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All of us would like to know what the future holds. What will happen to the world we live in? How will we and our loved ones be affected? Is there a way to know?

Prophecy is a thread that runs throughout the Bible from beginning to end. God says that prophecy is one of the greatest proofs of His existence. Notice His challenge in Isaiah 44:6-8 to those who doubt His existence:

“Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened . . . , and what is yet to come—yes, let them foretell what will come . . . Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me?” (New International Version, 2011).

Nothing can compare to God, who declares what will happen long before it comes to pass! History and Scripture bear witness that God foretold events many centuries before they happened, then brought them to pass just as He said.

Among all the purported holy books of the world’s religions, the Bible alone records many specific prophecies and their fulfillment—and many more prophecies that are yet to be fulfilled. The God of the Bible alone not only reveals the future, but has the astounding power to bring to pass what He has foretold!

“Remember the former things, those of long ago,” He says. “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. . . . What I have said, that I will bring about; what I have planned, that I will do” (Isaiah 46:9-10, NIV 2011).

We live in a time of dramatic and sudden change. Our world is being transformed before our eyes. The world order most of us grew up with is slipping away, being replaced by—what? No one seems to know. Today’s news anchors and analysts seem to have no clue. Where can we look for answers?

At Beyond Today magazine and TV, we know where to look, and that gives us the answers as to where the world is headed and why. We look to God’s Word, the Bible—studying, applying and living by it. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” the Bible tells us in Psalm 111:10. “A good understanding have all those who do His commandments.”

Because we teach and strive to live by God’s commandments, we’ve received an understanding of today’s society and culture sadly lacking in most media. We have the “good understanding” God promises to those who fear and obey Him.

Because of this, we understand a principle largely forgotten in today’s world—the principle of cause and effect or, as the Bible puts it, reaping what we sow (Galatians 6:7). This applies to both individuals and nations. Two lengthy chapters in the Bible—Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28—make this clear. They’re commonly called the “blessings and curses” chapters because they describe what happens when a nation obeys and honors God (bringing blessings) and what happens when a nation rejects God and disobeys Him (resulting in curses).

And this brings us to a key reason that prophecy should matter to you. Much of Bible prophecy is sobering and frightening—particularly that which describes the times just ahead. But God wants the best for you. He doesn’t want anyone to suffer. A key purpose for prophecy is that God wants us to repent so we are not caught off guard once these terrible event come!

Through the great biblical prophet Ezekiel, He tells us one of the key reasons for Bible prophecy: “‘As I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die . . . ?’” (Ezekiel 33:11).

Frightening and dangerous times lie ahead. But the message of Bible prophecy is that if you listen to God, heed His warnings and turn wholeheartedly to a life of surrendering to and obeying Him, you can be spared those times and begin living a life of hope.

Are you willing to take that step?
Beyond Today

By Peter Eddington

My wife tells me I like to stay a little too informed of weather reports! I feel it’s good to know if rain’s in the forecast. Often we can tell when a thunderstorm is looming. We see black clouds rolling across the horizon. We feel the wind pick up. We hear thunder in the distance. Besides, we have the TV weather forecast—and, you know, I like to stay informed! She says, “Well, just look out the window and you’ll see what the weather is!”

The truth is, we’re quite good at predicting the weather today. Meteorologists can even tell us if we should expect rain a week from now.

Jesus referred to weather forecasting of His day in Matthew 16: “Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, ‘When it is evening you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red;” and in the morning, “It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.” Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times’” (verses 1-3, emphasis added throughout).

They should have known from all that was happening and the lead up to it that the Messiah was among them as foretold. Even so, the Bible reveals signs of His second coming. For example, Jesus gave a detailed prophecy in Luke 21 of what things would look like at the end of this age, with the Kingdom of God about to take over and replace Satan’s rule of this planet.

After listing conditions and events, Jesus drew another analogy, saying: “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 also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near” (verses 29-31).

He further stated, “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (verse 36).

Please understand, watching doesn’t make us worthy. That depends on our relationship with God and our obedience to Him. Forgiveness offered through Christ is what makes us counted worthy to stand before Him without guilt—when we repent and follow Him. This is why we pray always.

Yet Jesus tells us to discern the signs of the times and to watch what’s happening. This will give us a needed sense of urgency, along with inner peace and trust in God to make it through.

Here we’ll look at seven end-time conditions to watch for—signs revealing the spiritual weather forecast of our day. If we’re watching carefully we’ll see when the fig tree is blooming, figuratively speaking, indicating that the Kingdom of God is very near!
1. The decline of the English-speaking nations

Much of Bible prophecy concerns Israel, but that includes much more than the modern Jewish state. The Jewish people are mostly of Judah, just one of the 12 tribes of Israel. Studying history and archeology along with the Bible, it is possible to determine who the modern descendants of ancient Israel are today. Foremost among them are the people of the United States, Great Britain and other English-speaking nations. (Be sure to read our study guide The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy to learn more.)

Sadly, biblical prophecy describes the decline of the end-time Israelites. This will be caused by a combination of war, financial collapse, natural disasters and social breakdown, with immorality and national sin leading to punishment.

The modern Jewish state of Israel will be in an especially perilous situation. Right now it is surrounded by threats—a soon-to-be nuclear-armed Iran to the east, Syrian chemical and biological warfare to the north, terrorist groups on all sides.

The biblical book of Hosea was meant for both ancient and end-time Israel. Listing many of the nation’s sins, the prophet delivers God’s warning of judgment if things don’t change: “Hear the word of the LORD, you children of Israel, for the LORD brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land: ‘There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land.

2. A 10-member European-centered superstate

With an analysis of history, prophecy shows the formation of a powerful European-centered superstate of 10 nations or groups of nations shortly before Christ returns—a final resurrection of the Holy Roman Empire.
The book of Revelation calls this power bloc and its dictatorial ruler “the beast”—the system portrayed as a seven-headed beast with 10 horns (see Revelation 13 and 17; compare Daniel 7). The final revival here is what Daniel 11 presents as the last “king of the North” (north of Jerusalem). In Daniel 2, the 10 toes of a metallic human image are a corollary to the 10 horns of the final revival (download and read our study guide The Final Superpower for more detail).

The apostle John recorded: “The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who . . . receive authority for one hour [a short period] as kings with the beast. These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast” (Revelation 17:12-13).

This short-lived, end-time empire is orchestrated by Satan, the seven heads and 10 horns emerging from him (Revelation 12:3, 9; 13:2). Amazingly, the Beast power and its ruler will be worshipped worldwide. Satan will transform this political and military might into a great religious crusade.

John wrote: “And I saw one of his heads as if it had been mortally wounded, and his deadly wound was healed. And all the world marveled and followed the beast” (verse 3). This foretold the Roman Empire’s past fall and its later resurrection. In fact, there have been several successive Roman revivals.

“So they worshiped the dragon who gave authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, ‘Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?’” (verse 4).

Thus, it’s a military power as well as a political and religious power. Revelation 18 shows the system, there called Babylon, to also be a great economic power.

Continuing in chapter 13: “And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months”—3½ years (verse 5). This corresponds to the “one hour” or short period of the final revival we saw above.

“Then he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven. It was granted to him to make war with the saints [true Christians] and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation” (verses 6-7). So this is a world-spanning totalitarian power, the likes of which we have never seen.

We’re further told that “all who dwell on the earth will worship him” except for those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life—Christ’s true followers who obey God (verse 8). And: “If anyone has an ear, let him hear” (verse 9). What we read here is that we’d better be listening to this warning. We’d better be watching and make sure we’re on God’s side—not the devil’s. So:

Watch for the continued unification or restructuring of the European Union into a merging of 10 powerful nations or groups of nations with the world’s largest economy that will dominate the globe.

Watch for the decline of the democratic influence in the European Union and a drift into autocratic leadership, most likely dominated by Germany.

For several decades following World War II, Germany appeared content to just let France lead the way in European affairs. But in recent years, their partnership has been a lot more equal, and the pendulum now even swings more toward Germany.

