. God said through Amos, "I will plant Israel in their own land, NEVER AGAIN TO BE UPROOTED from the land I have given them, says the Lord your God." (Amos 9:15)

Have you ever wondered why there is so much media attention given to a country the size of New Jersey with a population less than Houston, Texas? Is CNN, NBC, or Fox News reading their Bibles to ask, "What should be our featured stories today?" It is because God said thousands of years ago during the end times there would be a nation of Israel and they would play a prominent role in world events. By the way, excluding Israel, do you know which other

nation is mentioned most in scripture? Iraq—or ancient Babylon. Hmmm. Is God up to something?

1948 is such an important date in Bible prophecy that in 1970, Hal Lindsey wrote a book entitled *The Late Great Planet Earth*. He based it on Luke 21:32. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened." Lindsey correctly understood the reestablishment of Israel in 1948 was the budding of the fig tree, but he took the word "generation" to mean 40 years. In the Bible, genealogical lists often divide generations into forty year increments. So Hal Lindsey translated "generation" in Luke 21:32 to be forty years. He added 40 years to 1948, so he said in his book that Jesus would return to earth before 1988. As you know that didn't happen. His error was based on the misinterpretation of the word "generation." The word Jesus used for "generation" is the word *ethnos*. We understand what an "ethnic group" is. Jesus wasn't talking about a time period; He was talking about a people group. 2,000 years ago, He predicted the Jews would be scattered to all nations and Israel would be destroyed, yet He said the Jews would maintain their ethnic identity. There were all kinds of people surrounding Israel. Can you find a Philistine today? Or a Moabite, or a Jebusite? No, but can you find plenty of Israelites. The miracle of the Jewish people is they did not pass away while Jerusalem was enduring 1,900 years of Gentile control.

It hasn't been easy. Throughout the centuries, the devil has tried to destroy the Jews. Pharaoh was the first to try by killing the male Hebrew babies. The Romans tried to rid the world of the Jews. Even Adolph Hitler conspired to kill millions of Jews. Why do you think the Muslim world hates America so much? Because we are one of the few friends Israel has. What you see transpiring in the Middle East is all because the fig tree has budded.

But enough of the signposts; how are we to live during these troubling times? That leads to us to the practical advice Jesus has given His followers. Let's consider:

II. LASTING INSTRUCTIONS FOR GOD'S CHILDREN

These are scary times to be alive. The 21st century has been filled with chilling episodes that could make people faint from terror and fear. This fear began with all the Y2K predictions that at midnight on December 31, 1999 major computers would crash and cause world wide chaos. Then we faced the uncertainty and confusion over the Presidential election when there was a recount of votes in Florida...and then another recount, and then another. Remember, the hanging chads? Then of course, Tuesday morning, September 11 literally exploded our sense of security. Then there was the anthrax scare, where people were ironing their mail before opening it. Add that to the stock market "correction," rising gas prices, a war against the Taliban and the Saddam regime. The one word that has obsessed us this century is terror. This has been a tough century and we're only three years into it! In fact, I recently read an article that said, "It is a gloomy moment in the history of our country. Not in the lifetime of most men has there been so much grave and deep apprehension; never has the future seemed so incalculable as at this time. The domestic economic situation is in chaos. Our dollar is weak throughout the world. Prices are so high as to be utterly impossible. The political cauldron seethes and bubbles with uncertainty. It is a solemn moment of our troubles. No man can see the end." When do you think that was written? Last week? That statement appeared in October, 1857 in *Harper's Weekly Magazine*! Yes, things

are tough, but life has always been tough. We aren't being fed to the lions because we're followers of Jesus. We aren't engaged in a bloody Civil War. We haven't been put on gas and food rations like our parents and grandparents during WWII. Yes, life is hard, but we have so many creature comforts today we get nervous and go into panic mode when our cell phone loses coverage or we miss an episode of American Idol!

Trouble is timeless, but God is greater than any trouble. Jesus gave some great instructions to us about how we are to live our lives in a world that is falling apart. Someone once said the letters spelling "B.I.B.L.E." should stand for: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth! Here are three important instructions Jesus gives us about the how to face the future without fear:

1. Build your life on God's Word!

In verse 33 Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." Everything around us is temporary, but Jesus claimed His Word would exist forever. When this old earth has turned to dust and the stars have been plucked from their sockets in the sky, God's Word, the Bible, will still exist.

Many food products have expiration dates, or they sometimes have a "best if used before" date. For instance this egg crate says expires May 9, 2003. The Bible has a "best if used before date" but it doesn't have an expiration date. I don't know about your Bible, but in the back of my Bible it says, "Expiration Date: Never." But it says, "Best if used before I die or Jesus returns." The Bible won't do you any good after you die or after Jesus returns, so you'd better read it, study it and obey it now. This book is unlike any other book in history. It is God's Word. I like the way Eugene Petersen paraphrases Hebrews 4:12, "God means what he says. What he says goes. His powerful Word is as sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything. Nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it—no matter what." (*The Message*)

In a world that is becoming more unstable by the hour, we need something permanent upon which we can base our lives. God's Word stands forever. There are only two things in this world that are eternal—the souls of men and women and the Word of God. So, if you want your life to matter for eternity, invest yourself in the Bible and reaching people for Jesus.

