

## Second Coming: The Folly of Predictions

Last week we had the first of two sermons in response to a request about the millennial fever which is afflicting millions of people as we approach the year 2000. I mentioned a group of fundamentalist Christians already ensconced in Jerusalem to await the Second Coming of Christ, a belief based on the early church's conviction that the One who had left them would make a dramatic and literal return in their own lifetimes. These 1st century Christians were mistaken, as were those who in all sincerity made the promise to them. I would like to present the evidence for that statement so you can judge its accuracy for yourselves.

We begin with what Jesus himself is represented to have said when his disciples came to him in private with a question. "Tell us," they said, "what will happen to show that it is the time for your coming and the end of the age." His response shows that he shared the hopes of his people that God was on the verge of intervening to bring human history to a close. So after he describes the grim troubles they will experience, he says: "The time is near." "Near" is a relative term, of course, so just in case they aren't sure how near is "near," he narrows it down to their own lifetime. "Remember," he says, "that all these things will happen before the people now living have all died."

It's important for this statement to register, so please think about it for a moment. Using the apocalyptic imagery familiar to Jewish people, Jesus describes the dramatic coming of the Son of Man, with the sun and

moon going dark and stars falling from heaven, with a great trumpet blowing and angels who will go to the four corners of the earth to gather up the faithful. And then he says, “All these things will happen before the people now living have all died.” If you had been there that day, could you have understood that to mean anything other than that you — or at least some of your friends — would still be alive when the Endtime came?

But perhaps lest those with him should become obsessed with knowing the exact moment, he goes on to say: “No one knows, however, when that day and hour will come” — and he includes himself as one who could not pinpoint the day and hour. But in general terms he has already said confidently that it would happen while some of his generation were still alive. Not 200 years later, not 2000 years later, but while some people standing in front of him were still alive. It should be obvious to any unbiased person reading this 24th chapter of *Matthew* that things did not turn out quite the way he expected. But it’s terribly difficult for many people to admit this, because for them it is inconceivable that Jesus could have been mistaken....about anything. They think of him not as a real person, caught up in certain ways in the culture of his own people, but as a kind of alien visitor with supernatural foresight, a charming extra-terrestrial temporarily away from home. And they think this despite Luke’s (2:52) comment that as Jesus grew up he increased in wisdom (do you hear the significant word?— he “increased” in wisdom — he grew, not just in body but in mind. If words mean anything, that has to mean Luke is describing someone whose growth was like ours: we get bigger, and we get

smarter. So did Jesus at 12 or 25 reach a point where he knew everything and stopped growing? Not if he really was one of us. Yes, he knew the things in early manhood that please God and make life worthwhile, but he did not know everything....and he admitted it.

So we should not be surprised to learn that he was mistaken about his people's hopes for the end of the ages. No more than we should be surprised to find out that the Apostle Paul and other New Testament writers were also mistaken about when that would happen. And they were mistaken — as any careful and honest reading of what they say makes abundantly clear. Let's take a look at the evidence. Paul's converts in the young church at Thessalonica believed Jesus would return in their lifetime, but as some of their friends and relatives died they began to fret over what happens to those who die before that Second Coming. So in what is taken to be Paul's earliest letter, he includes himself among those who will still be alive when this happens, and he assures his worried friends that their deceased loved ones will not be left behind. Listen to his words:

“We who are alive on the day the Lord comes will not go ahead of those who have died. There will be the shout of command, the archangel's voice, the sound of God's trumpet, and the Lord himself will come down from heaven. Those who have died believing in Christ will rise first; then we who are living at that time will be gathered up along with them into the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” [1 Thess. 4:13-18] Paul was a first century Palestinian: the other side of the world did not exist for him. Australia and the Americas were hidden in

the mists of the future. His people had a whole hierarchy of angels, from lesser ones to archangels. Heaven was “up” in his simple 3-tiered world — the only world his readers knew. If you had read that letter soon after it was written, is there any question about how you would have understood it? It would have assured you of two things: first, that Jesus would be returning so soon that Paul can even include himself among those who will still be alive to give him a welcome, and, second, that there is no need to worry if your favorite Uncle Bill should die this week or next because he will not be left out of the great event.

