

# SIGNS FOR OUR TIMES

## Are We Living in the End Times?

**Text: Psalm 98; Malachi 4:1-2a; Luke 21:5-19; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13**

### Look for the Signs

Over the years, I've made a habit of collecting the texts of interesting signs. I love the one at a furniture store that read: "For sale -- Antique desk suitable for lady with thick legs and large drawers." Or the one on the door of an apartment building: "Dog for sale: Eats anything and is fond of children." Or my favorite one: "Lost: Small poodle. Shaved and neutered. Like one of the family."

Signs are an important part of life, aren't they? I don't mean just the humorous ones, but also the directive ones. For every sign that irritated us because we were forced to creep along in our car looking for those "Slow Children At Play," there are also those other signs without which we'd have surely gone down the "Wrong Way," or failed to "Stop," or neglected to "Yield," with disastrous consequences.

Perhaps that's why, when the Bible calls us to take note of what Jesus called, **"the signs of the times"** (Matt 16:3b), most of us perk up. We are almost all instinctively interested in knowing how to read what is going on in our times, so that we can better prepare for what lies ahead. If there are indicators to be found of a coming crash in the marketplace or a storm on the horizon or a crisis in our health, we want to know what they are so we can act appropriately now. Am I right?

So, how much more should we be interested in reading the signs that warn us of the end of ALL things? If it was possible to know that you were living in the end times of history, close to the time when Christ was going to come again, you'd want to know that, wouldn't you? You'd want to make sure that your relationship with God is strong and that you're doing what you're meant to do in the time you have left, wouldn't you?

So that's why our Lectionary Readings for this week are important. It's because they help us read the signs of our times. When I say "signs," however, don't think of placards on poles in the ground. Don't think of these things as events at fixed points that we just pass by like signs along the highway. The signs that Jesus is talking about are more like the stickers we paste on our cars. They are themes and messages that travel with humanity down the long road of history. It is for this reason that almost every generation of Christians have seen the signs Jesus describes present in their era.

Today I want to talk with you about just a few of them. I want to take them off

the back bumper and paste them up onto the windshield of your consciousness so that these truths will always be in your vision, helping to condition how you respond to life.

### **“Evil Happens”**

The first sign we need up on our windshield is one that reads like this: “EVIL HAPPENS.” Paste that at the bottom where you can’t miss it, but it doesn’t block your view. Now, I know it isn’t fashionable to focus on this, but the Bible warns us of the reality of an intelligent and oppressive Evil at work in this world. Sometimes that Evil is described in terms of a serpent or a beast or a dragon or an antichrist, but the big idea is that there is in this universe a cruel and crafty spiritual force, which has warred against the creation and creatures God loves since the dawn of time.

But as consistent as this struggle has been throughout history, the Bible teaches that there will come a time when this insidious Evil will lash out at God’s kingdom and people with a final fury that is hard to describe. The Old Testament book of Daniel chapter 7, the Book of Revelation, and the teachings of Jesus recorded in Luke 21 and Matthew 24 all speak of this in vivid terms. How will we recognize that such a time has come? Well, the Scripture suggests that there are five trends for which we should look.

First, expect the Rise of False Authorities. In our reading from Luke’s gospel, Jesus says: **“Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them”** (Luke 21:8).

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus himself said that in the last days of human history, **“Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Messiah!’... false messiahs and false prophets will appear... to lead astray, if possible, even the elect”** servants of God (Matt 24:5, 23-24).

Secondly, expect an Increase of Conflict and Chaos in this world. Sin will run rampant, setting people against one another with a wild fury. Evil will step up its efforts in a final all-out attempt to destroy what God has created. The creation itself will begin to break-down on an unprecedented level. In the words of Jesus: **“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines, and pestilences in various places, and fearful events... These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away”** (Luke 21:9-11).

Thirdly, expect a season of Terrible Tribulation for the Followers of Christ. Jesus said that in these last days: **“They will seize you and persecute you... They will put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name”** (Luke 21:12). As only prefigured in the tyrannies of Nero, Stalin, Hitler, and Mao, families will be torn

apart and turn against one another. **"You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me"** (Luke 21:16-17). In Matthew's gospel, Jesus adds: **"Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another... At that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now"** (Matt 24:9-10).

During this season we should expect to see, fourthly, the Tearing Down of the Holy. Jesus puts it this way in Luke's gospel: **"Some of [Christ's] disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, 'as for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down'"** (Luke 21:5-6). In other words, you can expect to see the great structures God has put in place for the worship of his name and the welfare of humanity, progressively dismantled. The systems of order and justice and virtue which God laid out in the construction of this creation will be torn down, stone after stone.

