

# ARE THESE THE LAST DAYS?

by Ray C. Stedman

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Surely no one alive is unaware of the apocalyptic character of the times in which we live. Everywhere there is a sense of impending disaster. The voices of the secular media, various Christian proclamations, etc., all are united in saying that something serious is ahead. Even young people, who do not have the experience of the past for reference, are nevertheless sensing a heavily clouded future. Perhaps this accounts for the rapid increase in teenage suicides. It may startle you to know that teenagers are now the dominant age group committing suicide today. They do not see any hope in the future.

Respected secular voices today reflect this growing despair. Eliot Jameway, an internationally known economist, recently said, "Humanly speaking, for the first time in my life I am afraid." Dr. Linus Pauling, the Nobel Prize winner, several years ago said, "The greatest catastrophe in the world will occur within 25 to 50 years." Dr. Margaret Mead, the late anthropologist, has asked the question, "Are we going to survive?" She said, "The major struggle of marriage is, who takes out the garbage? Does it matter who takes it out if we are not going to be here?" She asks again, "Are we going to be here? It is very doubtful. The whole world is in terrible danger. We could go tonight."

Malcolm Muggeridge, for years the editor of *Punch* magazine in Britain, and now a prominent Christian spokesman, has detailed several symptoms of a collapsing civilization, not only of this present hour, but of times in the past as well.

1. He says that one of the first signs of the approaching collapse is the breakdown of law and order since civilization consists of law and order.
2. Muggeridge lists a second symptom as the excessive interest in eroticism, that is, the rise of widespread immorality and the fascination with sexual themes. He sees this as a kind of an unconscious expression of the fear of impotence -- we are like children focusing upon our sexuality as some way of reassuring ourselves that our civilization has some stability and the capacity to perpetuate itself.
3. A third symptom he lists is the excessive need for excitement. In the days of the collapse of the Roman Empire, this was provided by the gladiatorial games held in the Coliseum. Today we get it from television, with its artificially-produced excitement, its violence, murder and sexuality.
4. Muggeridge sees a fourth symptom in the enormously complicated structure of taxation and administration. No one seems to be able to do anything to reduce the complexity of it. Taxation and government will keep mounting to the point where it will become insupportable, until the whole economy at last collapses under the weight of it.
5. Finally, a fifth symptom is excessive and pervasive boredom -- the sense of emptiness and meaninglessness. This, Muggeridge says, is the price of our materialism, the fact that we put so much emphasis on things. We are constantly barraged with appeals to buy this and buy that; if we only had this we would be happy, etc.

All these are signs of a collapsing civilization.

Muggeridge has gone even further. In a speech given right here at Stanford's Hoover Institute last summer, he delivered an almost prophetic foreview of the collapse of Western civilization. I would like to share these closing words of his message with you:

So the final conclusion would seem to be that whereas other civilizations had been brought down by attacks of

barbarians from without, ours had the unique distinction of training its own destroyers at its own educational institutions and providing them with facilities for propagating their destructive ideology far and wide, all at the public expense. Thus did Western man decide to abolish himself, creating his own boredom out of his own affluence, his own vulnerability out of his own strength, his own impotence out of his own erotomania; himself blowing the trumpet that brought the walls of his own city tumbling down. And having convinced himself that he was too numerous, labored with pill and scalpel and syringe to make himself fewer, until at last, having educated himself into imbecility and polluted and drugged himself into stupefaction, he keeled over, a weary, battered old brontosaurus, and became extinct.

Now we have to ask, what is the Christian reaction to that?

Do these secular doomsayers reflect the conditions that the Scriptures say will prevail in the world immediately before the return of Jesus Christ? Are these the last days?

It is easy to answer that question with a hasty, "Yes." It is easy to compile from the Scriptures a few dramatic descriptive passages that would make most of us say today, "This is it. We are facing those very conditions." But I am rendered cautious in doing that, first, because I know that historically this has been done scores if not hundreds of times in the past. You can read back through a few generations of Christian life and for the last three centuries, at least, there have been groups that were absolutely sure that their days were the last days. Some of them even set dates for the return of Christ. Other groups have been sure, as they observed the appearances of their own times, that these were the days before the return of the Lord. Yet we know that all of them were wrong. Therefore, it ought to be a caution to us, it ought to give us pause, before we do the same thing in our own times and immediately pronounce that we are in the last days.

