

The Second Coming of Christ

Mommy," a little one confided at bedtime, "I'm so lonely for my friend Jesus. When is He going to come?" That child could hardly know that her little heart's desire has been the longing of the ages. The final words of the Bible give promise of a soon return: "Surely I am coming quickly." And John the revelator, the loyal companion of Jesus, adds, "Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20).

To see Jesus! To unite forever with Him who loves us more than we can imagine! To have an end of all earthly suffering! To enjoy eternity with resurrected loved ones now at rest! No wonder that since Christ's ascension His friends have looked forward to that day.

One day He will come, though even to the saints His coming will be an overwhelming surprise—for all slumber and sleep in their long wait (Matt. 25:5). At "midnight," in earth's darkest hour, God will manifest His power to deliver His people. Scripture describes the events: "A loud voice" comes out of the "temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, 'It is done!'" This voice shakes the earth, causing such "a mighty and great earthquake as had not occurred since men were on the earth" (Rev. 16:17, 18). The mountains shake, rocks are scattered everywhere, and the whole earth heaves like the waves of the ocean. Its surface breaks up "and the cities of the nations fell. . . . Then every island fled away, and the mountains were not found" (verses 19, 20). "The sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place" (Rev. 6:14).

Despite the chaos descending upon the physical world, God's people take courage as they see "the sign of the Son of Man" (Matt. 24:30). As He descends on the clouds of heaven, every eye sees the Prince of life. He comes, this time, not as a man of sorrows, but as victor and conqueror to claim His own. In place of the crown of thorns, He wears a crown of glory, and "on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (Rev. 19:12, 16).

At His coming great despair grips those who have refused to acknowledge Jesus as Saviour and Lord, and have rejected the claim of His law on their lives. Nothing makes the rejecters of His grace so aware of their guilt as that voice that had pleaded so patiently, ""Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die?"" (Eze. 33:11). "And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?'" (Rev. 6:15-17).

But the joy of those who have long looked for Him overshadows the despair of the wicked. The coming of the Redeemer brings to its glorious climax the history of God's people; it is the moment of their deliverance. With thrilling adoration they cry out: "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation" (Isa. 25:9).

As Jesus draws near, He calls His sleeping saints from the graves and commissions His angels to "gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matt. 24:31). Around the world the righteous dead hear His voice and rise from their graves—glad moment! Then the living righteous are changed "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:52). Glorified and given immortality, together with the

resurrected saints they are caught up to meet their Lord in the air to remain with Him forever (1 Thess. 4:16, 17).

The Certainty of Christ's Return

The apostles and early Christians considered Christ's return "the blessed hope" (Titus 2:13; cf. Heb. 9:28). They expected all the prophecies and promises of Scripture to be fulfilled at the Second Advent (see 2 Peter 3:13; cf. Isa. 65:17), for it is the very goal of the Christian pilgrimage. All who love Christ look forward eagerly to the day when they will be able to share face-to-face fellowship with Him—and with the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the angels.

The Testimony of Scripture.

The certainty of the Second Advent is rooted in the trustworthiness of the Scripture. Just before His death Jesus told His disciples that He would be returning to His Father to prepare a place for them. But He promised, "I will come again" (John 14:3).

As Christ's first coming to this earth had been prophesied, so His second coming is also foretold through all of Scripture. Even before the Flood God told Enoch that it was Christ's coming in glory that would end sin. He prophesied, "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him" (Jude 14, 15).

One thousand years before Christ, the psalmist spoke of the Lord's coming to gather His people, saying, "Our God shall come, and shall not keep silent; a fire shall devour before Him, and it shall be very tempestuous all around Him. He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that He may judge His people: 'Gather My saints together to Me, those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice'" (Ps. 50:3-5).

Christ's disciples rejoiced in the promise of His return. Amid all the difficulties they encountered, the assurance this promise brought never failed to renew their courage and strength. Their Master was coming back to take them to His Father's house!

The Guarantee the First Advent Provides.

The Second Advent is closely tied to Christ's first advent. If Christ had not come the first time and won a decisive victory over sin and Satan (Col. 2:15), then we would have no reason to believe that He will eventually come to end Satan's dominion of this world and to restore it to its original perfection. But since we have the evidence that He "appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself," we have reason to believe that He "will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation" (Heb. 9:26, 28).

Christ's Heavenly Ministry.

