

PRELIMINARY SIGNS

(Rev 13:5-8, 14:6)

Preliminary Signs (Matthew 24:3-14)

Here are the beginnings of the birth pains before the dawn of the Messianic age. These events are always around and up to the present time.

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 regathered in their land (Isaiah 11:11-12, Jeremiah 30:3, Ezekiel 11:17, 37:21, Hosea 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 most of the 7,000 languages of the world are online in written format. Many are also in audio format together with Gospel videos and other teaching helps.

Marriage and the family unit which give stability to society are under attack and have broken 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, 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 John 5:19) who influences mankind according to his evil plans. The kingdom of God has not yet come,

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 Old Testament prophets predicted. Israel and their capital city Jerusalem are becoming increasingly prominent in world affairs.

God's people are being persecuted in many places, especially in the Middle East, where they have recently been driven out of many countries. Christian martyrs are already calculated at 90,000 a year of which 30,000 are by 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 societies. 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 about the word of God and godlessness in the next generation.

When Jesus was asked by his disciples about the signs of his return in Matt 24, the answer he gave was in three stages. First, he told them not to let anyone deceive them. Many will 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 on a global scale, should we consider them to signal the end.

Then Jesus spoke about persecution, apostasy, and evangelism. Persecution of Christians and apostasy in the Church have been around since the very beginning of the Church, but there would be an increase in the very last days, especially under the reign of a global leader called the Antichrist. Jesus told his disciples that they would be made to suffer and be killed and be hated by all the

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 will grow cold. Only those who endure to the end will be saved, and go on to enjoy eternal life in his messianic kingdom. The good news about the *kingdom* (are we getting the emphasis right?) will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come (Matt 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 every one 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 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 before his return. 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 of its sanctuary. An abominable idol was to be set up in the temple.

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 west, the Messiah will return (Matt 24:15-28). The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD was a time of terrible suffering for the Jews, but it was only a precursor of later events that would happen when he comes and sends his angels to gather his elect from all over the Earth.

The time of great suffering is called the Great Tribulation. It will be the greatest time of suffering that mankind has ever known, and also a very difficult 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. The final three-and-a-half-year period will begin with the erection of an idol in the holy place, which can only mean a third, rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Daniel certainly spoke of it in that way. There has been no Jewish temple in Jerusalem since the Romans destroyed the second temple in 70 AD, but Jewish groups are preparing for it, including furniture and clothing for the 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 whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Matt 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 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, also called the Antichrist, will arise and exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped. He will 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 now so that he will be revealed at the proper 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 Antichrist to be revealed. 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/he restrains until it/he is gone, (not ‘taken out of the way’, there is no verb for take in the Greek of this verse). If the final world government of which the Antichrist takes over the leadership is already evil, all restraint of evil will be gone and he will win the day. In Satan’s power, he will perform miracles, signs and wonders, and deceive those who are now living in spiritual darkness. The Antichrist’s rise to power will be preceded by increasing globalization and a one-world government. He will overthrow three of ten kings (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. Antichrist breaks the covenant in the middle of the seven years and thereafter ‘wages 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 will be overthrown by the Messiah at his coming.

Israel’s return to their land was prophesied by many of the Jewish prophets. Over seven million Jews now live in Israel. The apostle Paul makes it clear that God has 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-times (Isa 59:20-21, Jer 31:33-34, Joel 3:16-17, Zech 8:7-8, 12:10). They will become believers in Jesus after their Messiah returns and defeats their enemies who surround Jerusalem. Then he will rule over Israel Jerusalem, King of the whole world, reigning over the nations who survived 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, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and the islands of the

Mediterranean. He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four corners of 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 out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture where they will be fruitful and increase in number” (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 Kgs 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 (John 1:47-48). In a parable, Jesus used the fig tree as a metaphor for Israel and its lack of fruit (Luke 13:6-9). Then he said:

“Your house (temple) is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’” (Luk 13:34-35).

