

False Teaching About the Last Days

by John R. Rice

John R. Rice addresses the misconceptions surrounding the imminent return of Christ and encourages Christians to remain active in evangelism despite challenging conditions.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Jeremiah 23:29, Matthew 24:29-42, Mark 13:32, John 14:12, Acts 1:5, Acts 1:7

Topics: "Eschatology", "Evangelism"

Description

John R. Rice addresses the prevalent belief in the imminent return of Jesus, fueled by various signs and events like the atomic bomb, rise of Russia, and the establishment of Israel, leading to a sense of urgency and defeatism among Christians. He refutes the idea that specific events must occur before Christ's return, emphasizing the imminency of His coming as taught in the Bible. Rice highlights the importance of focusing on soul-winning and revival efforts regardless of current world conditions or misinterpretations of Scriptures, urging believers to trust in God's power and promises for salvation and revival.

Transcript

Thousands of tracts, magazine articles, sermons and radio messages tell the people, "Jesus is coming soon!" "These last days of this dispensation" and similar phrases are very common in the Christian magazines. "Time is running out!" writes one Christian, who means that in a very short time Jesus is certain to come. "The last great mission opportunity before Jesus comes" is the way one mission field is described. A widely-known seminary professor on the west coast is quoted as saying recently, "I believe we are seeing the very closing days of this dispensation."

Some Christian writers regard the atomic bomb, the rise of Russia, the founding of the new Israel state, the last world war (as they regarded the first world war), as evidence that we are in the very last days before Jesus comes.

All these people, usually faithful Bible believers, earnest Christians, have been influenced and misled by a heresy that has become widespread in recent years. This mistaken teaching holds that we are now, according to what are regarded as definite signs, in the very last few weeks or months or years before Jesus must come; that this period which they call "the last days" is more difficult than ever. They believe that sinners are harder hearted, that Satan deceives people more than ever, that world conditions make it harder to reach people with the gospel, and that for all these reasons great revivals are less likely than ever, if not impossible.

A noble and greatly-used man of God says about the blessed Billy Graham revival in Los Angeles late in 1949: "For these three thousand we are profoundly grateful to God, and our confidence in the power of mass evangelism to sweep folks into the kingdom of God has been restored."

Our brother agrees that the day of mass evangelism has not passed, though it took the Los Angeles revival to prove it. But it is noteworthy that many other people like this noble brother had been led to feel that mass evangelism had been outdated, no longer able "to sweep folks into the kingdom of God." We thank God that his confidence in this matter has been restored, but we need to face the false teaching, so prevalent, which has undermined the confidence of the people that great revivals and mass evangelism are possible today.

Again and again godly men have asked me how the work in the revival field goes. "Isn't it getting harder to have revivals?" they ask. And they are astonished when I tell them that it is not. And many others who are defeated lament that they cannot get the publicity that evangelists could once get, that local conditions like the competition of movies and radio and sports and the grip of modernists on the churches is unfavorable to revivals. And in the case of literally thousands of preachers these thoughts are connected with the teaching they have absorbed that the Lord Jesus is certain to return soon, and that in the immediate period before His return we will be unable to have great revivals.

"The great apostasy is on," people say, and they mean that they think the modernism of today proves that the end of gospel opportunity is about at hand, forgetting that great waves of infidelity have come to the world and even to the church down through many centuries, as it was in England before the Wesleyan revivals, as it came in France before that, as it came even in the early church in the first centuries of the Christian era.

The defeatism of Christians, who are not bold in preaching nor bold in prayer because they believe that Christian work is less effective than ever before, that the gospel does not bring the results that it did before, and that great revivals are less likely than ever before, is tragic indeed. And it is especially sad to see this defeatism springing up because of misinterpretation of Scriptures by Christians who really believe the Bible and love Jesus Christ.

This ultradispensational teaching that Jesus is certain to come soon, that certain signs prove the age is rushing to an early end, that the apostasy, world conditions and increased activity of Satan make gospel efforts less fruitful and revivals more difficult and unlikely, is a distressing perversion of a great truth. It is true that Jesus may come at any moment, but the ultradispensationalists do not preach the emphasis that Jesus urged, "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh" (Matt. 25:13), and the Bible doctrine often stated and inferred that Jesus might have returned any time since Pentecost and may return now at any time. Instead, they emphasize world conditions and so-called signs, and spend their time in study of the technical details of prophecy and speculation rather than on the soul-winning work which Jesus clearly told us to be about until He should return.

Jesus would have us to watch for His coming simply because He commanded us to watch. However, the custom has grown up among a lot of premillennial Christians of looking for Christ's return because we have had the first or the second world war, or of looking for Christ's return because Zionists and infidel Jews have established the modern nation Israel in Palestine. Some are moved more by newspaper accounts than by the plain command of the Lord Jesus.

And earnest Christians ought to recognize that this ultradispensational outlook is largely a retreat from alarming conditions which Christians are not willing to face and for which they think the gospel is not sufficient. Too many Christians see the wickedness of the human heart, as expressed in Hitler's murderous career and in the far worse wickedness of communism, and their faith wavers. Instead of an attitude of aggressive evangelism with the gospel which is really the dynamite of God, sufficient for any generation, they declare that such a generation as this is too hard for God, that Satan is too active, that the apostasy is too great and conditions too unfavorable for a revival.

Let us face this defeatism for what it is. Let us recognize the lack of faith, the powerlessness for the retreat of Christians from the battle which seems hard.

Indeed, some Christians rationalize the situation and subconsciously evade the facts of their powerlessness and unbelief with the doctrine that we are in the last days, and it is impossible to win souls in any great numbers. That is bad enough, but many such Christians are actually not much concerned about soul-winning and would much rather examine the Scriptures with a kind of morbid curiosity, hoping to be thought wise, when really they shed no tears for souls and never wait before God pleading for revival or His mighty pentecostal power.

Learned men say to the people, "Let us gather around the Word," and then they examine the Word of God as if it were a museum piece. It is as if, in a museum; soldiers gather around a sword, talk with interest of its history, how it was made, who wielded it, and tell what exploits were wrought with it in the past, yet never take this same sword to battle. So do many "Bible teachers" and "Bible students" use the Word of God. The Bible is not simply to be the object of dispassionate, technical interest and investigation. It is not a museum curiosity! It is the sword of the Spirit which ought to be used to cut sinners to the heart. It contains the gospel, the dynamite of God which is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth. "Is not my word like as a fire? . . . and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:29), the Lord asks. So all the searching of the Bible and the searching of the daily newspapers to find some "signs" that prove Christ will come within a certain specified time is contrary to the spirit of the Scriptures and does dishonor to the Lord Jesus Christ who left us here simply to get the gospel to every creature.

1. The Bible Doctrine That Christ's Return Is Imminent Cannot Be Reconciled With the Teaching That He Could Only Return After Modern Events

There are two theories about the premillennial coming of Christ which are contradictory. Both of them cannot be true.

One theory is that Jesus will not come until certain signs have appeared. Some think Jesus cannot come until the gospel is preached again to all the world. Some think Jesus could not come until what they call "the budding of the fig tree," the re-establishment of the nation Israel as it has recently been reestablished in Palestine. Others think that Jesus could not return until the so-called "great apostasy," the wave of modernism in the church which has occurred in America in the last fifty years and is now possibly past its climax. Many would say that the first and second world wars are signs of the soon coming of Christ. If that be true, then Jesus could not have come before these wars. Others believe that certain earthquakes, that famine following the wars, that the present capital-labor controversy encouraged by socialists and communists everywhere are signs of Christ's coming, and that therefore Christ could not have come before these clashes occurred and communism and socialism reached their present popularity. I want you

to see that this first and popular theory I am discussing is simply that Jesus was to come only after certain definite signs should appear.

The other and contradictory theory is that Jesus might have returned any time after Pentecost. No one knew when He would return, so it would have been possible for Him to have returned before the first or second world wars, before the evolution theory became widely prominent and the present great rage of modernism developed. He might have come before the modern missionary movement. Or he may come now at any moment. This theory, or doctrine, we will call it, is the doctrine of the imminency of Christ's return. But note carefully that this doctrine of the imminency of Christ's return contradicts the doctrine that Jesus could not come until a certain set time in a program and that He must come after a number of specified signs are fulfilled. The teaching that Christ must come at a set time or in a particular generation and only after a certain program of signs is fulfilled is entirely different from the doctrine of the imminent coming of Christ. And the imminent coming of Christ is clearly taught in the Scriptures.

I beg your patience as I state it again. It is important for us to see that one cannot hold to the imminency of Christ's return, that is, that He may come at any moment, that He might have come at any time since Pentecost as far as any one then could know, and that Christians, all through the ages, were right to expect Christ to come at any moment, and to watch for His coming, and to believe at the same time that certain signs must come first. That doctrine that Christ's coming is imminent, the time of His coming unknown and unknowable, is clearly taught in the Bible. But one cannot hold to the imminency of Christ's return, and at the same time believe that there had to be a first world war before Christ could return, or that Christ could not return before the nation Israel was established in Palestine; or that Christ could not return before the present wave of modernism and worldliness. Every reader may take his choice; he can believe in Christ's imminent return, as taught in the Scriptures, or he can believe that Christ's coming had to await certain events. The two doctrines are irreconcilable. They cannot be harmonized. The intelligent Bible believer cannot hold to both positions. And the Bible certainly clearly teaches the imminent return of Christ, that is, that Christ may return at any moment.

That being true, it will naturally be impossible for anybody to tell when we are in the last days of this dispensation. That being true, there can be no signs which definitely show the approach of the return of Christ. If Christ had to wait until certain signs appear before He can return, then His return is not imminent. On the other hand, if Paul was right to expect the Lord's return in his day, as he did, speaking of "we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord" (I Thess. 4:15), then all are wrong who think that Christ's coming is now indicated by the first and second world war, the great falling away of these days, the founding of the nation Israel in Palestine recently, etc. Either Christ might have come at any moment, as He taught, or He could not return until certain other events occurred. Both cannot be true. If Christ cannot now return until the gospel is preached to some tribes in the Amazon valley, then the imminent coming of Christ could not be true.

But, let me say again, the imminency of Christ's coming is clearly taught in the Bible. To the disciples on Mount Olivet and to all succeeding generations of Christians, Jesus commanded, "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come" (Matt. 24:42). Again He said to them and to us, "Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh" (vs. 44). Again He said to these disciples, and to all Christians who come after them, "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh" (Matt. 25:13). Then He told them, "And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch" (Mark 13:37). If these Scriptures are to be taken at honest face value, then all Christians, including those first disciples and including Christians of all ages, have been commanded to watch for

Christ's return, since He might come at any moment.

Christ's second coming, then, does not now wait, and never did wait, on any world events.

II. No One Knows Even Approximately When Jesus Will Come

In the Olivet discourse the Saviour discusses the second coming. The clearest point in all His teaching on the second coming is that no one knows when it will be. Consider Mark 13:32-37:

"But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father. Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is. For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cock crowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch."

Now observe the clear teaching of the Saviour that no man can know the time.

1. The angels do not know when Jesus will come.
2. The Lord Jesus Himself while on earth did not know when He would return.
3. Jesus said His second coming was so wholly unpredictable that it was illustrated by the servants waiting for their master's return. The master might come in the evening, midnight, cock-crowing or in the morning. In this world no one can foretell even approximately when Jesus will return and when this age will end. If the more than nineteen hundred years which have already elapsed since Christ promised to return be divided up into four watches or periods to represent evening, midnight, cock-crowing and morning, we find that Jesus is saying that no one can know even within centuries of the time of His return.
4. The all-important teaching of Jesus about His return is that He may come at any moment. His coming is imminent.

Jesus may not come for one hundred years, for five hundred years, for one thousand years. People often say, "Jesus is coming soon." That cannot be proven by Scripture. It is not what Jesus said. Jesus said, "Behold, I come quickly" (Rev. 22:7). We know Jesus will come suddenly. Whether He will come soon or late, we do not know. Whether He will come at evening or at midnight or at cock-crowing or in the morning, we do not know. Jesus said plainly that we are not to know. We are simply to wait. We are to expect His coming, to be ready for His coming and to be doing His blessed will in carrying the gospel to every creature but we do not know even the approximate time of His coming, nor of the end of this age.

This same strong teaching is given in Matthew 24:36-39. Again we have the clear statement of Jesus that no one can know even the approximate time of His coming. Read it carefully:

"But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only. But as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. 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, And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be."

Again Jesus plainly says that no man can know the day or hour of His return. He repeats that even the angels in Heaven do not know the time, and then He illustrates the total lack of information which any man can have about the time of the second coming. As it was in the days before the flood when people ate, drank, married, and gave in marriage and had no hint of the time when the flood would come until "the flood came and took them all away," just so surprising and unforeseen will be Christ's second coming. Before the flood they did not know even one day ahead of time when it would come. So from the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, we properly infer that we cannot know even one day ahead of time when Jesus will come.

Again this question of Christ's return and the restoration of the kingdom to Israel was brought up by the disciples after Christ's resurrection. Read the discussion in Acts 1:5-7:

"For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence. When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power."

Jesus had told the disciples to tarry and wait there until they were endued with power from on high. They were to be baptized with the Holy Ghost and so supernaturally empowered for soul-winning.

Do you ever find Christians more concerned about the technical details of prophecy, more concerned about speculation as to the time of Christ's return than about soul-winning? Well, the twelve apostles before they were Spirit-filled had the same carnal viewpoint. Instead of rejoicing that they were to be filled with the Spirit for soul-winning, they immediately jumped to the hopeful conclusion that Christ referred to His return, the restoration of David's throne and the future independence of Israel. So they said, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel." Then Jesus in strong and emphatic language told the disciples that the time and season of His glorious return and the restoration of Israel were not within their province at all, not matters for them to know. He said:

"It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." Acts 1:7, 8.

It is well to remember that the carnal mind seizes on externals rather than spiritual internals. The carnal nature is more concerned with incidentals than fundamentals. Men would rather be baptized than born again. Men would rather talk in tongues than have the mighty soul-winning power of the Holy Spirit. Just so, modern speculating, ultradispensationalists prefer to look for signs rather than to obey the Great Commission and to win souls.

Let us clearly understand what Jesus taught. He said, "It is not for us to know the times or seasons" concerning the second coming. Not the day, nor the hour, not the year, not the era of the second coming can be foreseen. Jesus expressly said that the Father deliberately kept this secret and it is not one that Christians should seek to know.

III. Date-Setting, Speculation, an Embarrassing Heresy

How it appeals to foolish human pride for a man to think, "In my superior wisdom I have figured out something others do not know!" And particularly, Bible teachers like to show their superior understanding

of the Scriptures and the times, because, first if 'the discovery' is sensational and will help get a crowd of excited hearers and second, if it will be a good alibi for man's powerlessness and fruitlessness in soul-winning. Men try to make the headlines by predicting when the next war will begin and when the next depression will be upon us. One can arouse more excitement and attract more attention if he can give plausible evidence that he has discovered approximately when the Saviour will return. That indicates that such a Bible teacher is more spiritual and more discerning and more everything that a proud carnal heart desires to appear to be! It is not surprising therefore that we have constantly recurring efforts to set the approximate date of the Lord's return.

For example, more than a century ago a farmer in New York state, named Miller, started to read his Bible and discovered, he thought, what the scholars had overlooked. By making a day mean a year (which it never does) he took some of the prophecies of Daniel from out of their setting and figured that Jesus must return on a certain day in 1846. He convinced many of his neighbors that he was right and these Millerites made them white robes and got ready for the rapture; but they waited in vain on hilltops and haystacks for the Saviour to catch them away.

One day last summer I sat at dinner with Dr. Lowe, a professor of Biblical Interpretation at the Practical Bible Training School, Johnson City, New York. He told me that his people lived in the community of Farmer Miller and many of them had been convinced that Jesus was coming on the day announced by Miller. One uncle planted no crops. Why should he when he wouldn't be there to gather them? He showed his faith by sitting on his front porch while others toiled. But Jesus did not come and that winter thirteen of his cows starved while he and his family barely lived on the milk from one cow and from corn meal given by a neighbor.

Seventh-Day Adventists are the spiritual descendants of the Millerites, and many of them still try to figure the time of the Lord's return by misinterpretation of Daniel's prophecy.

How foolish to think that the secret of the date of Christ's return is given in the book of Daniel and that Jesus and none of His disciples knew it!

The British-Israel cult could not find the date of Christ's return in the Bible so they turned instead to the Great Pyramid and they count it an inspired revelation like the Bible. In the ascending passage leading to the tombs of the kings in the pyramid they figured that one larger portion with a higher ceiling would represent the time of Christ's return; so they took a tape measure from the supposed original edge of the pyramid through the passage to the enlargement. They counted every inch a year and so began to foretell when Jesus would come!

One greatly-heralded British-Israel teacher in Los Angeles predicted that Jesus would come September 16, 1936, as I recall. Needless to say, his prophecy was proved wrong and his influence was broken. Date-setting for the return of the Saviour has always been a heresy which turns out with embarrassment.

In my boyhood I saw in the old opera house at Gainesville, Texas, a picture prepared under the direction of "Pastor Russell" of the "Millennial Dawn" cult. He predicted, "Millions now living will never die," and his books agreed that Jesus would come in 1914. When 1914 brought not the return of the Saviour but the First World War, Pastor Russell said Jesus came invisibly. The Russellites, later called Rutherfordites, now called Jehovah's Witnesses, still teach this heresy. But they still die!

Since speculation as to the date of the return of Christ has proved so foolish in the past and always is connected with heresy, it seems that Bible-believing Christians would take seriously the word of Jesus, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power" (Acts 1:7).

Such speculations are carnal, not spiritual, and grow out of human pride and from misinterpretation of the Bible. No one knows even approximately when Jesus will return. No one knows the day, the year, the generation when Jesus will return. He may come today. Praise His name, I would be glad to see Him; but there is no way for any honest Bible student to foretell whether Jesus will come soon or after hundreds of years.

IV. There Are No "Signs" of Christ's Coming by Which We May Know It Is Near

In my early ministry I sometimes preached on "Signs of Christ's Second Coming." I have a chapter on that subject in my book, *The Coming Kingdom of Christ*. In a second edition I was compelled to modify the chapter. I was compelled to see that the next thing on God's program, as far as Bible prophecy is concerned, is Christ's coming in the air to receive His saints when the Christian dead shall be raised and living saints changed and called up to meet Him in the air. That event is imminent; that means it may occur at any time. If Christ may come at any moment, then obviously we need not wait for any signs. And any signs could not make Christ's coming other than imminent, could not prove He would come this year or day and could not prove He would not come this year or day. The Bible teaching is that Jesus may come at any moment, signs or no signs. He could have come even in apostolic days before any recent events could have occurred.

But did not Jesus speak about signs of His coming? Jesus spoke particularly of one sign but that was not a sign of the first phase of His coming and the rapture but a sign which will occur after the rapture, at the close of the tribulation period, before Christ comes visibly, triumphantly, to the earth to reign.

This sign is mentioned in the Olivet discourse of Jesus. In Matthew 24:3 we have the disciples' question, "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?"

You see, the disciples asked, "What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" Or better translated, "What is the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the age?" In Luke 21:25-27 Jesus answered as follows about signs:

"And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

It is similar to the passage in Matthew 24:29,30 where Jesus mentioned the sign in these words:

"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: 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."

Note the following facts about Jesus' answer.

1. The sign is to be "immediately after the tribulation.;" I understand from the Scriptures that the tribulation cannot begin till after the rapture, so Jesus must come into the air to receive His saints before the Great Tribulation. "The sign" is after Christ's coming for His saints, not before.

2. We see that Christ's coming referred to by the prophets was His coming to the earth to reign after the rapture. Jews would naturally look forward to the part of Christ's coming that will affect them, when Jews will be regathered from all the earth, when the "angels...shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matt. 24:31), when Christ will destroy all the enemies of the Jews and overthrow all Gentile dominion and restore David's throne in Jerusalem and sit on David's throne. It is this kingdom that the apostles asked about in Acts 1:6: "Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" Gentile Christians are naturally more concerned about the rapture, the first phase of Christ's coming. But Old Testament prophecies in the interest of Jews center mainly in the second phase of Christ's coming, His revelation to Israel.

After the world is in the Great Tribulation time it will be very simple for those who know the Bible to learn when Jesus will return. There must be seven years in Daniel's seventieth week. The Great Tribulation time itself is clearly announced to continue 3 1/2 years, 42 months, 1,260 days. (Dan. 7:25; Rev. 11:2, 3; Rev.12:14.) The terrifying reign of the Man of Sin is definitely limited. After the first phase of Christ's second coming, the rapture, the second phase must come within a specified time. And just before Jesus returns to the earth with saints and angels to fight the Battle of Armageddon and set up His kingdom, the sign of His coming will appear in the heavens.

There is no sign of Christ's coming promised before the rapture.

No preacher has a Scriptural warrant, I think, for preaching that current events are signs of Christ's soon return. Mussolini was not the Antichrist, as some Bible teachers said, and they will be as foolish if they so designate Stalin or Tito.

We are not to believe Christ is coming because of some "signs" but because He said so!

V. Christ's Coming for His Saints Does Not Await the Preaching of the Gospel to Every Creature

A great missionary leader, a friend whom I greatly admire and love, has recently published a book in which he pictures an imaginary scene. Satan is pictured as in counsel with the princes of darkness, the leading demons who supervise his work in various countries. Some demons report proudly that the gospel is not being preached in the countries over which they bear evil sway, and all gloat that Christ cannot now return until these people hear the gospel. Missionaries shot down or discouraged before they can enter Afghanistan, and the failure of missionary groups to reach other isolated tribes, is cited. And then Satan himself and his demons are pictured as being greatly distressed and defeated because at last there is prospect of the gospel being preached to every creature. Now, though they have defeated Christ's planned return so long, it appears that the gospel will be preached to every creature and the Saviour will return.

It is here taught that Jesus cannot return to take away His saints until the gospel is again preached to all the world. But I believe that this is an entirely wrong interpretation of Scripture. The gospel has already been preached to all the world in early Christian times, if not in this generation. And if Jesus could not return until the gospel is preached to every tribe again, then His plain commands to watch, that He might come at any time, would seem out of place and misleading, if not actually dishonest. That surely we

cannot concede. The imminent coming of Christ, so clearly taught in the Scripture, means that He might have come at any moment, may come at any moment now, whether the gospel is preached again to all the world or not.

Mistaught people sometimes think that Matthew 24:14 refers to a sign of Christ coming. It says, "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come." But the context shows that this is a message primarily for Jews who will be living in the tribulation time and not for us today. The next verse mentions the Abomination of Desolation, when the Antichrist will stand in the temple in Jerusalem claiming to be God, which event must come after the rapture and which begins the Great Tribulation time. The following verse speaks of the flight of the Jews from the Man of Sin in those days, and verse 21 plainly says, "For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be."

So during the Great Tribulation time the gospel of salvation will be preached to the world in view of Christ's literal return. The preaching of the gospel to all the world mentioned in Matthew 24:14 will be after the first phase of Christ's coming, not before.

The simple truth is that the gospel has already been preached to all the world. I remember that Dr. R.A. Torrey called attention to two or three Scriptures which show that the gospel has already been preached to all the world. In Acts 2:5, "there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven" and these men heard the gospel at Pentecost. In Romans 1:8 Paul says "that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world," and how could people have heard of the wonderful faith of the fine Christians at Rome if they had not heard the gospel? Colossians 1:4-6 also says that the gospel had come to all the world in Paul's time. So Matthew 24:14 could not teach and does not teach that the gospel is to be yet preached in all the world before Jesus comes.

Besides, if the preaching of the gospel to some unknown tribe in Central America or the Amazon valley is an event that must occur before Jesus can come, then Christ's coming could not be imminent and the Scriptural warning that we must watch since Jesus may come any day or year would be foolish.

Let us say again there are no signs that will indicate when Jesus is to come and there is not a single prophetic event which must come before the rapture of the saints.

VI. The Modern Establishment of a Nation Israel in Palestine Not "the Budding of the Fig Tree," Not a Sign of Christ's Soon Return

Some months ago Editor Meldau, of Christian Victory magazine, my esteemed friend, wrote me and about a dozen well-known Bible teachers, asking us to prepare a statement for a forthcoming issue of his good magazine on a subject something like this, "Is the Re-establishment of Israel as an independent nation in Palestine recently, the budding of the fig tree mentioned in Matthew 24:32, 33, and a sign of Christ's coming?" I was glad to give my answer, and glad indeed when the symposium came out in the good magazine that nearly all the Bible teachers agreed that the recent establishing of an independent nation of Jews in Palestine did not fulfill the prophecy of the budding of the fig tree as foretold in Matthew 24:32, 33, and was not especially a sign of Christ's soon return.

Since that matter has often been misunderstood, let us read the passage involved and see clearly what the Saviour said in that Olivet discourse, about the budding of the fig tree. Matthew 24:29-34 reads as follows:

"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: 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. 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. Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled."

Let us note very simply some of the things which Jesus taught in this passage:

1. The time discussed is at the close of the Great Tribulation, and some time after the rapture of the saints. It is "immediately after the tribulation of those days . . ." (vs. 29). So the parable of the fig tree does not apply to these days before the rapture and before the Great Tribulation, but to the days "immediately after the tribulation." Nothing before the tribulation period could be meant here. The recent developments in Palestine are not meant, it is quite clear, since they did not happen "immediately after the tribulation of those days "

2. The meaning of the parable is clearly explained. Certain events which will follow the Great Tribulation are like a fig tree whose branch is tender and which puts forth leaves in the spring. These events are the appearing of the sign of the Son of man in Heaven, when Christ starts to return, and the sight of the Son of man coming in the clouds of Heaven; and the sending of the angels to regather Israelites from all over the world. Then verse 33 says, "So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors." When converted Israelites at the close of the Great Tribulation time, or other saints converted in that tribulation time, see Christ coming in the clouds of Heaven with power and great glory to set up His throne at Jerusalem and reign on the earth, and when they see the angels of God sent out miraculously around the world with the great sound of a trumpet to regather the elect, God's chosen nation Israel, from among all the lands of the earth, then these troubled people may know that Christ's coming and reign is immediately at hand. So there would be no use in speculating about the matter, because the meaning of the parable is clearly given in the words of the Saviour Himself.

And we should distinguish between the present immigration of godless Jews into Palestine, unconverted and unrepentant, and going by human means and with human purposes, from that other great gathering when every Jew left alive in the world will be gathered by the angels and brought to Palestine at Christ's return. The present movement in Palestine is human. It is not particularly a subject of Bible prophecy. It has no particular significance except that the Scripture indicates that some Jews will be in Palestine and will make a treaty with the Antichrist in the tribulation time. The present influx of Jews into Palestine is not the great regathering which will be done miraculously by the angels of God when Jesus returns in person to reign, after the rapture and after the tribulation period.

3. We must make sure to notice, too, that the coming of Christ here mentioned is the second phase of His coming. It is not His coming into the air invisibly to raise the Christian dead and receive them and us together, and carry us away for a honeymoon in Heaven. This is not the coming of Christ for His saints. It is the coming of Christ with the raptured saints, after the tribulation is over. The rapture will come, as most reputable pre-millennial Bible teachers agree, before the Great Tribulation time. Then after the Great Tribulation (which will occur in Daniel's seventieth week, as I believe), Christ will return with these saints

and with angels to fight the battle of Armageddon, to destroy the kingdom of the Antichrist, and to set up His throne at Jerusalem and reign on the earth for a thousand years of joy and peace. There are two separate phases of Christ's coming. That for which we wait is His coming into the air to receive His saints. Then after the tribulation time, those who will have been converted on the earth will long for Christ's return, with us, to set up His kingdom. It is this second phase of Christ's coming, when He shall come literally to the earth to take charge and to reign, that is discussed in this passage.

4. Jesus said in verse 34, "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all things be fulfilled." I rather think that "this generation" means the race of Jews and the race will not be destroyed despite all the Hitlers and Antichrists. Dr. Scofield's notes on this verse say about generation:

"Gr. genea, the primary definition of which is, 'race, kind, family, stock, breed.' (So all lexicons.) That the word is used in this sense here is sure because none of 'these things,' i.e. the world-wide preaching of the kingdom, the great tribulation, the return of the Lord in visible glory, and the regathering of the elect, occurred at the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, A.D. 70. The promise is, therefore, that the generation-nation, or family of Israel--will be preserved unto 'these things'; a promise wonderfully fulfilled to this day."

But if the word generation here means people living in one particular life-span, it still could mean only that group living "immediately after the tribulation of those days . . ." as Jesus Himself places them in verse 29. The so-called "budding of the fig tree" cannot happen until after Christ comes for His saints, after the Great Tribulation.

I am glad personally that there is now a land where oppressed Jews will be welcomed. But these Jews, going back in unbelief, have possession of only a very small portion of the land of Israel. They do not even have undisputed possession of Jerusalem. They have not gone back under the blessing and forgiveness of God. Blindness in part is still upon Israel.

The veil is not yet taken away from their faces. The great future regathering and conversion of Israel will take place by supernatural means after the tribulation time. And the establishment of a little state called Israel in recent months is not a sign that Christ may come soon. Christ may come very soon, but it needs no sign such as that to prove it. He may not come for long years. No one knows.

Let me stress with all my soul that current events do not especially affect the simple fact, clearly taught throughout the Bible, that we can have revival now, that God is in the saving business, and that any time God's people meet God's requirements, they may have His glorious power and the manifestation of it in the saving of multitudes of souls, in great revivals. Those who go by the newspapers and are greatly excited by current events may feel that the atomic bomb, the hydrogen bomb, the upsurge of communism, the modernism in many churches, the possibility of a third world war, and the establishment of the modern nation Israel, mean we are in "the last days," and that therefore great revivals are impossible. But those who steadfastly depend upon the words of Christ will remember that "The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever" (I Pet. 1:24, 25). The harvest is still great and the labourers few. If God's people, called by His name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek His face, and turn from their wicked ways, God will hear from Heaven, will forgive their sin, and heal their land, as He promised in II Chronicles 7:14. All of God's promises are still true. God's tender heart toward sinners still yearns for them to be saved. God's Holy Spirit has all the convicting and saving power He ever had. The Word of God is still quick and powerful and sharper than a two-edged sword. The blessed

promise of Jesus, "He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father" (John 14:12), is still true. Do not let false teachings and heresies about these so-called "last days" keep you from believing the Word of God, that we can have revivals now!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-r-rice/false-teaching-about-the-last-days/>

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