Christ's revelation to John makes it clear that the heavenly sanctuary is central to the plan of salvation (Rev. 1:12, 13; 3:12; 4:1-5; 5:8; 7:15; 8:3; 11:1, 19; 14:15, 17; 15:5, 6, 8; 16:1, 17). The prophecies that indicate that He has begun His final ministry on behalf of sinners add to the assurance that soon He will return to take His people home (see chapter 23 of this book). The confidence that Christ is actively working to bring to consummation the

redemption already accomplished at the cross has brought great encouragement to Christians who are looking forward to His return.

The Manner of Christ's Return

As Christ spoke about the signs that would indicate that His coming was near, He also indicated concern that His people not be deceived by false claims. He warned that before the Second Advent "false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect." He said, "If anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it" (Matt. 24:24, 23). Forewarned is forearmed. To enable believers to distinguish between the genuine event and a false coming, several Biblical passages reveal details of the manner in which Christ will return.

A Literal and Personal Return.

When Jesus ascended in a cloud, two angels addressed the disciples, who were still gazing up after their departed Lord: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

In other words, they said that the same Lord who had just left them—a personal, flesh-and-blood being, not some spirit entity (Luke 24:36-43)—would return to earth. And His Second Advent would be as literal and personal as His departure.

A Visible Return.

Christ's coming will not be an inward, invisible experience but a real meeting with a visible Person. Leaving no room whatsoever for doubt as to the visibility of His return, Jesus warned His disciples against being taken in by a secret second coming by comparing His return to the brilliance of lightning (Matt. 24:27).

Scripture clearly states that the righteous and the wicked will simultaneously witness His coming. John wrote, "Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him" (Rev. 1:7), and Christ noted the response of the wicked: "All the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:30).

An Audible Return.

Adding to the picture of a universal awareness of Christ's return is the Biblical assertion that His coming will be made known by sound as well as sight: "The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God" (1 Thess. 4:16). The "great sound of a trumpet" (Matt. 24:31) accompanies the gathering of His people. There is no secrecy here.

A Glorious Return.

When Christ returns, He comes as a conqueror, with power and "in the glory of His Father with His angels" (Matt. 16:27). John the revelator portrays the glory of Christ's return in a most dramatic way. He pictures Christ riding on a white horse and leading the innumerable armies of heaven. The supernatural splendor of the glorified Christ is apparent (Rev. 19:11-16).

A Sudden, Unexpected Return.

Christian believers, longing and looking for Christ's return, will be aware when it draws near (1 Thess. 5:4-6). But for the inhabitants of the world in general, Paul wrote, "The day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape" (1 Thess. 5:2, 3; cf. Matt. 24:43).

Some have concluded that Paul's comparison of Christ's coming to that of a thief indicates that He will come in some secret, invisible manner. However, such a view contradicts the Biblical picture of Christ's return in glory and splendor in view of everyone (Rev. 1:7). Paul's point is not that Christ's coming is secret, but that, for the worldly minded, it is as unexpected as that of a thief.

Christ makes the same point by comparing His coming with the unexpected destruction of the antediluvian world by the Flood. "For as in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man" (Matt. 24:38, 39, NIV). Though Noah had preached for many years about a coming flood, it took most people by surprise. There were two classes of people living. One class believed Noah's word and went into the ark and was saved, the other chose to stay outside the ark and the "flood came and took them all away" (Matt. 24:39).

A Cataclysmic Event.

Like the simile of the Flood, Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the metal image depicts the cataclysmic manner in which Christ will establish His kingdom of glory (see chapter 4 of this book). Nebuchadnezzar saw a great image whose "head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay." Then "a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth" (Dan. 2:32-35).

Through this dream God gave Nebuchadnezzar a synopsis of world history. Between his day and the establishment of Christ's everlasting kingdom (the stone), four major kingdoms or empires and then a conglomeration of weak and strong nations would consecutively occupy the world's stage.

Ever since the days of Christ interpreters have identified the empires as Babylon (605-539 B.C.), Medo-Persia (539-331 B.C.), Greece (331-168 B.C.), and Rome (168 B.C.-A.D. 476). As prophesied, no other empire succeeded Rome. During the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. it broke into a number of smaller kingdoms that later became the nations of Europe. Through the centuries, powerful rulers—Charlemagne, Charles V, Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm, and Hitler—have tried to establish another world empire. Each failed, just as the prophecy said: "They will not adhere to one another, just as iron does not mix with clay" (Dan 2:43).