The prophetic perfect tense (‘is left’) is a literary technique that describes future events that are so certain to happen that they are referred to as past events. The Lord ministered to them for three years and failed to find fruit. If the fig tree didn’t bear fruit soon, it would be cut down, as it was.

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 (Mark 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. That 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 (Mark 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:

“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree. As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, know that he is near, right at the door. Truly, I tell you, *this* generation (that witnesses these things) will certainly not pass away until *all these things* have happened” (Mark 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 will know that the Son of Man is near, right at the door.

Luke's record of this conversation says, “When you see these things happening, recognize that the *Kingdom of God* is near” (Luke 21:31). The Kingdom of God, by metonymy, implies that the King's arrival 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 earthly, 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 by the first-century Jews who were waiting for the kingdom to arrive according to the teaching of their prophets. 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 is judged” (John 16:11), but decades later the apostle John wrote that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). The ruler of the world, the evil one is Satan. He is not yet bound, even though he has 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, like “the Kingdom of God is near.” This is metonymy, it was the King who was near, not the kingdom. 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, “you know that the Kingdom of God is near.” When we see these things taking place, we will 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, “all the trees” (Luke 21:29) refers to the Gentile nations, of which many have come into existence since the Second World War. The 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 there are 193.

❖ **‘Babylon’ - the coming world government**

“After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast (empire) – terrifying, frightening, and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns (powerful leaders)” (Dan 7:7).

“The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast. People worshipped the dragon (Satan) because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked: ‘Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?’ (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 a Greek who ruled the Seleucid 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 (Matt 24:1-16). In other words, many Christians in the last days will be Christian by name only, without 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: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come" (Matt24:14). 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 Indian villagers have never met a born-again Christian.

❖ **The rise of Antichrist**

"Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed" (2 Thess 2:3).

For one hour, ten kings will receive authority along with the beast (the empire). They have one purpose and will give their power and

authority to the beast 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 sin' (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, whose number 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 it. It had eyes like a man (shrewd, crafty) and a mouth that boasted with audacious claims. He kept observing it until the animal was killed and its body destroyed and given over to fire (Dan 7:8, 11 cf. Rev 19:21). This fourth animal (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 his 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, and all authorities will serve him and obey him (Dan 7:19-22, 24-27).

The last world empire (the feet and toes) is 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 there, by defeating three confederates. As his name suggests, he will 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.

The 'sacrilegious object that causes desecration' (NLT) spoken about by Jesus is generally believed to be a statue or image of the Antichrist. In Matt 25:15, Jesus referred us to Dan 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, a prophecy that 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 for the second half of the week (three and a half years) he will suspend both sacrifice and grain offerings at the temple. He will set up an abomination that causes desolation at the temple 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. Then, after three and a half years, he puts an end to temple worship and sets himself up as God, placing a detestable idol of himself in the temple, the abomination that causes desolation (Dan 11:31, 12:11, 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 that there would be desolation until the Antichrist comes to his decreed end. His prophecy relates to the end of this age when the Messiah comes, as the following verses (Mat 24:23-28) indicate. Jesus was not interested in the temple that was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. At that time most Christians had already fled from Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). Dan 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, about three and a half years, is consistently used to refer to the second half of the Great Tribulation at the end of the age, at which time God still has an interest in Jerusalem and the Jewish nation.

The Antichrist and his false prophet will be captured at the battle of Armageddon and thrown into hell, while his armies who were recruited from all over the world will be slaughtered and left to be eaten by birds.

❖ **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 are 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 Matt 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. When the doors to the Church are shut, the Spirit will be poured out on Israel and they will once again become God's people on Earth. Jeremiah had prophesied this event, when the Lord said he would 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 will be trampled by the Gentiles 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 their full number is complete, Israel will 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 Matt 24:14-15, 21, 29, 32 will also see his return (Matt 24:34). Israel's seventy weeks to finish transgression will finish when the Holy Spirit is poured out on them (Ezek 36:24-28). They will be reinstated as God's people on Earth.