Well, Paul died without this having happened, and one by one the Thessalonian Christians died without its having happened, and centuries have passed with no such Second Coming — so what can we conclude except that Paul was mistaken about some things? After all, he, too, was a child of his times and adapted the religious concepts of his people to his own understanding of Christianity. So when he writes his first letter to the Thessalonian church he believes firmly that both he and some of them will survive until the Second Coming. He preaches the same message to other churches, telling the congregation at Rome that “the day is at hand” — not centuries down the line, but close — and he tells the congregation at Corinth that those who are single should not bother to marry because “the appointed time has grown very short [and] the form of this world is passing away.” If Jack loves Jill, let them wait — the time is too short to be concerned about marriage. He

assures these Corinthian believers, as he had the Thessalonians, that he and they were the ones “upon whom the end of the ages has come.” [Rom.13, 1 Cor.7] This is not language which it is hard to understand.

It is obvious in reading the New Testament that this conviction of the End coming in their own lifetimes sustained the early church in times of insult and persecution. All their troubles will soon be over. The Lord is coming right away. And they have that promise not only from the reported words of Jesus and the letters written to them by Paul, but from others whose letters became part of Christian literature. So *1st John* (2:18) says, “Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour.” Not a millennium away, or two millenniums away, but close enough to say we are in the “last hour.” *James* (5:8-9) urges the recipients of his letter to “be patient” and “establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.” In the book of *Revelation* (22:20) Jesus is represented by the writer as saying, “Surely, I am coming soon,” and the *First Epistle of Peter* offers the same comfort: “The end of all things is at hand.” [1 Peter 4:7] Now, with 20 centuries gone by and no Second Coming, modern prophets have been forced to stretch out phrases like “at hand” and “soon” to cover all those vanished centuries of time, but that distorts the text and it makes the original authors guilty of either ignorance or deception. Nothing could have been more cruel than for them to make such promises if they knew all the

time that long after their readers had been dust for ages, Jesus still would not have come. But they were not deliberately deceptive; they were completely convinced that he would come in their own lifetime.

But as years went by, and nothing happened, early Christians began to find this phase of their tradition troublesome. Their pagan neighbors and devout Jewish friends were ridiculing their hopes and pointing out that things were still going on just as they always had. If their Christ was going to come “soon,” what was he waiting for? So the late epistle known as *2nd Peter* begins to back away from phrases like “at hand” and “coming soon” and offers a more flexible concept, a way out of their dilemma. You can feel the time table being changed to help believers explain the delay and remove their growing scepticism. He says, “Do not forget one thing, my friends! There is no difference in the Lord’s sight between one day and a thousand years.” [2 Pet.3:3-13, TEV] So, presumably, “soon” could now mean a thousand years from now! This is really quite different from the conviction of Jesus and Paul that the end would come in their own generation, but (says the author) this will only give you more time to get your lives in order — a kind of comfort which strikes many who read it as a rationalization. It is, by the way, a rationale prophets have used ever since after setting a date and having it pass with nothing happening.

And as you know, the date-setting has continued in every century since. Many churches keep up a high level of excitement by telling their members that the end of the world is just around the corner. It’s a great

technique for boosting attendance (no one wants to be a lukewarm Christian if the End is near), and it helps with fundraising (no one wants to be stingy just before the Judgment Day). It has also swollen the bank accounts of more than a few doomsday prophets. During the 80's, the best-selling non-fiction author in the English-speaking world was a man named Hal Lindsey, who has sold millions of books with titles like *The Late Great Planet Earth*, *Countdown to Armageddon*, and *There's a New World Coming*. He would set a date, thousands would believe him, the deadline would pass, he would set another date — and always there would be followers ready to fall in step again.

It really doesn't seem to matter how many hundreds of times the prophecies turn out to be wrong; there is always a steady market for anyone willing to tinker with esoteric Bible prophecies and set a date with a straight face. I told some of you ten years ago how one of my most poignant boyhood memories is of a little stone church near my house where from time to time the preacher would persuade his small flock to meet every single night until the Lord came back. I would ride by on my bike, notice the stooped and weary mothers and fathers coming after a long day's work to sit in the church from 8 to 11 night after night for weeks at a time, and I would feel a deep sadness over their misplaced trust. I had begun to read some Christian history and I wondered if they knew that in every single decade for nearly 2000 years somebody had confidently predicted the imminent arrival of the Lord.