Finally, the dream focuses on the dramatic climax: the setting up of God's everlasting kingdom. The stone cut out without hands represents Christ's kingdom of glory (Dan. 7:14; Rev. 11:15), which will be established without human effort at the Second Advent.

Christ's kingdom is not to exist simultaneously with any human empire. When He was on earth during the sway of the Roman Empire, the stone kingdom that crushes all nations had not yet come. Only after the phase of the iron and clay feet, the period of the divided nations, would it arrive. It is to be set up at the Second Advent when Christ separates the righteous from the wicked (Matt. 25:31-34).

When it comes, this stone or kingdom will strike the "image on its feet of iron and clay" and "it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms," leaving not a trace of them (Dan. 2:34, 44, 35). Indeed, the Second Advent is an earth-shaking event.

The Second Advent and the Human Race

Christ's Second Advent will touch both of the great divisions of humanity—those who have accepted Him and the salvation He brings, and those who have turned from Him.

The Gathering of the Elect.

An important aspect of the establishment of Christ's eternal kingdom is the gathering of all the redeemed (Matt. 24:31; 25:32-34; Mark 13:27) to the heavenly home Christ has prepared (John 14:3).

When a head of state visits another country, only a few persons can be part of the welcoming party. But when Christ comes, every believer who has ever lived, regardless of age, gender, education, economic status, or race, will participate in the grand Advent celebration. Two events make possible this universal gathering: the resurrection of the righteous dead and the translation of the living saints.

1. *The resurrection of the dead in Christ.*

At the sound of the trumpet announcing Christ's return, the righteous dead will be raised incorruptible and immortal (1 Cor. 15:52, 53). At that moment the "dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thess. 4:16). In other words, they are raised *before* the living righteous are caught up to be with the Lord.

Resurrected ones reunite with those who sorrowed at their departure. Now they exult, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55, KJV). It is not the diseased, aged, mutilated bodies that went down into the grave that come up in the resurrection, but new, immortal, perfect bodies, no longer marked by the sin that caused their decay. The resurrected saints experience the completion of Christ's work of restoration, reflecting the perfect image of God in mind, soul, and body (1 Cor. 15:42-54; see chapter 25 of this book).

2. *The translation of the living believers.*

When the righteous dead are resurrected, the righteous who are living on the earth at the Second Coming will be changed. "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53).

At Christ's return no group of believers takes precedence over any other believers. Paul reveals that the living and transformed believers "shall be caught up together with them [the resurrected believers] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17; cf. Heb. 11:39, 40). So all the believers will be present at the grand Advent gathering, both the resurrected saints of all ages and those who are alive at Christ's return.

The Death of the Unbelievers.

To the saved the Second Advent is a time of joy and exhilaration, but to the lost it will be a time of devastating terror. They have resisted Christ's love and His invitations to salvation so long that they have become ensnared in deceptive delusions (see 2 Thess. 2:9-12; Rom. 1:28-32). When they see the One they have rejected coming as King of kings and Lord of lords, they know the hour of their doom has struck. Overwhelmed with terror and despair, they call upon the inanimate creation to shelter them (Rev. 6:16, 17).

At this time God will destroy Babylon, the union of all apostate religions. "She will be utterly burned with fire" (Rev. 18:8). The leader of this confederation—the mystery of iniquity, the lawless one—"the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming" (2 Thess. 2:8). The powers responsible for enforcing the mark of the beast (see chapter 12) will be cast "into the lake of fire burning with brimstone." And the rest of the wicked will be "killed with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse"—Jesus Christ the Lord (Rev. 19:20, 21).

The Signs of Christ's Soon Return

The Scriptures not only reveal the manner and object of Christ's coming, they also describe the signs that tell of the nearness of this climactic event. The first signs announcing the Second Advent took place more than 1700 years after Christ's ascension, and others have followed, contributing to the evidence that His return is very near.

Signs in the Natural World.

Christ predicted that there would "be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars" (Luke 21:25), specifying that "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars of heaven will fall, and the powers in heaven will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory" (Mark 13:24-26). In addition, John saw that a great earthquake would precede the signs in the heavens (Rev. 6:12). All of these signs would mark the end of the 1260 years of persecution (see chapter 12).