Watch for the people of the world to look to a man to save them—trading their freedom for rescue from total societal collapse. The world may be in such disarray that people are happy to have someone take charge.

Watch for other nations to follow Britain in seeking to leave the European Union as Europe moves away from democratic principles. It could be that this is how there will be just 10 national rulers handing over power in the final union, as Daniel and Revelation both prophesy.

Watch for the continued decline of Russia as it finds itself outside of both Europe and Asia. The culture of the czars and the Soviet premiers and presidents is not working in modern times.

Watch for the buildup of European military might, like many journalists are predicting, centered once again in Germany.

3•A powerful false church

As the new European political and military power develops, an influential religious leader over a powerful church will provide guidance and unity to this superpower. The book of Revelation refers to this church as “the great whore” and “the mother of harlots,” and its leader as “the false prophet.”

A woman is used to represent Israel and the true Church in Revelation 12. The true Church is “the church of the living God” (1 Timothy 3:15) which will become the bride of Christ at His return (Revelation 19:7-9). This woman is arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, representing the righteous acts of God’s faithful people (Revelation 19:8).

But, in contrast, in Revelation 17 a wealthy, immoral woman is used to depict a revival of ancient pagan Babylon as a false church: “The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus . . . The angel said to me, ‘. . . I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns’” (Revelation 17:4-7).

This false church, led by the False Prophet who will perform “great signs” (Revelation 13:13 19:20; 2 Thessalonians 2:9), will
direct the end-time Roman Empire, as it did the earlier empire and previous revivals.

Through her influential relationships with the highest political and social circles, she will become the pride of this world but also will be the relentless persecutor of God’s people. God accuses her of being “drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (verse 6).

Her cultural and religious roots go back to ancient Babel, the city where mankind rebelled against God soon after the great flood in the time of Noah (Genesis 11:4, 9).

When the apostle John saw her (this harlot woman representing the great false church) he “marveled with great amazement.” Then the angel said to John: “The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues” (Revelation 17:6, 15).

Watch for the increasing prominence of a powerful false church with influence worldwide—over “peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues” (Revelation 17:1, 15).

Watch for a church that commits “fornication” with the world’s political leaders—compromising principles and exchanging favors (verse 2).

Watch for the increasing influence of a church considered the “mother” of many other churches (verse 5).

Watch for a church whose teachings and practices originated in the ancient Babylonian mystery religion (verse 5).

Watch for a church responsible for the persecution and martyrdom of many true Christians down through history (verse 6).

4. New alliances and the king of the South

The new world order of globalization has resulted in the rise of new powers in the place of domineering superpowers. Smaller nations hold hostage the greater powers of our day. And even smaller terrorist organizations wreak havoc and fear on much larger enemies.

All this is leading toward new alliances. These relationships are based on financial benefit, including regional trade, and on mutual protection, with consolidation of military strength.

So, with the decline of the English-speaking nations mentioned earlier, who will fill the power vacuum?

Much of the answer is found in Daniel 11, the longest continuous prophecy in the Bible. Historians can go through its verses, one by one, and pinpoint exactly what Daniel prophesied—Alexander the Great, the great empires of the world, various wars and conflicts through the centuries. And then we come to verse 40, which concerns the end time.

“At the time of the end the king of the South shall attack him [the king of the North]; and the king of the North shall come against him like a whirlwind, with chariots, horsemen, and with many ships; and he shall enter the countries, overthrow them, and pass through. He shall also enter the Glorious Land [the Holy Land], and many countries shall be overthrown; but these shall escape from his hand: Edom, Moab and the prominent people of Ammon [modern Jordan]. He shall stretch out his hand against the countries, and the land of Egypt shall not escape” (Daniel 11:40-42).

What we see here is the aforementioned united European power as the king of the North, being to the north of Jerusalem. The king of the South is most likely a group of Islamic nations centered to the south of Jerusalem that will band together to protect and advance their interests, religion and culture. You can read a detailed analysis of this in our free study guide The Middle East in Bible Prophecy.

What may cause the coming war between these two regional powers—between Europe and the Arab world? Time will tell. So:

Watch for increased tension between the Muslim world and Christianity—tension that will eventually result in war, as foretold in Daniel 11.

Watch for regional trading blocs in North America, Europe and Asia to become powerful political partners leading to trade wars between the different regions of the world.

Watch for war to break out in the Middle East—not just small clashes in front of embassies, but full-scale war.

Watch for Israel and Jerusalem to be at the center of conflict.

Watch for the rise of the king of the North in Europe and the king of the South in the Islamic and Arab world, leading to a conflict of ideology between the West and Islam, between North and South, as prophesied in the book of Daniel.

5. A vast Asian power bloc

Revelation 9 reveals a great Asian regional power whose massive armies will attack the forces of the king of the North in the last days, this being announced by the sixth of seven trumpet blasts in the book.

John writes: “Then the sixth angel sounded: And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, ‘Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates [at what was then the eastern edge of the Roman Empire].’ So
the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day
and month and year, were released to kill a third of mankind”

This will be a huge war. “Now the number of the army of
the horsemen was two hundred million; I heard the number
of them” (verse 16).

This event, the sixth trumpet plague called “the second woe,”
seems to be a massive counterattack from beyond the Euphrates
River against the European-led forces of what was the fifth
trumpet plague or first woe (compare Revelation 8:13; 9:12; 11:14).

In Revelation 16:12 we again see “the kings from the east”
specifically associated with the Euphrates River: “Then the
sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates,
and its water was dried up, so that the way of the kings from
the east might be prepared.”

These forces will play a major role in the final events of this
age. So:

Watch for China to become a dominant financial and
military power in Asia, as its
1.4 billion people and growing
economy modernize. Studies claim
China could have as many as 3,000
nuclear warheads.

Watch for an unstable peace
between many Asian nations leading
to warfare. Problems between India and Pakistan
will continue.

Watch for political instability to increase as
millions of people in India now enter the middle
class, seeking greater political freedom and wealth.

Watch for growing cooperation and partnership
between many Asian powers, including China,
India, Russia and Iran. We already see this in what
is called the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

6. The gospel preached in all nations

The true gospel message of Jesus Christ and the
Kingdom of God must be preached to all nations
of the world. This is the commission given to God’s
Church (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15), and the
United Church of God and Beyond Today magazine
and TV take this imperative very seriously.

In laying out events preceding His return, Jesus
said that “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached
in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and
then the end will come” (Matthew 24:13-14).

But we are warned that a time will come when
the gospel will not be proclaimed. God says in Amos 8:9-12 that
there will be “a famine . . . of hearing the words of the Lord.”

God’s Church will at that time be so severely persecuted
that it will not be able to effectively preach the gospel.

Recall what we read earlier of the Beast in Revelation 13:6-7:
“Then he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to
blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in
heaven. It was granted to him to make war with the saints and
to overcome them.”

Then, at this coming time of Great Tribulation, God will
send two witnesses to preach: “And I will give power to my two
witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred
and sixty days [3 ½ years]” (Revelation 11:3). It therefore seems
that the famine of the word will occur prior to the Great
Tribulation when destruction and captivity is imminent.

God’s two witnesses will stand in opposition to the Beast
and the False Prophet. Jerusalem will find itself in the vortex
of a great spiritual battle, as prophesied events reach a climax. So:

Watch for the Church of God to preach the gospel until it is
prevented from doing so.

Watch for the Church to expand its technology to preach
the gospel in many languages to reach billions of people
around the world.

Watch for the Church of God to be increasingly persecuted by
governments and the public for its unique beliefs and practices,
such as the observance of God’s seventh-day Sabbath and His
annual festivals, rejection of Christmas and Easter, upholding of
God’s dietary laws, and the biblical belief in the God family and
the rejection of the unbiblical concept of the Trinity.

Watch for God to use two uniquely called individuals to
receive international media attention as they powerfully
preach a warning message to the entire world.

Watch for God to use the technologies that mankind has
discovered to instantly reach billions of people of all languages
with His gospel and warning messages—and we’re seeing that
more and more as each day goes by.