Furthermore, I am made cautious by the fact that Scripture itself makes very clear that the last days began with the first coming of Jesus. There is a very strong sense in Scripture that for twenty centuries we have been living in the last days -- that these last days began with the coming of Christ. When Scripture uses the term, "the last days," it is not talking about the time immediately before Christ returns; it is speaking of the whole period of time in which the life of the church has been going on, some 2,000 years.

Let me show you some of the passages that reveal that. Sometimes Bible teachers are not very fair in their use of Scripture. They tend to pick up a few passages here and there and call these the last days. They ignore other passages that speak very clearly about what these last days truly are. In the opening words of the letter to the Hebrews, the writer begins in this way:

**In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. {Heb 1:1-2 RSV}**

There is the very phrase, "these last days." The writer says they began when Jesus appeared and spoke to men in his first coming, therefore the last days are still continuing. The writer sees them as going on until the ultimate end predicted in the Scripture; the whole period is known as "these last days."

Another well-known passage is found in the letter to the Romans. The Apostle Paul writing from Corinth, says in Chapter 13, Verse 11:

**Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; {Rom 13:11-12 RSV}**

It is clear from *that* that Paul speaks as though the end were almost upon the people of his day. "The night is far gone, the day is at hand. The hour has come," he says, "when our salvation, which we have been looking for, is almost upon us." Yet that was written in the 1st century. Twenty centuries of time have gone on since then.

In First Peter, Chapter 4, Verse 7, Peter puts it very bluntly:

**The end of all things is at hand. {1 Pet 4:7 RSV}**

Again, this was written to those in the 1st century. Now either we have to believe that the Bible is mistaken about this, or we have to understand that the Biblical phrase, "the last days," does not mean the immediate end before the return of Christ; it covers a longer period. In this sense, therefore, it is perfectly proper to answer our question this morning, "Yes, we definitely are in the last days," but we have been there for twenty centuries.

"But," somebody will say, "Scripture speaks of a coming period called 'the last days'." Most people refer to Second Timothy, Chapter 3, Verse 1, where the Apostle Paul, writing to Timothy toward the close of Paul's ministry, puts it this way:

**But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. {2 Tim 3:1-5a RSV}**

That sounds very much like the closing words of the first chapter of Romans, which speaks of a time of incredible inhumanity, when senseless violence will occur, when people will seemingly forsake all the normal strictures against injury to others and there will be crimes of incredible malice and evil.

As people read the reports in our newspapers of ugly and awful things that outrage the entire community, they say we must be in the last days. We were all outraged by the invasion of five armed men into an old people's home in San Francisco last week, at the rape of an old blind woman and pistol whipping of the helpless victims there in that home. The Mayor of San Francisco came on television with expressions of moral outrage at such a terrible thing. That incident sounds like this list, doesn't it?

People say that the Bible predicts that these will come before the end and now they are coming, so this must be the last days.

Now I urge you to read your Bible with care and caution in these areas. If "the last days" mean, as we have already seen, the full period of time between the coming of our Lord the first time and his second appearing on earth, then what Paul is referring to is not just one single period when these kind of conditions will prevail on earth, but a repeating cycle of periods that will come again and again and again in history. There will be cycles of revolutionary conditions ("times of stress," the apostle calls them), they will come again and again, and every time these occur it will look like we are approaching the days of the return of Christ.