1. The witness of the earth.

In fulfillment of this prophecy "the largest known earthquake," occurred on November 1, 1755. Known as the Lisbon earthquake, its effects were observed in Europe, Africa, and America, covering an area of about 4 million square miles. Its destruction centered on Lisbon, Portugal, where in a matter of minutes it leveled public and residential buildings, causing scores of thousands of deaths.

While the earthquake's physical effects were large, its impact on the thought of the time was just as significant. Many living then recognized it as a prophetic sign of the end and began to give serious consideration to the judgment of God and the last days. The Lisbon earthquake gave an impetus to the study of prophecy.

2. *The witness of the sun and moon.*

Twenty-five years later the next sign mentioned in prophecy took place—the darkening of the sun and moon. Christ had pointed out the time of the fulfilment of this sign, noting that it was to follow the great tribulation, the 1260 years of papal persecution spoken of elsewhere in Scripture (Matt. 24:29; see chapter 12 of this book). But Christ said that the tribulation that was to precede these signs would be shortened (Matt. 24:21, 22). Through the influence of the Reformation and the movements that grew out of it, the papal persecution was indeed shortened, so that by the middle of the eighteenth century it had almost wholly ceased.

In fulfillment of this prophecy, on May 19, 1780, an extraordinary darkness descended upon the northeastern part of the North American continent.

Recalling this event, Timothy Dwight, president of Yale University, said, "The 19th of May, 1780, was a remarkable day. Candles were lighted in many houses; the birds were silent and disappeared, and the fowls retired to roost. . . . A very general opinion prevailed, that the day of judgment was at hand."

Samuel Williams of Harvard reported that the darkness "approached with the clouds from the southwest 'between the hours of 10:00 and 11:00 A.M., and continued until the middle of the next night,' varying in degree and duration in different localities. In some places 'persons could not see to read common print in the open air.'" ⁷ In Samuel Tenny's opinion "the darkness of the following evening was probably as gross as ever has been observed since the Almighty fiat gave birth to light. . . . If every luminous body in the universe had been shrouded in impenetrable shades, or struck out of existence, the darkness could not have been more complete."

At 9:00 that night a full moon rose, but the darkness persisted until after midnight. When the moon became visible, it had the appearance of blood.

John the revelator had prophesied the extraordinary events of that day. After the earthquake, he wrote, the sun would become "black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon . . . like blood" (Rev. 6:12).

3. *The witness of the stars.*

Both Christ and John had also spoken about a falling of the stars that would indicate that Christ's coming was near (Rev. 6:13; cf. Matt. 24:29). The great meteoric shower of November 13, 1833—the most extensive display of falling stars on record—fulfilled this prophecy. It was estimated that a single observer could see an average of 60, 000 meteors per hour. It was seen from Canada to Mexico and from the mid-Atlantic to the Pacific, many Christians recognizing in it the fulfillment of the Bible prophecy.

An eyewitness said that "there was scarcely a space in the firmament which was not filled at every instant with these falling stars, nor on it, could you in general perceive any particular difference, in appearance; still at times they would shower down in groups—calling to mind the 'fig tree, casting her untimely figs when shaken by a mighty wind.'"

Christ gave these signs to alert Christians to the nearness of His coming so that they might rejoice in their expectation and be fully prepared for it. "Now when these things begin to happen," He said, "look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws

near." He added, "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. When they are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you, likewise, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near" (Luke 21:28-31).

This unique witness of earth, sun, moon, and stars, which came in the precise sequence and at the time Christ had predicted, directed the attention of many toward the prophecies of the Second Advent.

Signs in the Religious World

Scripture predicts that a number of significant signs in the religious world will mark the time just preceding Christ's return.

1. A great religious awakening.

The book of Revelation reveals the rise of a great, worldwide religious movement before the Second Advent. In John's vision, an angel heralding Christ's return symbolized this movement: "I saw an angel flying in the midst of heaven having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth and to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—saying with a loud voice, 'Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water'" (Rev. 14:6, 7).

The message itself indicates when it is to be proclaimed. The everlasting gospel has been preached throughout all ages. But this message, emphasizing the judgment aspect of the gospel, could only be proclaimed in the time of the end, for it warns that the "hour of His judgment has come." The book of Daniel informs us that in the time of the end its prophecies would be unsealed (Dan. 12:4). At that time people would understand its mysteries. The unsealing took place as the 1260-year period of papal dominance came to its end with the captivity of the pope in 1798. The combination of the exile of the pope and the signs in the natural world led many Christians to study the prophecies about the events leading to the Second Advent, which resulted in a new depth of understanding of these prophecies.