7. The Bride of Christ prepares for His return

The end-time Church of God prepares itself to serve the
living Christ at His return. This is necessary to its members
becoming ready to rule in the Kingdom of God—to be leaders
and teachers of God’s way in the future (compare Revelation
5:10; 20:4, 6). These are people filled with God’s Spirit who believe their purpose is to serve others and develop the fruit of the Spirit in their lives (Galatians 5:22-23).

Revelation 19 talks of this momentous event that culminates after all of the seals of the book have been opened. We are here close to the end of the story:

“‘Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.’ And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, ‘Write: “Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!”’” (verses 7-9). So:

**Watch for** God’s Church, those “who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 12:17; see 14:12) to become more zealous and committed disciples.

“And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:24-25).

**And then?**

What will happen next? At last, Jesus returns and the Kingdom of God arrives! It’s the end of this present evil age when the world enters a new age, a new beginning where peace and true religion prevail. It will be a time when all of humanity will be offered salvation and eternal life.

Our world will become a wonderful place, with Christ as our King. That’s the message we preach today—the gospel of the Kingdom of God—God’s Kingdom being established on the earth by Jesus Christ.

That world will be a stark contrast to what we see today. Hunger, suffering, child slavery, wars, violence, riots—these will be things of the past—history. This world will be a different place under the rule of the Kingdom of God.

**The final weather report**

It’s good to know if rain or sunshine is in the forecast. Weather forecasters are quite good at forecasting tomorrow’s weather, but we’re looking beyond that. For we know that ultimately true sunshine is in the forecast, don’t we?

How are you at discerning the signs of the times? Jesus told us to watch. If we are watching carefully and keep the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, we will see when the fig tree is blooming. And we’ll know and expect that the Kingdom of God is very near!

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**LEARN MORE**

Many are confused about what the Bible teaches regarding the end time. What does it really say? How can we properly prepare for what’s coming? Be sure to download or request our free study guide Are We Living in the Time of the End?

BTmagazine.org/booklets
Multiple terror attacks strike Britain

We’re going to see a lot of stories like this in the news over the next few years. The migration of refugees into Europe has become the perfect cloak for anyone wanting to commit acts of terror. A suicide attacker has the upper hand because he is only one hard-to-find person.

One person has the power to do a lot of harm, and it doesn’t require coordinating with a group. Recently, a suicide bomber killed himself and 22 others at a pop music concert in Manchester, England, and an asylum seeker was caught planning another such attack in Germany (“Police in Germany ‘Foil Asylum Seeker Suicide Attack,’” BBC News, May 30, 2017).

Another attack on the London Bridge involved a rented vehicle and multiple stabblings by a group of men. Neighbors of one of the perpetrators reported him to authorities at least twice after he had attempted to convert their children to radical Islam in a local park. Another “was born in Pakistan and raised in London. By the time of his death, he had been brought to the attention of police several times over his extremist views and had even appeared in a documentary about British Islamist extremists called “The Jihadi Next Door” (“How a Man Raised in London Wound Up Involved With Britain’s Latest Terror Attack,” Public Radio International website).

While it’s encouraging to know that officials knew many of the recent attackers and their history with extremism, it’s inexcusable that nothing was done until many innocent people died.

The damage a suicide attacker is able to do—all immediate and in long-term impact—is staggering. Thankfully the police in Germany were able to act before they saw all of the signs in this instance, but recent events in the UK are sobering. Hopefully, we’ll continue to read headlines of attacks foiled rather than attacks actually occurring as we move forward in this new reality. (Source: BBC News, Public Radio International.)

Egypt’s Copts face terrible danger, persecution

While no one in the Middle East is safe as ISIS forces continue their reign of terror on the ground, perhaps no single group has a greater target on its back at the moment than Egypt’s Coptic Christian population.

Copts have been targeted for violence by ISIS supporters for some time now, but the atrocities are getting increased visibility following several high-profile attacks in recent months that have left scores dead. Particularly troubling is the violence perpetrated on unarmed, defenseless churchgoers in Coptic places of worship.

In the face of continued persecution, Egypt’s Copts have stood firm not only in facing violence but also in refusing to respond in kind to their attackers. As pointed out in The Washington Post: “Copts have endured centuries of discriminatory policies at the hands of successive Egyptian regimes, attacks and incitement by Islamist groups, and pogroms by their very neighbors. Yet there has not been a single Coptic terrorist attack as reprisal or violent response.

“For terrorism experts insisting that terrorism is the result of poverty or the lack of political freedom, the Copts—who are just as poor and unfree as the majority of Egyptians—stand as an anomaly and an unwelcome testament to the ridiculousness of their [that is, these so-called experts’] theories” (Samuel Tadros, “The Continuing Tragedy of Egypt’s Coptic Christians,” May 30, 2017).

For Christians in the Western world, the terrible dangers faced every day by Egypt’s Copts should serve as both a wake-up call and a challenge to examine our own depth of faith. Will we one day be faced with the same dangers and choices facing these men and women today? If so, how will we respond? Hopefully, with God’s help, we would respond with faith and an eye on the goal of God’s Kingdom, the wonderful future awaiting His faithful servants. (Source: The Washington Post.)

Embellished ISIS moves underground and online

The U.S.-led Western coalition efforts against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS or ISIS) are having the intended effect of weakening ISIS forces on the ground in places like Iraq and Syria. As the presence of ISIS is diminished, however, terrorist leaders are looking for other spheres of influence and methods for pushing their agenda of violent extremism.

ISIS has always used the Internet effectively in its recruiting efforts, with well-run websites, social media accounts and an online magazine, but the future of ISIS will center on the ground and online as it weathers the current onslaught from American forces supporting a patchwork of anti-ISIS forces arrayed against the U.S.-led Western coalition efforts against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS or ISIS) are having the intended effect of weakening ISIS forces on the ground in places like Iraq and Syria. As the presence of ISIS is diminished, however, terrorist leaders are looking for other spheres of influence and methods for pushing their agenda of violent extremism.

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We’ve already seen some of the terrible results of ISIS’ online recruitment—lone wolf attacks in Western nations, radicalization of Muslim youth abroad and a rally point for terrorist sympathizers. While ISIS may become less relevant in the Middle East, the fear is that it may simultaneously become more dangerous abroad. “If ISIS is close to being defeated—as many analysts have claimed in recent months—why is there heightened concern about its potential to conduct attacks? . . . [In May] the State Department released a travel warning for Americans heading to Europe . . . The United Kingdom just [afterward] elevated its threat level from severe to critical” (ibid.).

The apostle Paul taught that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness” (Ephesians 6:12). It is the spiritual darkness behind ISIS and radical Islam that is the real threat, and that evil spirit knows no national boundaries and cannot be defeated by human means. Only the coming of Jesus Christ will depose the darkness behind ISIS. (Source: The National Interest.)
North Korean leader’s bravo d a growing danger

In spite of sanctions, warnings and threats, North Korea presses forward with advanced missile testing. North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong Un says his country will continue to develop weapons to protect itself.

“Kim said the reclusive state would develop more powerful weapons in multiple phases in accordance with its timetable to defend North Korea against the United States. He expressed the conviction that it would make a greater leap forward in this spirit to send a bigger ‘gift package’ to the ‘Yankees’ in retaliation for American military provocation” (Ju-min Park and Jack Kim, “North Korea Warns of ‘Bigger Gift Package’ for U.S. After Latest Test,” Reuters, May 30, 2017).

Calling out the United States shows the confidence the North Korean leader has in his country’s weapons developments. It also shows that very little will stop them from continuing their nuclear and missile programs.

Jesus Christ warned of a coming escalation in “wars and rumors of wars.” We are in such a time now. We hear daily about the developments of weapons in places like Korea and Iran, countries that would do harm to many should they attain the power to do so. But Jesus added after His ominous warning, “See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet” (Matthew 24:6).

This doesn’t mean everyone will be spared from calamity, but it means we should have confidence in God. Though we know of ongoing terror in the world today, Jesus tells us to not be troubled. Knowing that is comforting and shows that no matter what we see in the headlines, our God is in control. (Source: Reuters.)