There is not enough time to mention the incredible hysteria that overcame thousands of people as the year 1000 approached and Second Coming fever went off the chart, but from the repeated date-setting that followed I have one favorite quotation closer to our own times. In a 19th century book called *Father and Son*, William Gosse (the son of the title) tells how his father, a determined fundamentalist in religion, handled the doctrine of the Second Coming. "My father....awaited, with anxious hope, 'the coming of the Lord,' an event which he still frequently believed to be imminent. He would calculate, by reference to prophecies in the Old and New Testament, the exact date of this event; the date would pass, without the expected event, and he would be more than disappointed, he would be incensed. Then he would understand that he must have made some slight error in calculation, and the pleasure of anticipation would recommence."

In our own country, in the 1840's, a man named William Miller led a band of followers to upstate New York to wait for the Second Coming, and although nothing happened two American denominations were born from that miscalculation: the 7th Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses. From time to time, in my own lifetime, I would toss newspaper stories into my Second Coming folder. Here is a quick sampling:

In 1956 a great many people in Rome became convinced the world was going to end at midnight on a certain Monday. The Vatican felt constrained to issue a statement saying "there is nothing to warrant the present panic." In 1973 a group holed up in a small house in Grannis, Arkansas for months while awaiting the

Second Coming. It didn't happen, and they disappeared from the news. *Time* magazine featured Second Coming prophecies in 1977, '78 and '79. And in 1980, when I decided there was no point in collecting any more of these rather sad stories, an evangelist named Willie Day Smith declared over some 30 radio stations that the Lord would arrive on the following Tuesday. That Tuesday, as it turned out, was April the 1st, but the humor of that fact did not occur to Willie. I heard no more about him, but I would guess that like other prophets he simply reset the date.

What I witnessed 50 years ago in the small neighborhood church I once used to ride past on my bicycle has since gone high-tech with a vengeance, getting more strident and glitzy as we came ever closer to the year 2000. It's no longer some poorly-educated lay preacher with 15 or 20 families waiting seven nights a week for a final trumpet to sound, but empire-builders like Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Jack Van Impe, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell — to name just a few. (Jerry, by the way, has said the Y2K computer dating problem may be an act of God to create mayhem around the world and ignite a huge revival before the Second Coming. According to the *Washington Post*, his \$28 videotape about doomsday says he plans to hoard food, sugar, gasoline — and ammunition. In a curious comment for a preacher he explains that last item by saying that since he would be blessed with food and his family would be with him inside the house, "I've got to be sure I can persuade others not to mess with us." I suppose you could call it "friendly persuasion."

The guessing game never ends, although it does heat up tremendously when years like 1000 and 2000 come close. As I mentioned last week, the book of *Revelation* is ransacked for numbers and symbols that can be connected with current events, given prophets of sufficient ingenuity. We can't know how 1st century Christians decoded all those bizarre symbols, but modern interpretations would have had no meaning for them. For example, the falling stars of Chapter 6 recently became orbiting nuclear missiles re-entering the atmosphere; the giant locusts of Chapter 9 have become helicopter gunships; and the number of the beast in Chapter 13 — that infamous 666 — was recently said to refer to a computer in Brussels that was issuing identity numbers divided into three groups of six digits each. Or, as one religious looney explained the number a few years ago, it was fulfilled in the person of a famous man whose three names all have six letters: Ronald Wilson Reagan. One has to pity those early Christians who thought the writings were meant for them.

So it has been, through the long centuries since Jesus went away, and so it will be for as long as people enjoy making predictions and setting dates, much of it based on bizarre imagery and number symbolism so obscure they can be made to mean anything one wants them to mean. It would be good if they remembered the words of Jesus when his own disciples became too curious about dates: “It is not for you to know the times or seasons,” but that warning has always been ignored, and it always will be. Next week, next month, someone will arrange a brand new set of interpretations to prove that the end of time is at last upon us. Each of you is

free to interpret what you read as your heart and mind dictate, but it is appropriate to say this: the next time you hear a time-setting prophet, remember the long, long past and the strewn wreckage of a thousand mistaken predictions — and resolve to better use your energies by working for a better world.....here, now, and tomorrow.

Help us know, Eternal God, that the “kingdom of heaven” is a

condition of the heart, that we make it come on earth when we

treat one another with love and mercy, and that Jesus “returns”

every time we demonstrate His spirit to those we meet each

day. Amen.