This focus on the Second Advent also brought about a worldwide revival of the Advent hope. As the Reformation sprang up independently in various countries throughout the Christian world, so did the Advent movement. The worldwide nature of this movement is one of the clearest signs that Christ's return is drawing near. As John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ's first advent, so the Advent movement is preparing the way for His second advent—proclaiming the message of Revelation 14:6-12, God's final call to get ready for the glorious return of the Saviour (see chapters 12 and 23 of this book).

2. Preaching of the Gospel.

God "has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31). In warning us of that day, Christ did not say that it would come when all the world is converted, but that the "gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). Thus Peter encourages believers to be "looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God" (2 Peter 3:12).

Statistics on the translation and distribution of the Bible in this century reveal the growth of the gospel witness. In 1900, the Bible was available in 537 languages. By 1980, it had been translated, in full or in part, into 1, 811 languages, representing nearly 96 percent of the world population. Similarly, the annual distribution of the Scriptures has risen from 5.4 million Bibles in 1900 to 36.8 million Bibles and nearly half a billion Bible portions by 1980.

In addition, Christianity now has at its disposal an unprecedented variety of resources for use in its mission: service agencies, educational and medical institutions, national and foreign workers, radio and television broadcasting, and impressive financial means. Today, powerful shortwave radio stations can beam the gospel to practically every country around the globe. Used under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, these unparalleled resources make realistic the goal of evangelizing the world in our time.

Seventh-day Adventists, with a membership that represents about 700 languages and 1, 000 dialects, are proclaiming the gospel in 190 countries. Almost 90 percent of these members live outside of North America. Believing that medical and educational work play essential roles in fulfilling the gospel commission, we operate nearly 600 hospitals, nursing homes, clinics and dispensaries, 19 medical launches, 27 health food factories, 86 colleges and universities, 834 secondary schools, 4, 166 elementary schools, 125 Bible correspondence schools, and 33 language institutes. Our 51 publishing houses produce literature in 190 languages and our shortwave radio stations broadcast to approximately 75 percent of the world population. The Holy Spirit has abundantly blessed our mission thrust.

3. Religious Decline.

The widespread proclamation of the gospel does not necessarily mean a massive growth in genuine Christianity. Instead, the Scriptures predict a decline of true spirituality toward the end of time. Paul said that "in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

So today, love of self, material things, and the world has supplanted the Spirit of Christ in many hearts. People no longer allow God's principles and His laws to direct their lives; lawlessness has taken over. "And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matt. 24:12).

4. A Resurgence of the Papacy.

According to Biblical prophecy, at the end of the 1260 years the papacy would receive "a deadly wound" but it would not die (see chapter 12 of this book). Scripture reveals that this deadly wound would heal. The papacy would experience a great renewal of influence and respect—"all the world marveled and followed the beast" (Rev. 13:3). Already today many view the pope as the moral leader of the world.

To a large extent, the papacy's rising influence has come as Christians have substituted traditions, human standards, and science for the authority of the Bible. In doing so, they have become vulnerable to "the lawless one," who works "with all power, signs, and lying wonders" (2 Thess. 2:9).

Satan and his instruments will bring about a confederation of evil, symbolized by the unholy trinity of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet, that will deceive the world (Rev. 16:13, 14; cf. 13:13, 14). Only those whose guide is the Bible and who "keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12) can successfully resist the overwhelming deception this confederation brings.

5. Decline of Religious Freedom.

The revival of the papacy will affect Christianity dramatically. The religious liberty obtained at great cost, guaranteed by the separation between church and state, will erode and finally be abolished. With the support of powerful civil governments, this apostate power will attempt to force its form of worship on all people. Everyone will have to choose between loyalty to God and His commandments and loyalty to the beast and his image (Rev. 14:6-12).

The pressure to conform will include economic coercion: "No one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name" (Rev. 13:17). Eventually those who refuse to go along will face a death penalty (Rev. 13:15). During this final time of trouble God will intervene for His people and deliver everyone whose name is written in the book of life (Dan. 12:1; cf. Rev. 3:5; 20:15).

Increase of Wickedness.

The spiritual decline within Christianity and the revival of the man of lawlessness have led to a growing neglect of God's law in the church and in the lives of believers. Many have come to believe that Christ has abolished the law and that Christians are no longer obliged to observe it. This disregard of God's law has led to an increase in crime and immoral behavior.