Balkans remain a regional interest

With all eyes on the Middle East’s continually roiling violence, on the political wrangling between NATO and Russia, and on North Korea’s ever-increasing belligerence, little attention is paid to the Balkans, a region often forgotten but rarely irrelevant. The Balkans’ position at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East produced a region with a rich, complicated, violent history. Despite the best intentions and efforts of some, the future of the region likely will continue to be complicated and violent.

David Kanin, lecturer at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, explains: “There are many differences between the Balkans and the Middle East, but they have two things in common. Both regions are former pieces of the Ottoman Empire that have not found stability since that empire receded in the late 19th century . . . The Balkan region—a fluid concept with changing ‘membership’ over the past two centuries—continues to struggle to orient itself in the wake of the collapse of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. The shards of that country are going in different directions” (“Will the Balkan Tinderbox Ignite Again?” The Cipher Brief, May 24, 2017).

Kanin points out that Western efforts to redraw the Balkan map have proved controversial, to say the least, with Kosovo, the most recent nation-state in the Balkans, still not receiving full international support for its very existence. It seems the best efforts to create stability in the Balkans have not produced lasting change.

Not mentioned by Kanin is the still minor but potentially troubling presence of radical Islamists in the region. Bosnia and Kosovo are both Muslim-majority nations with their own history of a radical underbelly. Given the instability of the region in general, how long until the Balkans yet again erupt in conflict and violence? Given the history of Balkan conflict rippling out to the rest of Europe and beyond, we can be certain that the future of the Balkan nations will impact the rest of us in a big way. (Source: The Cipher Brief.)

Prescription drugs now the preference of millennials

The drug debate in America goes on. As a candidate, Donald Trump made a vow to continue waging the war against illegal drugs. He promised to put a wall along America’s southern border—partly to keep down illegal immigration, but also to keep drugs from crossing into the country.

The use of illicit drugs is actually down from previous generations. The Economist recently reported: “Consumption of many illegal drugs is declining. An analysis by DrugAbuse.com, a treatment hotline, shows that millennials (defined as those born between 1983 and 2002) use less marijuana and cocaine than baby-boomers did at the same age. But as the leading street drugs have become less popular, prescription painkillers have filled the void: over the past decade opioid abuse has soared” (“Millennials Are Less Keen Than Previous Generations on Illicit Drugs,” May 30, 2017).

While the use of illegal drugs is declining, the rise in abuse of prescription pain medication is alarming. Because no stigma is attached to the use of drugs prescribed by a doctor, use of pain meds—apart from overt evidence of a problem—is socially acceptable. But acceptability in this case opens the door to greater harm. The fact that opioids are the drug of choice shows that people are trying to mask pain. Whether physical or emotional, pain is what people are running from. Of course, it’s not wrong to seek relief from pain, and strong medications can be helpful in some cases, but we must be careful to not ignore the root causes, form addictions and end up saddled with yet more pain.

Sadly, this world is full of pain, suffering and empty and meaningless lives because so few understand the purpose for human existence and so many have rejected God. But God offers hope and a new world under the reign of Jesus Christ when pain and suffering will come to an end and individuals will no longer have to look for ways to manage their pain on their own. Learn more about this in our free study guide Why Were You Born? (Source: The Economist.)

How can you make sense of the news?

So much is happening in the world, and so quickly. Where are today’s dramatic and dangerous trends taking us? What does Bible prophecy reveal about our future? You’re probably very concerned with the direction the world is heading. So are we. That’s one reason we produce the Beyond Today daily TV commentaries—to help you understand the news in the light of Bible prophecy. These eye-opening presentations offer you a perspective so badly needed in our confused world—the perspective of God’s Word. Visit us at ucg.org/beyond-today/daily
On Aug. 29, 1949, the Soviet Union successfully detonated its first atomic bomb at a remote experimental site in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (today’s Kazakhstan). This came as a shock to many U.S. officials, who didn’t think the Soviets could develop atomic weapons capability so soon after World War II.

Following that episode and throughout much of the 1950s and 60s, the fear of a Soviet nuclear attack against America and its allies was profound. During that time many experts believed that the immediate danger from a nuclear blast would come as a result of its intense heat and from debris and glass flying through the air. Consequently, civil defense “duck and cover” safety drills were conducted by schools and communities across the United States.

As a pupil in elementary school during that time, I participated in those exercises. My schoolmates and I were taught that if we saw the flash of a nuclear fireball, we should duck down under our desks and cover our heads with our hands. After the shock wave, we were to move immediately to the school’s basement cafeteria, which also served as a fallout shelter for ostensible protection from exposure to nuclear radiation.

Although such civil defense drills are a thing of the past, the threat posed by nuclear weapons remains very real. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, thousands of nuclear weapons remained in Russia’s possession. Today, besides the United States and Russia, seven other countries possess nuclear arsenals—China, France, India, Israel, the United Kingdom, Pakistan and North Korea.

For decades the greatest danger to America and its allies was Russia, but now North Korea seems to have taken that position due to its unpredictability and open threats to use nukes against the United States. Plus, Iran will almost certainly pose a nuclear peril to the world within several years. To understand this overall problem, let’s examine the sobering security situations these nations present.

**Nuclear weapons threat: Russia**

Today most Americans think very little about nuclear weapons. However, this powerful, deadly technology matters a great deal to the Russian people and their leaders. Russia relies on its nuclear arsenal as a source of national pride, being one of the last vestiges of its former superpower status. According to the Federation of American Scientists, which calculates nuclear weapon stockpiles, the Russian Federation currently possesses more than 4,300 operational warheads.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is not averse to using his country’s nuclear capability to pressure and threaten his adversaries. For example, to express dissatisfaction with perceived NATO incursions into a portion of Russia’s “neighborhood” (former Soviet bloc countries along its western border in the Baltic Sea region), Putin used his nation’s mobile nuclear missile launchers to project power.

This occurred in October 2016 when he ordered nuclear-capable Iskander ballistic missiles to be placed in Kaliningrad, a Russian province between the NATO states of Poland and Lithuania on the Baltic Sea. Putin’s action prompted an anxious response from those nations and others in the region.

Putin said at the time, “We must take counter-measures, that is, strike with our missile systems the targets that in our opinion begin to threaten us” (quoted by Nicole Stinson, “Vladimir Putin Moves Nuke-Capable Missiles Closer to Europe in Latest Move Against NATO,” *Daily Star*, Nov. 22, 2016).

Besides its moves in the Baltic region, Russia has flexed its muscles in other ways, such as its annexation of Crimea in 2014, its overt support of Russian-separatist forces in eastern Ukraine beginning that same year, and its military ground and air operational support (beginning in September 2015) of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war.

Russia’s confrontational approach to the United States and its allies has taken an even more troublesome turn with its efforts to develop a new intercontinental ballistic missile system. Putin’s action was in response to perceived threats related to NATO’s missile defense system, which became operational in Europe in July 2016.

*Newsweek* recently reported: “Russia has for months been testing a giant nuclear weapons delivery system that can carry 10 heavyweight warheads. Russia began testing the Sarmat last year and had been expected to enter it into service in 2018. The Russian weapon was designed to push through U.S. missile...
U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis declared North Korea’s push to acquire nuclear-armed missiles a “clear and present danger” and an “urgent military threat.”

defenses. It is expected to replace the RS-36M, which was known as ‘Satan’ by NATO in the 1970s” (Cristina Silva, “Russia’s New ‘Satan’ Nuclear Weapons System Could Wipe Out Texas or France,” March 23, 2017).

In addition, as TIME magazine pointed out, “Moscow has also returned to a habit of nuclear threats, while in its military exercises, it has begun to practice for a nuclear strike, according to the NATO military alliance” (Simon Shuster, “Why Russia Is Rebuilding Its Nuclear Arsenal,” April 4, 2016).

Nuclear weapons threat: North Korea

Another peril facing the United States and its allies comes from North Korea, with its accelerating missile development program and nuclear attack capability. Although it’s the world’s 51st most populous country, North Korea according to some sources fields the earth’s largest army with 1.3 million men under arms, led by “supreme leader” Kim Jong un.

Its armed forces face South Korea’s 625,000 frontline military personnel and 28,000 U.S. troops stationed in South Korea. North Korea is “equipped with 20,000 artillery pieces, 1,000 short- and medium-range missiles, 70 submarines, more than 400 patrol/missile boats and 563 combat aircraft. A strike against [South Korea’s capital] Seoul would be devastating” (Christopher Wallace, “North Korea’s Army: 1.2M Men, Obsolete Equipment and Nukes,” Fox News, April 28, 2017).

Seoul is a city of 10 million people—the most densely populated in the world. And it’s located only 30 miles from the demilitarized zone, the disputed boundary between the two nations.

While a military conflict in that region employing only conventional weapons would be dreadful in terms of loss of life, injury and property damage, the carnage and destruction resulting from a nuclear strike or exchange would be unthinkable. Despite that, considering its belligerent rhetoric and actions, North Korea appears to be preparing for such an eventuality—after having conducted five successful nuclear tests between 2006 and September 2016.

The country’s central news agency Rodong Sinmun declared on May 2, 2017, that the state will launch a devastating strike to “reduce the only part of the U.S. mainland to ruins.” An American expert, highly knowledgeable about the menace posed by electromagnetic pulse (EMP) weapons, suggests this threat should not be taken lightly (see “Terrorism and EMP Weapons: Iran and North Korea” on page 15).

The number of operational plutonium-based nuclear weapons possessed by North Korea is estimated at 10 to 30. “Unless something changes, North Korea’s arsenal may well hit 50 weapons by the end of [President Donald] Trump’s term. American officials say the North already knows how to shrink those weapons so they can fit atop one of its short- to medium-range missiles—putting South Korea and Japan, and the thousands of American troops deployed in those two nations, within range.” (David Sanger and William Broad, “As North Korea Speeds Its Nuclear Program, U.S. Fears Time Will Run Out,” The New York Times, April 24, 2017, emphasis added throughout).

Admiral Harry Harris, Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, told the Armed Services Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives in late April: “North Korea vigorously pursued a strategic strike capability in 2016. Kim’s strategic capabilities are not yet an existential threat to the U.S., but if left unchecked, he will gain the capability to match his rhetoric.” (“Hawaii Threatened by North Korea Now, U.S. Commander Tells Congress,” McClatchy DC Bureau, April 26, 2017).

On June 3, at an international security conference in Singapore, U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis declared North Korea’s push to acquire nuclear-armed missiles a “clear and present danger,” an “urgent military threat” and “a threat to all” (quoted by Robert Burns, “Mattis: North Korea a ‘Clear and Present Danger’ to World, ABC News website, June 3, 2017).

President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping have agreed to work with the international community to try to achieve a peaceful solution to the North Korea nuclear threat. China has since suspended some imports of North Korean coal, consistent with UN sanctions, and began urging Kim Jong un to stop nuclear and missile activities.

President Trump’s approach is to pressure North Korea into dismantling its nuclear, ballistic missile and proliferation programs by instituting robust economic sanctions and taking stronger diplomatic actions.

After an April 26, 2017, White House briefing to U.S. senators regarding North Korea’s progress in nuclear weapons and missile capabilities, Defense Secretary
Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Director of Intelligence Dan Coats said in a joint statement: “The United States seeks stability and the peaceful denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. We remain open to negotiations towards that goal. However, we remain prepared to defend ourselves and our allies.”

In an interview following that briefing, U.S. Senator Chris Coons of Delaware commented on the nuclear threat posed by North Korea by stating, “This is a very dangerous circumstance.”

Nuclear weapons threat: Iran

A third potential nuclear weapons danger to the United States and its allies arises from Iran. For more than six decades Iran had been engaged in efforts to develop nuclear energy technology. However it has always declared that all its nuclear activities are for peaceful purposes.

Various authorities have disagreed with that claim and some have reported on evidence of Iran’s efforts to acquire the capacity and expertise to build nuclear weapons. In a report from Nov. 25, 2015, the United Nations atomic agency assessed “that a range of activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device were conducted in Iran prior to the end of 2003 as a coordinated effort, and some activities took place up to 2009” (George Jahn, “UN Atomic Agency Believes Iran Conducted Experiments Meant to Develop Nuclear Weapons,” US News & World Report, Dec. 2, 2015).

On July 14, 2015, Iran and six world powers—China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States—reached an agreement to limit Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for relief from economic sanctions. These negotiations left ambiguity as to whether Iran would build nuclear weapons. But as noted above, Iran had previously developed the technologies needed to accomplish this in a relatively short period.

Added to its previous work on nuclear weapons science, Iran is formulating advanced missile delivery capability. “Tehran is developing increasingly sophisticated missiles and improving the range and accuracy of its other missile systems” (Anthony Cordesman, “Iran, Missiles, and Nuclear Weapons,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Dec. 9, 2015).

An Iran with nuclear weapons would pose a severe threat to the security of the United States and its allies, along with the world at large. Consider the danger in these circumstances:

- A nuclear-armed Iran, coupled with the ability to miniaturize nuclear warheads so as to be mounted on intercontinental ballistic missiles, would create an existential threat.
- America's Arab allies, such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia—which are anxious about Iran's provocative regional actions—would feel significantly more vulnerable and threatened by a nuclear-armed Iran.
- If Iran develops nuclear weapons, it would likely trigger nuclear proliferation to other countries in the Middle East—such as Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia—which would lead to even greater regional instability.
- Iran could share its nuclear weapons technology and proficiency with extremist groups such as Hezbollah, which is virulently hostile to Israel and the United States.
- These are some of the reasons why the development of nuclear weapons capability by Iran is unacceptable to the United States and its allies.

What does the future hold?

But beyond the present dangers and threats posed by Russia, North Korea and Iran, what lies ahead for the United States and its allies? Will they end up locked in armed conflict? The immediate answer for the short term is that no one really knows. Nevertheless, the Bible is very clear regarding trends and events that will take place in what it describes as “the time of the end” (Daniel 12:4, 9).

That future period will be incredibly dangerous and disastrous. As Jesus Christ Himself foretold: “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:21-22).

This time of “great tribulation”—described also as “a time of trouble” and “Jacob’s trouble” (Daniel 12:1; Jeremiah 30:5-7)—will be so fearsome that if Jesus Christ doesn't return to earth to end it, the entire human race will face extinction. When warfare, which includes the use of nuclear weapons, is combined with immensely destructive natural and supernatural forces, the future period of savagery and upheaval will make all previous periods of war seem tame by comparison.

The coming great tribulation will strike principally, but not be limited to, the modern-day descendants of ancient Israel. This includes the United States, Britain, other British-descended peoples and the present-day Jewish state of Israel. As Bible prophecy indicates, these nations will be attacked and plundered by malicious enemies at that time.

There is no indication in prophecy of a nation like the United States standing as a world superpower at the time of Christ's return, giving further reason to understand that America will have collapsed sometime prior. (Other prophecies do reveal the United States as an end-time superpower, but the time frame is well before the final events yet to come.)

The downfall of the United States, Britain and other modern descendants of ancient Israel will occur because their citizens will have largely turned away from God in reckless disobedience and lost His protection.
It’s important to note that Bible prophecy often has dual application and fulfillment—in both ancient times and the end time. The prophet Isaiah described both the people of ancient Israel and their contemporary descendants: “This is a rebellious people, lying children, children who will not hear the law of the Lord; who say to the seers, ‘Do not see,’ and to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us right things; speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits. Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us’” (Isaiah 30:9-11).

Not only have many people in these nations abandoned God, they have also disregarded or spitefully despised His laws. This includes disgracing the sacred marriage relationship through rampant divorce and pervasive sexual immorality.

Terrorism & EMP Weapons

Death and destruction due to terrorism is a pervasive element of today’s society. The potential of this despicable evil frightens citizens of many countries. Among nations and groups promoting and executing these malevolent acts are Iran and North Korea. U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis described Iran as the world’s “biggest state sponsor of terrorism.”

Daniel Byman, a professor and senior associate dean at Georgetown University’s Walsh School of Foreign Service and a senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, wrote: “Iran’s leaders have used terrorism since they took power in 1979. Over 35 years later, Iran continues to use terrorism and to work with an array of violent subplot groups that use terrorism among other tactics” (“State Sponsor of Terror: The Global Threat of Iran,” Feb. 11, 2015, Brookings Institution).

In October 2008, U.S. President George W. Bush removed North Korea from the State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism in the expectation that it would agree to halt its nuclear weapons development program. The strategy didn’t work. “Several shipments of arms have been intercepted on their way from North Korea to Iran and its terrorist proxies. North Korea has certainly provided material support for terrorists and terrorist organizations” (Ethan Epstein, “North Korea Is Definitely a State Sponsor of Terrorism,” The Weekly Standard, March 6, 2017).

In addition to countless terrorist bombings and assassinations that both Iran and North Korea have helped perpetuate, these nations are researching means of developing and employing electromagnetic pulse (EMP) nuclear weapons.


While Iranian missiles cannot yet reach America, a potential nuclear weapons capability could still directly threaten the U.S. homeland. Many national security experts are worried about the possibility of a nuclear weapon arriving in a cargo container at a major U.S. port. In addition, there is great concern that a single missile containing a nuclear warhead launched from a ship or submarine off the U.S. coast and detonated in the atmosphere could destroy America’s electrical infrastructure.

“Suspected for years of plotting to dismantle the U.S. electric grid, American officials have confirmed that Iranian military brass have endorsed a nuclear electromagnetic pulse explosion that would attack the country’s power system. American defense experts made the discovery while translating a secret Iranian military handbook. A knowledgeable source said that the textbook discusses an EMP attack on America in 20 different places” (Paul Bedard, Washington Examiner, March 19, 2015).

Furthermore, North Korea launched missiles into space in April 2012 and February 2016 and now has two earth-observation satellites in low orbit. Michael Maloof, a former U.S. Defense Department security policy analyst, explained their deadly significance: “North Korea could orbit a satellite which would be the size of a nuclear bomb and detonate it upwards of 300 miles above Earth, on command, making North Korea a threat to any country as a result” (“Expert: North Korea Has EMP Attack Capability,” WND.com, April 25, 2017).

Contrary to conventional thought, North Korea does not actually need a missile capable of reaching the United States mainland to create damage and havoc. This is because a satellite-based nuclear weapon could accomplish a crippling EMP attack that could effectively bring down the U.S. power grid.

Furthermore, a high-yield megaton-class (1,000-kiloton) nuclear weapon is not required for an effective EMP strike, according to Dr. Peter Vincent Pry, executive director of the Task Force on National and Homeland Security and chief of staff of the Congressional EMP Commission. He stated: “I am looking at an unclassified U.S. Government chart that shows [that] a 10-kiloton warhead (the power of the Hiroshima A-Bomb) detonated at an altitude of 70 kilometers will generate an EMP field inflicting upset and damage on unprotected electronics” (“Time to Take NKorea Nuke Threats Seriously,” Newsmax, May 4, 2017).

By some estimates, as few as three EMP detonations properly placed above the United States could lead to the deaths of 90 percent of the U.S. population within a year from starvation and disease. The danger is real and growing.

A single nuclear missile launched from a ship off the U.S. coast and detonated in the atmosphere could destroy America’s electrical infrastructure.
as well as the horrific murder of multiple millions of children through abortion.

During ancient Israel’s time, God admonished His chosen people repeatedly to forsake their lawlessness (Ezekiel 14:6; Jeremiah 8:6). But because they refused, God told them they would be punished (Amos 3:2; Leviticus 26:19). Through His prophet Ezekiel, God said: “Now upon you I will soon pour out My fury, and spend My anger upon you; I will judge you according to your ways, and I will repay you for all your abominations . . . Then you shall know that I am the LORD who strikes . . . The vision concerns the whole multitude, and it shall not turn back; no one will strengthen himself who lives in iniquity” (Ezekiel 7:8-9, 13).

What should you do to prepare?

While God sent His prophets to warn the people in those earlier days, what about His message to the nations today? God’s Church is now commissioned with the vital responsibility to proclaim to the modern-day descendants of ancient Israel—and indeed to all nations—God’s warnings in Scripture about the consequences of sin and the need to turn from disobedience (Isaiah 58:1; Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20). The gospel (or good news) that Jesus gave His Church to proclaim includes the vital message of repentance and salvation through Him, as well as His impending return to earth as humanity’s only hope of survival!

But sadly, as the end of this age draws near, the Bible explains that men, women and even children will become increasingly selfish, corrupt and intractable. The apostle Paul describes vividly their attitude and temperament:

“And know this: in the last days, times will be hard. You see, the world will be filled with narcissistic, money-grubbing, pretentious, arrogant, and abusive people. They will rebel against their parents and will be ungrateful, unholy, uncaring, coldhearted, accusing, without restraint, savage, and haters of anything good. Expect them to be treacherous, reckless, swollen with self-importance, and given to loving pleasure more than they love God. Even though they may look or act like godly people, they’re not. They deny His power. I tell you: stay away from the likes of these” (2 Timothy 3:1-5, The Voice).

Because the vast majority of people today don’t know God or His Word, the Bible, they will be blind to danger signs increasing throughout society. As a result they will be shocked and frightened by numerous terrible conditions and events that will transpire (Matthew 24:37-39).

But what about you and me? Are we disregarding God, or are we willing to change our ways and sincerely obey His Word? And are we preparing for what the Scriptures tell us will occur in the coming days?

Those who know and understand the truth are admonished to recognize clearly “the signs of the times” and to especially be spiritually awake and alert (Matthew 24:3; Luke 12:40; 1 Thessalonians 5:4). “Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation” (1 Thessalonians 5:6-8).

Be ready all the time

To accomplish this we need to study the Bible diligently, apply its instructions faithfully and build a strong, close and enduring relationship with God. We also need to carry out unswervingly our duty to preach and publish the gospel, even if people ignore or oppose it.

Those who refuse to follow God’s instructions to be obedient, watchful and prayerful will find themselves spiritually unprepared and then suffer the consequences of their neglect (Matthew 25:1-13). “Constantly be on your guard so that your hearts will not be loaded down with self-indulgence, drunkenness, and the worries of this life, or that day will take you by surprise like a trap, because it will come on everyone who lives on the face of the earth” (Luke 21:34-35, International Standard Version).

What else are we advised to do? We must be spiritually prepared and ever vigilant. “You also must be ready all the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected” (Matthew 24:44, New Living Translation). “Be ready” includes maintaining zeal for God and His Work on earth while preparing energetically for Christ’s second coming (Matthew 25:1-13; Luke 21:36; Revelation 3:3).

We need to make every effort, with God’s help, to abound with love, joy and faith through His divine Spirit, while jettisoning all spiritual weariness and lethargy (Philippians 1:11; Acts 13:52; Galatians 6:9; Revelation 3:14-17). As we’ve seen, the Bible gives us ample instruction as to what we need to do in preparation for God’s coming, righteous Kingdom.

Finally, although we should certainly be mindful about the current nuclear peril posed by Russia, North Korea and Iran, let’s realize that times will grow increasingly worse prior to Jesus’ return to earth.

We should be mindful of the current nuclear peril posed by Russia, North Korea and Iran, but let’s realize also that times will only grow increasingly worse prior to Jesus’ return to earth.
wo days after Donald Trump became the 45th president of the United States, the German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (now Germany’s federal president) wrote about the uncertain future ahead for Germany and Europe: “We are living between two eras—the post-war order and the quarter century after the fall of the Berlin wall are now history. The order of the 21st century and the way the world of tomorrow will look is not settled; it is completely open . . . I know we have to adjust to troubled times, to some unpredictability and new uncertainties” (May Bulman, “Germany Warns Donald Trump’s Presidency ‘Marks End of Old World Order,’” The Independent, Jan. 23, 2017).

Where are matters headed?

NATO in question with demands that Europe shoulder costs

Not all of the uncertainties for Europe’s future involve the new American administration, but concerns about the NATO alliance are one of them. “It could have been worse,” was the summary comment made by German news media after Chancellor Angela Merkel’s visit to Washington, D.C., in mid-March to meet President Donald Trump.

As expected, European nations’ lack of funding to meet their NATO commitments was one of the topics on President Trump’s agenda for the meeting. Some weeks earlier Merkel agreed that the newly elected president had valid concerns about NATO members not fulfilling their annual commitment of 2 percent of GDP spent on defense.

In fact, in 2016 only five of NATO’s 28 member countries met that requirement, and the United States accounted for approximately two thirds of the funds spent by all NATO members on defense, although a sizeable portion of U.S. military spending involves commitments outside NATO’s traditional area of responsibility.

Reflecting the new American administration’s reassessment of the Atlantic alliance, in his first meeting with his NATO counterparts, America’s new secretary of defense James Mattis declared, “America will meet its responsibilities, but if your nations do not want to see America moderate its commitment to the alliance, each of your capitals needs to show its support for our common defence” (Paul Szoldra, “Here’s Who Is Paying the Agreed-Upon Share to NATO—and Who Isn’t,” Business Insider Deutschland, Feb. 16, 2017).

Just two weeks after Merkel’s White House visit, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson insisted at a Brussels meeting of NATO foreign ministers that all alliance members agree to meet the 2 percent funding goal by 2024, with “yearly milestones and progress commitments” to be presented by the May 2017 NATO summit.”

Germany’s foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel’s response to Tillerson’s proposal lacked enthusiasm: “I don’t know any politician in Germany who believes that this goal is doable or desirable for our country . . . We will increase military spending, but only to the extent that we consider to be responsible. I have no idea where we are supposed to put all the aircraft carriers we would have to buy to invest 70 billion euros in our army annually” (Marcus Becker, “Gabriel Rebells Against Tillerson,” Spiegel Online, March 31, 2017, translated from German).

No matter what happens with the NATO alliance, Europe will increase its military expenditures. If the alliance is to survive, Europe will need to spend more to satisfy its North American partner. If NATO collapses, Europe will be forced to spend more anyway—and at the same time become inde-
pendent of American dominance regarding military strategy.

**Muslim refugee crisis remains unresolved**

Relations between Europe and the Trump administration are only one of Europe’s current concerns. Muslim refugees from war-torn Syria, Iraq and Libya have flooded Europe in the last two years, with Germany alone having accepted some 1.5 million refugees over an 18-month period. Although the so-called Balkan route has been effectively shut down, people are still trying to get to Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea, mainly from Libya, using boats that in many cases are not seaworthy.

The influx of so many people from another culture has strained social resources, revealed fissures in European unity and left many people wondering to what extent the refugees will be—or even want to be—integrated into European society.

When thousands of refugees from Syria wound up on small Greek islands in the Aegean Sea in 2015, the utter impossibility of Greece fulfilling its obligations under the Schengen treaty (permitting passport-free travel between much of Europe) was readily apparent.

The treaty mandates that any person arriving from outside the European area must be cleared for entry into the European Union and neighboring participants by the country of the point of entry. This means that countries like Greece and Italy on the outward perimeter of the area of participating states are forced to bear more responsibility for permitting people to enter the European area than landlocked countries within like Hungary and the Czech Republic, which are only responsible for people arriving at their international airports from non-participating countries.

With its population of only 11 million people, Greece was overwhelmed in 2015 by the more than one million refugees who poured over its borders, many arriving by boat on Greek islands. As many as 10,000 arrived on some days. Greek border police had to be augmented by officers from other EU countries, and even then many refugees entered the EU undocumented, much less with proper vetting.

Processing the refugees at its external perimeter was not the only challenge for individual European member countries. Should the thousands of refugees just be allowed to go wherever they wanted within the EU and neighboring states, with the vast majority of them seeking resettlement in Germany? To cope with the refugee influx, the European Commission proposed a system to discourage the kind of country-hopping that saw hundreds of thousands of refugees settle in Germany after having passed through other European countries such as Hungary and Greece.

The proposal provided for the resettlement, on a quota basis, of some 160,000 refugees left stranded in Greece and Italy in 2015. However, by March 2017 less than 10 percent of them had been resettled in other EU countries. How to distribute the remaining thousands of refugees reflects an east-west divide within Europe, with Hungary and Poland refusing to participate in the resettlement plan and others helping only on a limited basis.

The European Commission has recently pressured Poland and Hungary to accept refugees under the EU relocation plan. If the two countries refuse to cooperate, Brussels will use “all powers” in response, it said in a statement.

“This is solidarity in action and a demonstration of responsibility. Now is the time for our member states to deliver on their commitments and to intensify their efforts,” said Dimitris Avramopoulos, EU commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, in an April 12, 2017, European Commission press release. “They have a political, moral and legal duty to do so. I call on those countries that have not yet joined this common effort to do so,” he added.

In comments made to British newspapers, an unnamed EU diplomat said that Poland and Hungary would either participate in the refugee relocation plan or possibly face expulsion from the Union.

**Will Muslim refugees be assimilated?**

For Hungary’s prime minister Viktor Orban the refugee crisis is not just a question of humanitarianism. Orban does not hesitate to voice his concerns over Europe’s future with its growing Muslim population. Orban explained his viewpoint in an interview with a Swiss radio station: “Whenever I talk about a Christian Europe in the European Commission, the others look at me as if I were from the Middle Ages.” In his view, the influx of refugees will eventually lead to a “competition of cultures,” and “Christians will be the losers in this competition if many Muslims are allowed into Europe” (Deutschlandfunk [Germany Radio], ”Retter des Christlichen Abendlandes? [Savior of the Christian Western World?]” June 20, 2016).

The Hungarian leader believes that the religion of Islam and its resulting culture cannot be assimilated into a cultural environment that was largely shaped by Christianity. Instead of assimilation, he believes, multiculturalism will result in two distinct societal entities. Orban’s prediction should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, which is known for its intent to promote a Muslim “parallel society” in Europe.

Since the beginning of the refugee crisis in 2015, Europe has seen a noticeable increase in conservative movements—partially because of the fear that assimilation will not work, and partly because of terrorist attacks committed by people admitted as refugees. As a result, traditional political parties have had to appeal for adherence to traditional European culture in an effort to stem voter dissatisfaction.

Prominent politicians of Germany’s mainstream Christian Democratic Union (CDU, the party of Chancellor Merkel and former Chancellor Helmut Kohl) have called for an “Islam law” to be introduced in parliament prior to this fall’s national election. CDU deputy party chairperson Julia Klöckner said the law could regulate Islamic mosques in Germany, including a provision prohibiting financial support for mosques in Germany from foreign sources.

Other party officials believe that any proposed law should clearly subjugate any and all aspects of Islamic sharia law to Germany’s de facto 1949 constitution.

The increased interest in conservative movements predated recent tensions between Turkish president Recep Erdogan and EU leaders prior to Turkey’s April referendum on constitutional reform. However, Erdogan did not help matters any by urging his countrymen living in Western Europe to be prolific in their family planning.

“Go live in better neighborhoods. Drive the best cars. Live
in the best houses. Make not three, but five children. Because you are the future of Europe,” Erdogan told his fellow Turks in Europe in a speech after the Netherlands and Germany prohibited rallies in support of the Turkish referendum (“Erdogan Urges Turks in Europe to Have 5 Children,” Daily Mail, March 17, 2017).

His foreign minister even warned that Europe was heading for “wars of religion” in response to the Dutch government’s action to prevent Turkish officials from campaigning for the referendum in the Netherlands. And it was Erdogan himself who, in a speech he gave in Cologne in 2011, urged his fellow Turks living in Germany to not be assimilated.