The second instruction Jesus gave is found in verse 34.

2. Guard your heart!

Jesus said, "Be careful or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life." Jesus warned it's possible for our hearts to become burdened down. The word literally means weight applied on an object until it is depressed. A depressed person often reports the symptom of feeling as if a huge weight is crushing their chest making it hard to breath. This is the kind of weighed down heart Jesus warned about.

Jesus mentions three things that can crush your heart. First, dissipation means "excess." Is there anything in your life you are doing "in excess?" For instance, eating is fine, overeating is

dangerous; using the internet is okay, but being a slave to the net is dangerous. The only thing you should be doing in excess is loving, praying, and serving God!

Jesus mentions the danger of drunkenness as well. Dissipation or excess, leads to drunkenness which leads to dissipation. It's a vicious circle of cause and effect. Drunkenness represents the desire to dull ones senses by artificial means. Sometimes, life gets so tough many people try to escape from reality by drugging themselves with alcohol or drugs.

A third danger Jesus lists is anxiety or worry. Some folks who would never get drunk or live an excessive lifestyle, are eaten up with the cancer of worry and anxiety. Drunkenness can destroy you physically, but worry will destroy you emotionally and mentally. Jesus said, "Be on guard! Be careful! Don't let these things weigh you down.

3. Keeping watching/praying!

Jesus said, "Be always on watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen." These are not two separate commands, but one. You'll often find "watching and praying" together in the scriptures.

On the night before Jesus was crucified, He went into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Jesus knew He would be arrested by a mob in just a short time. In Mark 14:38, He gave His disciples these instructions, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation." He wanted them to see what was happening, so they would know how to pray for strength and guidance. When Jesus came back from praying He found the disciples asleep. He said, "Could you not keep watch for one hour?"

Jesus has gone on before us, and He is now making intercession for us to the Father. He has told us to watch and pray. God is up to something very important in the world right now, and if we don't see it, we won't know how to pray. Like the disciples, the church is asleep at the wheel right now, and while we slumber, God is working. We need to wake up and starting watching and praying. If you aren't watching, you won't know how to pray. If you aren't praying it doesn't matter what you see.

We should be watching for these signs. In verse 28 Jesus told us what to be watching for. He said, "When these things begin to take place, stand and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. As we see these signs around us, we should look up, and watch for the return of Jesus. As Paul wrote to Timothy, we should be "looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." (Titus 2:13)

CONCLUSION

When you read the words of Jesus, you are going back to the future. Although He spoke these words almost 2,000 years ago, He spoke of an event that hasn't yet happened—His return to this world. Will you be ready? You can't say it's unexpected, because the signs are everywhere. In verse 34 Jesus warned the worst thing that could happen would be for the Day of His return to come on a person unexpectedly, like a trap.

In the spring of 1980, the blue skies above Oregon began to be obscured by steam rising from Mt. Saint Helens. Geologists warned an eruption was imminent and residents living near the area were ordered to evacuate. State troopers and forest rangers entered the area with loudspeakers blaring, "Danger! Evacuate the area immediately." Flashing road signs were erected that said, "Warning, Warning, Warning. Evacuate immediately." There was an 83-year-old man named Harry Truman (no relation to the president) who operated a lodge at Spirit Lake only five miles from Mt. St. Helens. He laughed at the warnings. Officials argued with him to leave, but when he stubbornly refused, he was granted permission to stay. He said, "Nobody knows more about this mountain than old Harry—and it wouldn't dare blow up on me."

On the morning of May 18, 1980 Harry woke, and probably followed his habit of feeding his 16 cats, then fixing breakfast for himself. At 8:13 a.m. Mt. St. Helens exploded with the force of a 23 megaton atom bomb. The top 1,500 feet of the mountain disappeared. The sound of the eruption was heard 600 miles away. The air was instantly heated to 600 degrees. Old Harry never heard a thing because a shock wave of energy traveling faster than the speed of sound radiated out from the blast. It was followed by a fifty foot tall wave of mud and dirt that flattened everything within 150 square miles. It destroyed enough trees to build 200,000 three bedroom homes. The eruption was followed by a cloud of ash that covered everything to a depth of fifty feet. They never found a trace of Harry, his cats, or his cabin. I wonder what went through old Harry's mind in that millisecond before he realized he had gambled and lost. He had heard the warnings, but he did not heed the warnings.

The Bible says at any moment, the Lord Jesus could return in a flash, in a twinkling of an eye. God has placed warning signs all along the road. Warning, repent immediately. For those of us who have heeded His warning, we will escape His judgement against sin. But some people like Old Harry, just laugh at the Bible and refuse to heed God's Warning.

OUTLINE

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1. Spiritual signs

"There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents...having a form of godliness but denying its power." 2 *Timothy 3:1-2, 5*

2. Natural signs

3. Political signs

"In the days to come Jacob (Israel) will take root; Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the earth with fruit." *Isaiah 27:6*

"I will plant Israel in their own land, NEVER AGAIN TO BE UPROOTED from the land I have given them, "says the Lord your God." *Amos 9:15*

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"God means what he says. What he says goes. His powerful Word is as sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything. Nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it--no matter what." (Hebrews 4:12 *The Message*)

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes