

2. PRELIMINARY SIGNS

Preliminary Signs of Jesus' return to Earth that we should be aware of are described as the beginnings of the birth pains before the dawn of the Messianic age (Mat 24:3-14). These events are already around in these last days and will continue to increase.

1. False prophets and false religions (24:4-5, 11).
2. Wars, famines, and earthquakes (24:6-7).
3. Christian persecution (24:9).
4. Increase of evil, rebellion, and apostasy (24:9-10).
5. Israel regathering in their land (Isa 11:11-12, Jer 30:3, Ezek 11:17, 37:21, Hos 3:4-5, Amos 9:14-15).
6. The proclamation of the gospel throughout the world (24:14).

False religions are ubiquitous, and the gospel is now being preached throughout the whole world. It is a light shining in the darkness of a world inundated with many problems. The world is advancing technologically but is going downhill socially and morally. Translated Scriptures from many of the world's 7,000 languages are online in written format. Many are also in audio format, together with Gospel videos and other teaching aids.

Marriage and the family unit which give stability to society are under attack and are breaking down all over the world, resulting in widespread mental health issues. Millions of homeless refugees are looking for a better place to live. There are pandemics, global warming issues, destructive wars in various places, and endemic poverty in many countries. The problem is that the whole world lies under the control of the evil one (1 Jn 5:19) who influences mankind according to his evil plans. The kingdom of God has not yet come, Jesus is not yet in charge, but the gospel of the kingdom has spread worldwide. By around 2030-2035, all languages that need a Bible will have at least some Scriptures translated. The time for the Messiah to return is drawing near. The Jews have returned to Israel as many of the OT

prophets predicted. Israel and their capital city Jerusalem are becoming increasingly prominent in world affairs. They are continually under threat of attack by their Muslim neighbors and are attacked verbally by the UN and the majority of nations.

Jews are being persecuted in many places, especially in the Middle East, where they've been driven out of many countries. Christian martyrdoms number around 90,000 a year, 30,000 being carried out by Islamic terrorists. The Western world rejoices in being secular. Governments and the media have turned their back on God and many want to eradicate Judeo-Christian values from their cultures. The spirit of lawlessness abounds and will increase until the man of lawlessness is revealed. The restrictions on Christian teaching in schools and the move toward a genderless society will result in ignorance of the word of God and godlessness in the next generation.

When Jesus' disciples asked him about the signs of his return (Mt 24:3), his response was threefold. First, he told them not to let anyone deceive them. Many would come claiming to be the Messiah and leading many astray, a warning about false religions.

Secondly, he warned them about wars and rumors of wars. But he told them not to be alarmed. There would be wars between nations, famines, and earthquakes in various places, but these would be only the beginning of the birth pains, not the end of the age. Only when these things happen globally should they be considered a sign of the end.

Then Jesus spoke about persecution, apostasy, and evangelism. Persecution of Christians and apostasy in the Church has been around since the very beginning of the Church and there will be an increase in the very last days, especially under the reign of a global leader called the Antichrist who will wage war on the saints and conquer them (Dan 7:21, Rev 13:7). Jesus warned his disciples that they'd be put to death and hated by all nations because of him. People will betray and hate one another. False prophets will appear and deceive many. Lawlessness will increase and the love of many nominal Christians will grow cold. Only those who endure to the end would be saved and enjoy eternal life in the Messianic kingdom. The good news about the

kingdom will be preached throughout the entire world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come (Mt 24:9-14).

The worldwide preaching of the gospel is a definite sign that the end is near, but how can it be measured? The world has 195 nations and there are now Christians and Churches in all of them. God's word is freely available like never before in written and audio form, including the internet, MP3 players, and phone applications. At the same time, there are many unreached groups among Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus in Asia who do not even have a Christian friend or acquaintance.

The final stage of Jesus' response to his disciples concerns the signs of his return to Earth and the end of the age. They bring us to the final seven-year period. He spoke of the 'abomination that causes desolation' spoken about by the prophet Daniel (9:27) standing in the holy place, and the reader is cautioned to understand this. Daniel was talking about the destiny of the Jewish people and their holy city, Jerusalem, and its temple. An abominable idol would be set up there.

He said there would be a time of *great suffering, greater than what has happened since the beginning of the world, and never to happen again.* If God didn't shorten those days, *no one* would survive. That sounds like nuclear warfare. For the sake of the elect, God's chosen, those days will be limited. Then, just as lightning flashes from the East to the West, the Messiah will return (Mt 24:15-28). The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD was a time of terrible suffering for the Jews but was only a precursor of later events that would happen when he'll come and send out his angels to gather his elect from all over the Earth.

The final seven years of this age is called the tribulation and the final 3 ½ years is the Great Tribulation (Dan 12:1, Mt 24:21, Rev 7:14). It will be the greatest time of suffering mankind has ever known and a challenging time for Israel. It will be characterized by warfare, no doubt nuclear, and the persecution of God's people. It is also a time of God's judgment on the world when a third of mankind will be killed (Rev 9:15). This period begins in the middle of the final seven years of this age when the Antichrist erects an idol in the Jewish temple (the abomination that causes desolation) and abolishes the daily sacrifice (Dan 9:27, 11:31, Mt 24:15-16, 2 Thess 2:4). He'll belittle God, his

name, his temple, and heavenly beings. He'll wage war against the saints and conquer them. He'll have authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation and make them worship him (Rev 13:5-8). He'll have a image of himself erected in the temple and cause it to speak (Rev 13:15). There has been no Jewish temple in Jerusalem since the Romans destroyed the second temple in 70 AD, but Jewish groups are already preparing temple furniture and clothing for the future priests.

Signs that the Messiah is coming soon are increasing: First, there is worldwide evangelization. Jesus said the gospel of the kingdom would be proclaimed throughout the entire world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Mt 24:14). Note that it is the gospel of the kingdom that will be proclaimed. The good news of the cross could not be understood by his Jewish disciples at that time. For them, it was the kingdom they longed for. The good news in Matthew is always to do with the coming of the Messianic kingdom, or by metonymy, the coming of the Messiah.

A rebellion will occur before Jesus returns, a worldwide rejection of God, his word, his Church, and his people Israel, resulting from an embrace of humanism. This is the spirit of antichrist. With the loss of godly and quality political leadership, civilization will collapse. Then the lawless one, the man of sin called the Antichrist, will arise and exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped. He'll eventually set himself up in God's temple in Jerusalem, the final center of resistance, proclaiming himself to be God (2 Thess 2:3-4). Paul said: And you know what is restraining him now so that he won't be revealed before the right time. It was not the Antichrist being restrained, because he wasn't around in Paul's day. Rather it is the mystery of lawlessness that is restrained until the time comes for the Antichrist to be revealed (2 Thess 2:6-7). Suggestions for the 'restrainer' are the word of God, the Holy Spirit, good government, and Michael. The restrainer is not necessarily personal; it can be a masculine noun like 'word.' It restrains until it is taken out of the way. If the leadership of the final world government which the Antichrist takes over is already evil, all restraint of evil will be gone and he'll win the day. In Satan's power, he'll perform miracles, signs, and wonders, and he'll deceive those who are now living in spiritual darkness. The Antichrist's rise to power will be preceded by increasing globalization and one-world government. He'll overthrow three of ten leaders and make a covenant with many for seven years. The 'many'

may be the majority in Israel and the covenant may be an agreement relating to a Jewish temple. The Antichrist will break the covenant in the middle of the seven years and thereafter wage war against Israel and the Church during a 3 1/2 year period, during which a great multitude of believers will be martyred (Rev 7:9, 14). He'll eventually be overthrown by the Messiah at his coming.

Many Jewish prophets predicted Israel's return to their land. Over seven million Jews now live in Israel. The apostle Paul made it clear that God was not finished with Israel. God's gifts and his call are irrevocable (Rom 11:29). There are many prophecies that Israel as a nation will be converted at the end-time (Isa 59:20-21, Jer 31:33-34, Joel 3:16-17, Zech 8:7-8, 12:10). They'll believe in Jesus after their Messiah returns and defeats their enemies who surround Jerusalem. Then he'll rule over Israel from Jerusalem, as king of the whole world, ruling the nations who survive the Great Tribulation.

Preliminary Signs Leading to the Great Tribulation

❖ Return of Israel

In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people from Assyria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Babylonia, Hamath (Syria), and the islands of the Mediterranean. He'll raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel. He'll assemble the scattered people of Judah from all over the Earth (Isa 11:11-12).

Since 1948, when Israel was reconstituted as a nation, 900,000 Jews have left these surrounding Muslim nations, and 650,000 of them migrated to Israel.

I myself will gather the remnant of my flock from all the countries where I've banished them and will bring them back to their pasture where they'll be fruitful and multiply (Jer 23:3).

The fig tree (Mark 11:12-21, Lk 21:29-32)

Israel was associated with the fig tree in several OT passages (1 Ki 4:25, Jer 8:13, Hos 9:10, Joel 1:7, Mic 4:4). When Jesus chose Nathanael to be his disciple, he had been sitting under a fig tree, and Jesus described him as a genuine Israelite (Jn 1:47-48). In a parable,

Jesus used the fig tree as a metaphor for Israel and its lack of fruit (Lk 13:6-9). Then he said:

God has left your house (temple) to you. I tell you, you'll not see me again until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the Lord's name (Lk 13:35).

The prophetic perfect tense, 'left,' is a literary technique that describes future events that are so certain to happen that they're referred to as past events. The Lord ministered to them for three years and failed to find fruit. The fig tree hadn't born fruit, so it would be cut down.

During the last week of Jesus' life, as he approached Jerusalem, he was hungry, and although he knew there was no fruit on the fig tree because it wasn't yet the season, he went and looked for fruit, and not finding it, he cursed it (Mk 11:12-14). Jesus would not curse a fig tree just because it had no fruit, especially when it was not the season for figs. His comment encourages us to look for a symbolic meaning. In the following verses, Jesus drives traders out of the temple and accuses the Jews of making God's temple, which was supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations, a hideout for bandits. Israel had not produced the fruit expected of it

The next morning the disciples find the fig tree withered away to its roots (Mk 11:20-21), symbolic of the judgment that would come upon Israel in AD 70 at the hands of the Romans when the temple and Jerusalem were destroyed and the Jewish nation was scattered over the world.

The very next day, Jesus tells the disciples to learn a lesson from the fig tree. Luke calls it a parable because it is not a botany lesson; it relates to the future of Israel. Jesus speaks to his disciples about the end of the age and then he gives them a sign:

Learn what the fig tree is teaching you. Whenever its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, know that the arrival (of the Son of Man) is near, he's right at the door. Truly, I tell you, *that generation* will not pass away until *all these things* have happened (Mk 13:28-31).

When Israel has been restored as a nation, when the gospel has been preached to all nations, when God's people are hated by all, when the Abomination that causes Desolation stands in the temple, when a time

of great tribulation arrives in the world, then they'll know that the Son of Man is near, right at the door.

Luke's record of this conversation says: In the same way, when you see these things happening, know that the God's appointed king is near (Luke 21:31). The Kingdom of God, by metonymy, implies that it is the Messiah's arrival that is imminent. Those who erroneously teach that the Kingdom of God has already been inaugurated cause a lot of confusion. The Kingdom of God is an earthly kingdom, not heavenly. The Messiah doesn't rule the world from heaven, he waits there for his enemies to be made his footstool (Heb 10:13). The Kingdom of God has nothing to do with God ruling in our hearts. These ideas are not found in Scripture and were never believed in by first-century Jews who were waiting for the kingdom to arrive according to the their prophets' teaching. You can't have a Messianic kingdom without a Messiah. As long as the empires and governments of this world are controlled by godless forces whose policies are based on greed, pride, and injustice, you can be sure that the Kingdom of God has not yet arrived. Jesus said: The ruler of this world has been judged (Jn 16:11), but decades later the apostle John wrote that the whole world still lies in the power of the evil one (1 Jn 5:19). The ruler of the world, the evil one is Satan. He is not yet bound, even though he's been judged at the cross.

The Messiah has not returned yet, therefore, his earthly kingdom has not yet been established. When the Messiah arrives, his kingdom arrives (Rev 11:15). The inauguration of his kingdom will be such a glorious and powerful event, that every eye will see it and know about it. There is no way that the *generation* Jesus spoke about could be first-century Jews, no matter what grammatical arguments are provided. He said 'that generation would not pass away until all the things he was talking about had taken place.' That includes the worldwide proclamation of the gospel, the great period of tribulation in which no human would be saved if the days weren't cut short, the darkening of the sun and the moon, the return of the Messiah, and the resurrection of the elect. Jesus' generation passed away long ago and none of these things has happened. Prophetic statements are often ambiguous and cryptic, Just as 'the Kingdom of God is near,' is metonymy, meaning that the Messiah was near, so here, Jesus was talking about the end of the age, the final generation that would see the restoration of Israel as a nation, Jerusalem being surrounded by armies (Armageddon), and the Abomination that causes Desolation standing in the temple.

Israel's rebirth as a nation occurred on May 14th 1948. It is that generation, my generation, that will not pass away before Jesus returns. It is not helpful to talk about a generation being 25 or 40 years in length. Jesus was talking about a generation passing away - coming to an end, disappearing. Some people who were alive in 1948 will live to be one hundred years old in 2048. This way of thinking does not put a date on Jesus' return, but it does show that Jesus' return is near, even within twenty years. The final world empire or union, symbolically called 'Babylon' and 'Rome' in the NT, will soon arise and seven years later the Messiah will appear with great power and glory.

His purpose for telling this parable is that we might know the signs that would precede his return. When you see these things happening, he said, know that the Kingdom of God is near. When we see these things taking place, we'll know that our redemption is drawing near. The kingdom is not here now, its establishment will coincide with the Messiah's physical arrival. Jesus tells his followers who would witness that event to stand erect and raise their heads because their redemption is drawing near. The parable informs us that the events surrounding Jesus' return concern the nation of Israel. And just as the fig tree refers to Israel, the statement, 'all the trees' (Luke 21:29), refers to the Gentile nations, of which many have come into existence since the Second World War. The independence of English and French colonies resulted in 41 new nations, while the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union added another 18. In 1948 there were about 100 countries in the world, today (2024) the UN has 193 member states.

❖ ‘Babylon’ - the coming world government

After that, as I was looking in my vision at night, I saw a fourth beast (empire) – terrifying, frightening, and very powerful. It had very large iron teeth, and it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it and it had ten horns (Dan 7:7).

The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast. They worshipped the dragon (Satan) who had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast saying: Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against him? (Rev 13:3b-4).

A coalition of nations will arise to rule the whole world before the Great Tribulation begins. It won't be friendly; it will be a dictatorship, devouring the whole Earth, trampling it down, and crushing it. The

dictator who conquers all is the Antichrist. This final world empire is symbolically called ‘Babylon’ and ‘Rome,’ previous world empires that ruled the then-known world; the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. The Antichrist will logically arise from this region. Antiochus Epiphanes, the type of the Antichrist, was of Greek, Median, and Armenian descent and ruled a Syrian empire, stretching from Turkey to Iran.

❖ **Increasing wickedness and persecution of the Church**

When answering his disciples’ question about the sign of his coming and the end of the age, Jesus told them Christians would be arrested, persecuted, killed, and hated by all nations. Many of them would turn from the faith and hate each other, and many false preachers would appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of *most* will grow cold, but whoever stands firm to the end will be saved (Mt 24:1-16). In other words, many Christians in the last days will be Christian by name only, devoid of the Holy Spirit and genuine faith. Persecution will separate the wheat from the tares. Jesus even asked: When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the Earth? (Luke 18:8). He knew that *most* would not persevere.

❖ **Evangelisation of the world**

Jesus gave another clue: This good news about the king that God has appointed will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come (Mt 24:14). There are now Christians and churches in every country of the world and Bibles or parts thereof in most languages. Mass media via radio, television, mobile phones, and the internet ensures that even the most isolated people are now exposed to the gospel. However, it is also true that some people have never met a born-again Christian.

❖ **The rise of the Antichrist**

Don’t let anyone deceive you in this way, for that day will not come unless the rebellion against God occurs first and the man of lawlessness who is heading for destruction is revealed (2 Thess 2:3).

For one hour, ten kings will receive authority along with the beast (the Antichrist). They’ll have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the Antichrist to wage war against the Lamb and his

followers (Rev 17:12-14). The Antichrist will subdue three of these ten kings (Dan 7:8, 24) and become the world leader.

The prophet Daniel gives us the most information about the Antichrist, although the name Antichrist is not used as a proper name in Scripture. Jesus does not name him, Daniel calls him a ‘little horn’ (7:8), and a ‘despicable person’ (11:21), Paul calls him the ‘man of lawlessness’ (2 Thess 2:3) and ‘the lawless one’ (2 Thess 2:9), while in Revelation, John simply calls him ‘the animal’ or ‘the beast’. In 1 John, John talks about many antichrists and doesn’t seem to have the end-time Antichrist in mind. Sometimes the word ‘animal’ or ‘beast’ describes the kingdom, sometimes it refers to the dictator, of whom the number of his name is 666. Daniel describes his appearance and demise. He was thinking about the ten horns (leaders) the beast had, when another horn, a little one, grew up among them. Three of the first horns fell before him. He had eyes like a man (shrewd, crafty) and a mouth that boasted with audacious claims. He kept observing it until the beast was killed and his body destroyed and given over to fire (Dan 7:8, 11 cf. Rev 19:21). This fourth animal (the empire) was different from the others, extremely awe-inspiring, with iron teeth and bronze claws. It devoured and crushed its victims and trampled them under its feet. The Antichrist, who will be greater in appearance than his fellows, will wage war against the saints and prevail against them until God comes and passes judgment in their favor, and the time comes for them to possess the Messianic kingdom.

The Antichrist will seek to alter God’s times and laws, which may include the calendar, sacred holidays, and Judeo-Christian morality. Nevertheless, the heavenly court will convene, and the Antichrist’s authority will be destroyed forever. Then the kingdom, authority, and magnificence of all nations of the Earth will be given to the saints. The Messiah’s kingdom will endure forever (Dan 7:14). But the kingdom belongs also to the saints (Mt 5:3, 10, Dan 7:19-22, 24-27) and all rulers will serve and obey them. Three times it is stated that it is the hoily people of the Most High who possess the kingdom. The third person singular pronouns (Dan 7:27) refer to the people of the saints of the high places and not to the Messiah who has not been mentioned since Daniel 7.14). See: Book 1, chapter 31.

The last world empire (the feet and toes) seems to be an extension of the Roman empire (the legs), which consisted of southern Europe, North Africa, and parts of the Middle East. Antichrist will most probably arise from this area, by defeating three confederates. As his name suggests, he'll oppose God and Christians and Israel, and God will allow him to conquer them during the three and half years that precede the Messiah's return.

Why would God allow the Antichrist to wage war on the saints and defeat them? Consider the following suggestions:

- It will sort out true believers from the hypocrites
- It will be a witness of the saints faith to the world
- It will allow evil to climax before judgment
- The saints defeat will be temporary
- Vindication of the saints will bring God glory

The 'sacrilegious object that causes desecration' (NLT) spoken about by Jesus is generally believed to be a statue or image of the Antichrist. Jesus refers us (Mt 25:15) to Daniel 9:26-27 to learn about this. There it says that the people of a coming ruler would destroy both the city and the sanctuary. This prophecy was fulfilled by the Roman emperor Titus when he destroyed Jerusalem and its Jewish temple in 70 AD. Daniel said *the end* would come suddenly like a flood. War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. He (the ruler) will make *a binding covenant with many for one week*, and then, during the second half of the week (three and a half years) he'll suspend both sacrifice and grain offerings at the temple. He'll set up an abomination that causes desolation at the temple, ultimately setting himself up as God, until what God has decreed is poured out on him.

The text of Dan 9:27 is not clear, but one theory has it that the covenant he makes with *many* will be an extensive peace treaty that allows Israel to build a third temple at Jerusalem which needs to be there for Antichrist to desecrate (2 Thess 2:4, Rev 13:14-15).

Jesus warned the Jews that when they saw this object that would cause desolation (Matt 24:15-16), they should flee to the mountains. He added that if those days weren't shortened, no one would survive and there would be desolation until the Antichrist reached his decreed end.

His prophecy relates to the end of this age when the Messiah comes as the following verses (Mt 24:23-28) indicate, not the temple that was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. Daniel 12:11 says that from the time the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination is set up, there will be 1290 days. Then he adds that those who wait and arrive at 1335 days are blessed. This period of about three and a half years, is consistently used to refer to the Great Tribulation at the end of the age, a time when God has a renewed interest in Jerusalem and the Jewish nation.

❖ Daniel's 70 Weeks

One day in about 536 BC when the prophet Daniel was praying and confessing the sins of his people Israel, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and gave him an important prophecy about the people of Israel and their holy city Jerusalem. Their future history was summarized as 70 weeks, each week standing for seven years, instead of seven days, making 490 years in all. However, they're not continuous; there is a long break after the 69th week and before the 70th week. At this time, Daniel was in ancient Babylon along with the Jews who were in exile. There would be 69 weeks (483 years), starting from the date a decree was made to rebuild Jerusalem, and finishing with the coming of the Messiah. Without going into the complicated details, this period has been calculated as being from around 450 BC to 33 AD; from the time that Artaxerxes made a decree concerning Ezra and his return to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:11-26) to the time when Jesus was crucified, after which God's attention was transferred from the Jews to the building of Jesus' community among the Gentiles.

Gabriel told Daniel that 70 weeks were decreed for Israel and Jerusalem - to finish transgression and to *bring in everlasting righteousness*. The long break after the 69th week can be explained by Jesus' words in Matthew 23:38. He told the Jews that their house (temple) would be left to them desolate because they had rejected their Messiah. The Church began at Pentecost in 33 AD (Luke 21:20) and will continue until the Messiah's return. After the doors to the Church are shut, the Spirit will be poured out on Israel and they'll once again become God's people on Earth. Jeremiah had prophesied this event, when the Lord said he'd forsake his house (whether the house of Israel

or the temple) and abandon his inheritance and give the one he loves into the hands of her enemies (Jer 12:7). So, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, and the Jews were scattered among the nations. As Jesus prophesied, they fell by the sword and were carried off as captives to all the nations, and Jerusalem was trampled by the Gentiles until recently. Their trouble will continue until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (Luke 21:24). Jesus said the trampling of Jerusalem is a judgment on the Jews, a time of punishment (Luke 21:22) in fulfillment of what had been written (Dan 9:24). It began when Titus destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD and will finish when the Antichrist surrounds Jerusalem and is defeated by the returning Messiah.

After Israel rejected their Messiah and had him killed, the risen Jesus told the apostles to go and make disciples of all nations. The history of Israel as the people of God was put into abeyance while Jesus built his Church community from all the nations. As Paul said in Romans 11, Israel is a branch broken off the olive tree that represents the people of God, and the Gentiles are being grafted in. When Israel's full number is complete, they'll again be grafted back into the olive tree. We live in exciting times. Israel has returned to their land and many signs indicate that our world is coming to its prophesied conclusion. In 2017 the United States recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Jesus said the generation that witnesses the events of Matthew 24:14-15, 21, 29, 32 will also see his return (24:34). Israel's seventy weeks to finish transgression will finish when the Holy Spirit is poured out on them (Ezek 36:24-28) and they are reinstated as God's people on Earth.