1. Surge in World Crime.

The disrespect for God's law current within much of Christianity has contributed to modern society's contempt for law and order. Throughout the world, crime is skyrocketing out of control. A report filed by correspondents from several world capitals stated: "Just as in the United States, crime is on the rise in almost every country around the world." "From London to Moscow to Johannesburg, crime is fast becoming a major menace that is changing the way in which many people live."

2. Sexual Revolution.

Disregard for God's law has also broken down the restraints of modesty and purity, resulting in a surge of immorality. Today sex is idolized and marketed through films, television, video, songs, magazines, and advertisements.

The sexual revolution has resulted in the shocking rise of the rate of divorce, aberrations like "open marriage" or mate swapping, the sexual abuse of children, an appalling number of abortions, widespread homosexuality and lesbianism, an epidemic of venereal diseases, and the recently surfaced AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome).

Wars and Calamities.

Before His return, Jesus said, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven" (Luke 21:10, 11; cf. Mark 13:7, 8; Matt. 24:7). As the end draws near and the conflict between the satanic and divine forces intensifies, these calamities will also intensify in severity and frequency, and find an unprecedented fulfillment in our time.

1. Wars.

Although wars have plagued humanity throughout history, never before have they been so global and so destructive. World War I and II caused more casualties and suffering than all previous wars combined.

Many see the prospect of another worldwide conflict. World War II did not eradicate war. Since it ended, there have been some "140 conflicts fought with conventional weapons, in which up to ten million people have died." The threat of an all-out thermonuclear war hangs over our world like the sword of Damocles.

2. Natural disasters.

Disasters appear to have increased significantly in recent years. Recent cataclysms of earth and weather, coming one on top of another, have caused some to wonder whether nature has gone berserk—and if the world is experiencing profound changes in climate and structure that will intensify in the future.

3. Famines.

Famines have occurred many times in the past, but they have not occurred on the scale with which they have in this century. Never before has the world had millions of people suffering from either starvation or malnutrition. The prospects for the future are hardly brighter. The unprecedented extent of starvation clearly signals that Christ's return is imminent.

Be Ready at All Times

The Bible repeatedly assures us that Jesus will return. But will He come a year from now? Five years? Ten years? Twenty years? No one knows for sure. Jesus Himself declared, "Of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only" (Matt. 24:36).

At the end of His earthly ministry Christ told the parable of the ten virgins to illustrate the experience of the church of the last days. The two classes of virgins represent the two kinds of believers who profess to be waiting for their Lord. They are called virgins because they profess a pure faith. Their lamps represent the Word of God, the oil symbolizes the Holy Spirit.

Superficially, these two groups appear alike; both go out to meet the Bridegroom, both have oil in their lamps, and their behavior doesn't seem to differ. They have all heard the message of Christ's soon coming and are looking forward to it. But then comes an apparent delay—their faith is to be tested.

Suddenly, at midnight—in the darkest hour of earth's history—they hear the cry, ""Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!"" (Matt. 25:6). Now the difference between the two groups becomes apparent: some are not ready to meet the Bridegroom. These "foolish" virgins are not hypocrites; they respect the truth, the Word of God. But they lack the oil—they have not been sealed by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rev. 7:1-3). They have been content with superficial work and have not fallen on Jesus Christ the Rock. They have a form of godliness but are destitute of God's power.

When the Bridegroom comes, only those who are ready go in with Him to the marriage celebration, and the door is shut. Eventually the foolish virgins, who had gone to purchase more oil, return and call, ""Lord, Lord, open to us!"" But the Bridegroom answers, ""I do not know you"" (Matt. 25:11-12)

How sad that when Christ returns to this earth, He will have to speak these words to some whom He loves. He warned, ""Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"" (Matt. 7:22, 23).

Before the Flood, God sent Noah to alert the antediluvian world to the coming destruction. In a similar way, God is sending a threefold message of warning to prepare the world for Christ's return (see Rev. 14:6-16).

All who accept God's message of mercy will rejoice at the prospect of the Second Advent. Theirs is the assurance, ""Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!"" (Rev. 19:9). Indeed, "to those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation" (Heb. 9:28).

The Redeemer's return brings to a glorious climax the history of God's people. It is the moment of their deliverance, and with joy and adoration they cry out, "Behold this is our God; we have waited for Him. . . we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation" (Isa. 25:9).