All of this will lead, inexorably, to a final trend – the Apparent Victory of Evil. The Books of Daniel and Revelation are much more explicit about this but, in the gospels, Jesus puts it with characteristic brevity: **"Because of the increase of wickedness the love of many will grow cold"** (Matt 24:12). As C.S. Lewis pictures it in his Chronicles of Narnia, the love of God, of his creation, and of his creatures that makes life warm and bright, will steadily diminish before the Wicked Winter.

Now, what do you make of all this? Is this just science fiction? Just the raving of religious crazies? Or do you see any traces of these trends in our times? The rise of arrogant false authorities. The increase of conflict and chaos. Tribulation for the faithful. The tearing down of the holy. The apparent victory of evil. Are we living in the end times? If we are, then it is crucial that we recognize that there is more to the story.

### **"Fear Not"**

You see, there's a second sign that you need to peel off the bumper of your Bible and put right up there at the top edge of your windshield, where you'll see it every time you raise your eyes. It's the one that the T-shirt company labels "NO FEAR" and the angels label "FEAR NOT." One of the great themes that unites the prophetic passages of the Book of Daniel, the Book of Revelation, and the gospels themselves is that there will come a day when it will be thunderously obvious what an understatement it was when the Apostle John wrote: **"Greater is He [God] that is in You than he [Satan] who is in this world"** (1 John 4:4).

God is going to rise up in all his blazing glory and bring history as we've known it to a brilliant end. By the glory of his holiness, he will hold Evil and its servants completely accountable for their actions. By the glory of his love he will set everything right for those who have been wronged. The prophet Malachi puts it like this in one of our other Lectionary readings for this week: **"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire. Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves"** (Malachi 4:1-2).

The prophet Daniel says: **"I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven."** Like "a son of man." It's the title Jesus of Nazareth called himself by as he walked on the earth. Daniel says: **"He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshipped him... and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed"** (Daniel 7:14).

Do you get this? When God stands up to his full fiery height; when He destroys all that has damaged and disfigured the good he has made; when Jesus Christ rules a new earth; all that you may have sacrificed in the cause of staying true to God will be given back to you with eternal interest... That's what the future holds for those who have put their lives into the hands of Him who holds the future. **"Not a hair of your head will perish,"** says Jesus. So **"Stand firm, and you will win life"** (Luke 21:19).

### **"Seize the Day"**

Let me close with the question: Are we living in the end times? Some people feel the ticks of the clock are so loud you'd have to be deaf not to perceive it. Yet, again, one of the evidences of the divine genius of God's Word is that there has never been a generation that could not see the events of their lives in the pages of these prophecies. Yet Jesus himself said: **"About the exact day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father"** (Matt 24:26). The world as we know it might come to an end before you have to go back to work tomorrow! Then again these trends we're living through may only be bumps on a much longer road. Christ may not return till after the Cubs win the World Series. But one thing is certain, and it's a point I'll try to make with a final illustration.

In his book, *From Beginning to End*, author Robert Fulghum includes the picture of a photograph that hangs upon the wall of his study. It depicts a man staring off into space, as he sits in a folding chair, in the midst of a field. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that the man is actually the author himself, the field is actually a graveyard, and the spot on which he sits is

already marked with a tombstone, waiting for a final date next to his name. Fulghum says, I had the grave prepared and the photo taken simply to remind myself that I am going someplace... that it is important to use the time "between now and then"... "to keep focused in my task."

How about you? How focused are you? Maybe there is one more sign of our times we ought to paste up on the windshield of our minds. Put this one right in the center, so that we're forced to see life through it. The words on this sign read Carpe Diem... **SEIZE THE DAY**. You see, however you understand the scriptures and the history of the world, you can count on this: Your life will be gone in the twinkling of an eye, in a few ticks of the clock hand of eternity. As will mine.

So, as the Apostle Paul once wrote: Let us **"be careful, then, how we live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity"** (Ephesians 5:16). As Paul urges in our final Lectionary reading, let us not be **"idle"** in our discipleship or **"disruptive"** to the Lord's work. Let's **"never tire of doing what is good"** (2 Thess 2:11,13) every moment of every day. Because of this we can be certain: These are our end times and it matters what we do with them.

Please pray with me...

Lord, as we go into the future, we give thanks for the three great signs your Word has given us by which we may travel the road ahead. For the sign you have given us in the Cross of Christ that EVIL HAPPENS only for a fixed season; for the sign you have give us in the Empty Tomb to FEAR NOT for Your will and world shall indeed triumph in the end; and for the sign you have given us in the passing of this hour that now is the time to speak those words of love or confession... now is the time to make that change... now is the time to do the good we have intended, to share what we cannot keep, to reach out to that stranger, to take your hand... O God, with the time we have left, help us to SEIZE THE DAY. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Robert Fulghum, *From Beginning to End: The Rituals of Our Lives*. New York: Villard Books, 1995, pp.29ff.