You only have to be a student of history to know that history records many examples of these "times of stress." Every century seems to have had its outbreak of evil in this way. Periods of quietness, of relative prosperity and expansion have been followed by terrible times of unrest and collapse of all the institutions that were thought to be so stable in those times:

- The end of the Roman Empire in the 5th century was such a time, when barbarian hordes swarmed out of the northern countries of Europe down over the southern states, captured the city of Rome and sacked it. Everybody saw the collapse of all that appeared to be stable in their day. Those were "times of stress."
- Again, in the Crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries, when bands of knights gathered together from all over Europe and marched into the Holy Land, there were terrible times of attack and carnage. People were afraid for their very lives.
- Again in the 13th century, when the Mongol hordes swept out of Asia and came battering up against the capitals of Europe -- these were "times of stress."
- Again in the 15th century, the Turks assaulted the citadels of civilization in Europe; and

- o In the 16th century during the days of the Reformation, Europe was aflame from end to end.

These were "times of stress." What the apostle is simply saying is that in this whole period will come these repeated cycles of history when men will be facing times of danger and terrible outbreaks of evil, and every time it will look as though these are the last days before the Lord is coming back again.

What are we facing today? Well, undoubtedly we are facing another cycle of these "times of stress," heralding the overthrow of a civilization, but not necessarily the final days before the Lord returns. Now, it could be. Every one of these times of stress has been a time when Christ could have returned, from the outlook of those who lived in that day, but not necessarily so. These "times of stress" are related to the overthrow of civilizations, of established orders, the fulfillment of our Lord's words that he will, "rise and shake the earth terribly, and everything that can be shaken will be shaken," {cf, Heb 12:26-27}. These appear to be apocalyptic times in which we are facing the possibility of the end.

"Well," someone says, "what about signs like the return of the Jews to Israel. What about the amazing, scientifically documented increase in natural disasters such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc.? What about the possible imminent rebuilding of a temple in Jerusalem? What about these strange stories that are widely circulated these days of demonic manifestations, and of angelic manifestations -- the appearances of apparently angel messengers to various people from place to place -- as well? What about these?"

Well, let us take a look at some of these:

The return of the Jews to Israel is indeed a remarkable sign. It is necessary before the final days that Scripture predicts can be fulfilled. There must be a people again in the land. As a student at Dallas Seminary, I remember how excited everyone got in 1948 when once again there was a nation of Israel in the world, established in the land of Palestine. We all thought the return of Christ could not be more than a few years away because here was Israel back in the land. Well, that was in 1948, over 30 years ago, and still things are going on. Thirty years is not very long, but we can see that it certainly was not five years from the time of the return of Christ. There is not a word in Scripture of how long Israel will be back in the land before the Lord returns. The fact that something fulfills a predicted event does not in any way set up a calendar that says we are very very close to the return of the Lord. It does indicate a "time of stress," a cycle of distress, perhaps, reappearing in history, but it does not indicate that it is the last time. No one knows, and there is not a word or hint in Scripture of how long Israel will be back in the land. It may be hundreds of years before the Lord returns. Scripture does not say.

Natural disasters are specifically said by Jesus to be "but the beginnings of the birth pangs" of an approaching end. Again, there is no word, not a hint in Scripture of how long these things will last. In fact, Scripture seems to suggest that these kinds of conditions, these kinds of disasters will occur in repetitive cycles just like the "times of stress." In 79 A. D., when Vesuvius blew up and buried Pompeii in ashes, this was a very similar situation to what just happened in the state of Washington when Mt. St. Helens blew up, and buried a great part of the country in ash. There have been great earthquakes throughout all this period of history, some far more devastating than anything we have known in modern times. The great earthquakes in Lisbon in the last century and the one in Tokyo in the early part of this century were far more devastating than anything we have seen in San Francisco -- including the great earthquake of 1906. So to point to natural disasters as "signs of the times" is indicative that you do not understand much about prophetic Scripture. These are themselves nothing but the "beginning of sorrows" {Matt 24:8 KJV}, as Jesus himself pointed out, and are not indicative of the near approach of the end.

Take the demonic and angelic manifestations that many are recounting today. There is a rash of stories going around about people picking up hitchhikers who say something about "Jesus is coming soon," and as the driver continues the conversation the hitchhiker disappears, gone while the car is moving. I have heard probably 25 different versions of that story in the last few years. My oldest daughter had an experience along this very line a few weeks ago. But the question is, "What is the significance of this?" We have to recognize that there are times in history, recorded in the Scriptures, where there have been outbreaks of both demonic and angelic manifestations:

- At the time of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt angels appeared frequently to people.
- Again in the days of Elijah and Elisha there were both demonic and angelic manifestations.
- Again at the coming of Christ and during the apostolic period there are several recorded instances of the appearance of angelic beings.

This manifestation seems to fade and then come back again. Now what do we say about these?

Well, the only thing we can safely say is that they are manifestations of these cycles of stress that come into history repeatedly, but that there is no indication, necessarily, that these are declaring an imminent appearing of Jesus Christ returning to earth again. Now, no one will argue that we are certainly closer today to the return of Christ than we have ever been before, but I am saying that there is no certainty at all that the return of Jesus may not be centuries away. There is no sign, nothing that I know of today that indicates that he is at the door, that *that* time is imminent. All of this can settle down and go back again into what we call "normal life." Civilizations may collapse, what we have known as stable economies may be overthrown, violent changes may occur in society, but those in themselves do not herald the return of Jesus Christ. That is what I am saying.

Now let me add something. I believe from the Scriptures that the departure of the church to be with the Lord has always been an imminent possibility. It is an event that Scripture says will occur without warning. How can you get ready for an event that is going to occur without warning? You can *keep* ready, but there is nothing particularly you have to do to *get* ready. It is very much like our own personal death. None of us has a guarantee that he will be here tomorrow; at any time death could intervene for any of us here this morning. We live in that expectation, and it is a good expectation, a good reminder that we must not live for this world and for this life as though it were everything. We have no hold upon it, our grip may be loosened at any time, therefore these things must not be allowed to possess us. Neither is it something that we anticipate with such imminency that we fold our hands and wait for it. We are not to do that any more than we are to decide that since we have arrived at 20, 30, 40, 50 years of age, whatever, we are going to fold our hands and wait for death. We do not do that, and we should not do that about the return of the Lord either because that is an event without warning, invisible to the natural eye when, as Paul describes it:

**The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. (1 Th 4:16-17 {KJV})**

But that is an event that is suddenly launched upon humanity without warning, as Jesus himself made clear in the great Olivet Discourse. Now, there are some who say the church is not going to escape the great tribulation. I always feel sorry for those people. I can imagine looking back down on earth and seeing them still marching around with their little signs saying: HELL NO! WE WON'T GO! Even if they are right, even if our eschatology at this point is wrong, we are told that there is no action expected of God's people until they see the desolating sacrilege sitting in the temple, predicted by Daniel the prophet. Jesus himself said that *that* is the sign of the imminent end, of the return of Jesus Christ, when the Antichrist proclaims himself to be God in the temple in Jerusalem. How long that temple has to be there before that happens, no one knows until that time takes place. But Jesus said that when that happens, "Move! Get out of town. Don't wait. Don't even go down and take a coat. Move!" That is the moment for action. But until that occurs there is no word given to us to make any kind of preparation, physically, for the last days or for the return of Christ.

I would conclude, therefore, two things from this:

One is that it is actually harmful to the cause of Christ to get involved in some physical preparation for the last days, to go hiding rifles and food up in the hills with the anticipation that you are going to go up there when things get terrible. There is nothing like that in Scripture. No word is given to us to do that. To spend time reading the prophetic areas of Scripture and charting the events of it, trying to determine what follows this and

what follows that, when Christ is going to return and setting dates is all an utter waste of time. To go from meeting to meeting to keep your emotions stirred up with the expectation that the Lord is coming back almost any moment is harmful, because it takes our attention from what Scripture tells us we ought to be doing when we are facing one of these cycles of distress that could, admittedly, culminate in the return of Christ.

All right, we are in one of those times. What does the Scripture tell us to do? Well, let me detail it for you. It is found very plainly and clearly set out in Chapter 4 of First Peter. He says:

**The end of all things is at hand; therefore {1 Pet 4:7a RSV}**

**1. keep sane and sober {1 Pet 4:7b RSV}**

Do not go running off after some wild-haired movement that wants to run up in the hills and defend themselves against whatever is coming. "Keep sane and sober," Peter says.

I am impressed by the fact that when Jesus talks about the last days he begins and ends what he has to say with one word, "Watch," {Matt 24:42, 25:13}. "Watch out," is the idea, because these will be days of delusion days of confusion, days when people will be emphasizing the wrong things, when false escapes will be offered and false ways of living will be set forth and delusive ideas will be abroad. Peter says, "Watch. Take heed. Establish yourself in your faith again. Go back to the Scripture and find out where you are. Be careful. Keep sane and sober," he says, so that you will not be swept away by all the excited reactions that you will hear about in these last days, in these times of stress.

Then Peter says,

**2. Keep praying. {cf, 1 Pet 4:7c}**

The reason, of course, is because days of stress always create great possibilities, great opportunities, and prayer is a way of laying hold of those opportunities. Prayer is a way of calling all the artillery of heaven and bringing it to bear against some weak point in the devil's armor and breaking through at that point so that God reaps a great harvest, despite the terrible conditions that are around. Paul tells us in the letter to the Ephesians that evil days create great possibilities, therefore, "redeem the time," he says, buy it up. One way is to be alert, to be praying about the possibilities that open for us day after day, possibilities with individuals, with circumstances and with groups so that you might enter and break through some of the barriers that have shut us out from these groups in the past. Thus, keep praying, Peter says. Watch and be sober and sane and keep praying. And,

**3. Above all hold unflinching your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. {1 Pet 4:8-9 RSV}**

There is the manifestation of the "Body Life" of the church -- being open to help people who are in need. Be deliberately responsive to appeals that are made for help; practice hospitality widely and generously. That is why every week we publish a "Need Sheet" and a "Prayer Sheet" where some of the needs are made manifest among us in order that we might respond, because this is the way the Lord wants us to behave when we see that the times are close. And finally,

**4. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another. {1 Pet 4:10a RSV}**

In other words, get busy, use your gift. God has given each one of us gifts. For heaven's sake, use them; that is what he is saying. When times of stress come again and people are frightened and who knows what is going to happen, when the future looks uncertain, that is a good time for you to take knowledge of what gifts God has given you. Can you teach? Well then, start teaching. You do not have to wait for a Sunday School class. You can have one in your home. You can get a friend and meet in a car at lunch time and study the Bible together. But use your gifts. If you have the gift of encouragement, look around for people who are discouraged and start helping them and encouraging

them and strengthening them. If you have the gift of administrating, offer yourself to these struggling Christian groups who have a tremendous vision to help people but are falling all over each other trying to get it done because nobody is administrating it. Offer yourself. If you have a gift of wisdom, or knowledge, use it. If you have a gift of helps, put it to work. This is the way Peter says we are to act.

**Whoever speaks let him do so as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. {1 Pet 4:11a RSV}**

There is the activity for the "last days."

Do not waste your time running around from meeting to meeting, clapping your hands, and singing about the coming of the Lord. I do not have anything against that per se, but, if that is all you do, you are wasting time; you are not preparing for his coming.

These may or may not be the last days, who knows? But whatever they are, they are days of opportunity, days of possibility, days when God can be glorified. And if they culminate at last with the trumpet blast and the return of the Lord, what a satisfying thing it will be to know that you did not get all wound up with a lot of extraneous activity that goes nowhere, but you "occupied," as Jesus said until he came. That is what he tells us to do: "Occupy until I come," {cf, Luke 19:13 KJV}.

## Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the days in which we live. What exciting, what frightening days they are. How the heart quails sometimes with fear, looking at the things that are coming to pass on the earth. But oh! what reassurance is given to us that you are still in charge, that man does not determine his own destiny nor set his own schedule, that you are working out the events of earth according to your own program and nothing can stay your hand. Thank you for letting us live in these days. Help us keep sane and sober and not wrapped up in all kinds of excitement that is unwarranted and unworthy, but keep us laboring in the fullness and power of the Spirit to accomplish what you want done in these days. We pray and thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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