During the recent French presidential campaign, candidate Emmanuel Macron, France’s former economic minister, repeated a concern of recent years about the growing dominance of the German economy: “Germany’s economic strength in its current form is not tolerable.”

During negotiations on approving loans to Greece in 2011 to stabilize the euro, Europe’s old fears about a strong Germany seemed to be reawakening. Angry demonstrators in Athens called German leaders “Nazis,” while the British press claimed that Germany was using the euro crisis to fulfill its old but long-suppressed dream of having an empire of its own.

The Daily Mail expressed concern over growing German power on the European continent. Claiming that Germany was using the financial crisis to conquer Europe, it reported that a German “fourth reich” is on the horizon (Hitler’s Germany of World War II being the Third Reich—reich meaning empire):

“If the euro is to survive—and with it the European project—the other 16 Eurozone countries will have to be like the Germans. Indeed, they must lose the freedom not to be like the Germans. That means a complete fiscal union in which Germany, as the EU’s most powerful economy and principal paymaster, makes the rules and makes them unbreakable. Be in no doubt what fiscal union means: it is one economic policy, one taxation system, one social security system, one debt, one economy, one finance minister. And all of the above would be German” (“Rise of the Fourth Reich, How Germany Is Using the Financial Crisis to Conquer Europe,” August 17, 2011).

Germany’s Bild newspaper later quoted the Daily Mail description of conquest by German economic domination: “In the past, military conquest would have been necessary to get rid of the leadership in a European country. Today it happens via economic pressure. With help from their French allies the Germans caused a regime change in two of the most troublesome eurozone countries”—Greece and Italy (Nov. 9, 2011).

Brexit will leave Germany with more power

When Frank-Walter Steinmeier talked about the “new uncertainties” ahead for Germany, his primary focus was the NATO alliance and its future. But another cloud on the horizon for Europe’s future is the impending Brexit—Britain’s exit from the European Union.

For a casual observer, the main issue here would appear to be the future economic relationship between Brussels and London. Will the thousands of EU citizens now living in the United Kingdom retain legal residency there? Will the United Kingdom receive a special “favored nation” preferential trade status with the EU?

With the second-largest domestic economy in the EU, Britain’s exit from the European trading block will no doubt have long-lasting repercussions. One of them has nothing to do with Britain itself, but rather with the country whose position as the prominent domestic economy in the EU will be further strengthened by Britain leaving—Germany. Germany’s GDP equals approximately that of the 20 smallest EU countries combined and will be nearly 50 percent larger than France’s domestic economy, which will take over second place in the European Union’s national GDP ranking after Britain is out.

With the second-largest economy in the EU, Britain’s exit will further strengthen the position of the largest economy—Germany.

Predecessor of the European Union

Britain’s departure from the European Union will only further strengthen Germany’s position as the dominant—one would say dominating—EU member nation. A strong European Union without the German economy is unthinkable, but a strong Germany acting on its own is also unthinkable for many Europeans, as it was for the man considered to be the father of today’s Europe, Robert Schuman, the postwar French foreign minister.

In retrospect Schuman seems to have been predestined for his role. When Germany annexed the territory of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871 after defeating France on the battlefield, his father became a German citizen. Thus Schuman was born as a German citizen in 1886. He earned his law degree in Germany and then practiced law in Metz while being assigned to a German reserve army unit. When Alsace-Lorraine was returned to French sovereignty in 1919, Schuman became a French citizen for the first time, but without any residual hate for Germany.
Five years after Germany’s armed forces surrendered to the allies in 1945, Schuman, now France’s foreign minister, proposed the creation of a European coal and steel union that was the first step toward a postwar united Europe. Schuman’s proposal caused a sensation.

“The announcement of the Schuman plan was a welcome message for the generation that had suffered through World War II and now had hope that another war among European brothers would not—and could no longer—break out. As stated in the Schuman declaration, combining heavy industry—which was also the industry of armaments—would make a war between France and Germany materially impossible. A grave was thereby dug for the centuries-old enmity between the two neighboring countries, and with its gravestone a foundation was laid for unifying Europe” (Franz Herre, *A wie Adenauer*, 1997, pp. 67-68).

Schuman made no attempt to disguise his goal of integrating the German national state in an international European partnership, thereby preventing Germany from pursuing hostile plans toward its neighbors. Just five months prior to making his proposal for a coal and steel union, Schuman addressed this topic in a speech given in Brussels:

“The result of Germany’s membership in a [proposed] European organisation—if it subjugates this country to the needs of the whole community—will be its gravestone and a guarantee for us . . . It places the German potential for intellect and work in the service of Europe, and Germany benefits itself from the intellectual and material potential that Europe provides in such a community . . . Germany is the most dangerous when it is left to itself and its fearful and destructive state of unrest” (Dec. 18, 1949, emphasis added).

**Who will defend Europe?**

Will Germany’s economic dominance eventually lead to a greater role in other areas as well? For example, what role would Germany play in a Europe that would be forced to defend itself militarily? Donald Trump’s pre-inauguration comments like “NATO is obsolete” and “The countries we defend have to pay for it. If they don’t, then the United States must be willing to let them defend themselves”—widely reported in European media—left Europeans wondering to what extent they would have to go it alone militarily.

If the American nuclear shield protecting Europe were to be removed, Europe would be subject to political and military blackmail without a nuclear deterrent. The prestigious German weekly *Die Zeit* recently asked whether the European Union would need its own nuclear weapons, independent of the United States, to defend itself against the threat of Russian aggression (Peter Dausend and Michael Thumann, “Braucht die EU die Bombe? [Does the EU Need the Bomb?]” *Zeit Online*, Feb. 16, 2017).

Britain and France both have nuclear weapons, but Britain is on course to leaving the EU, and France might not be willing to extend its own nuclear capability to defend Europe. So what is the rest of the continent to do?

Modern Germany is committed to the success of the “European experiment” and is now solidly entrenched within its framework (as desired by her neighbors) and does not hesitate to voice its opinion on European affairs. The creation of a European full political and economic union, a possibility allowed by the EU Lisbon Treaty, is unthinkable without German participation.

Europeans realize that, too. To whom did they look for support in solving the eurozone sovereign debt crisis? On whom will they rely in other crises in the future? The Germans.

**What’s ahead for Europe?**

Europe, which has been remarkably stable for almost 70 years now, is seeing the foundations of that stability severely tested. In the wake of Britain’s Brexit vote, separatist movements and parties in several nations are clamoring for leaving or even dissolving the EU.

Meanwhile, Europe’s very identity is being challenged by millions of migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East. Many are in truly desperate straits, seeking peace and safety, but many others are coming simply for a better economic life in wealthy Europe compared to their poverty-stricken homelands. And many others are coming, yes, to take over the continent—heeding the calls of Islamic leaders for conquest.

Recent history shows that many have no desire or intent to assimilate into traditional European culture or adopt European values. It’s no wonder historians like Bernard Lewis have referred to this as a “clash of civilizations”—for indeed it is!

Many Europeans are also concerned about a resurgent Russia whose leader, Vladimir Putin, seems determined to restore Russian power and prestige—if not its empire. Russia has already brought large and strategic portions of Ukraine and Georgia back under its control, and former Eastern European Soviet-bloc nations watch Moscow with a nervous and alert eye.

In times of crisis, Europe has had a history of turning to strong leaders who promise decisive solutions to people’s problems. The most devastating was about eight decades ago when a humbled and hurting Germany turned to a former army corporal and failed artist who promised to lead the nation to greatness—and instead led the continent into the most destructive bloodbath in human history.

Soberingly, the Bible foretells the rise of a new European-centered superpower to emerge in the time leading up to Jesus Christ’s return, followed by another final global conflict that will bring the world to the brink of human annihilation before God intervenes to save us from ourselves.

As we see current geopolitical trends reshaping our world, let’s be sure to heed Jesus Christ’s admonition to “take heed, watch and pray” (Mark 13:33, 35, 37), giving diligent attention to our spiritual condition and praying always, as He tells us in Matthew 6:10, “Your kingdom come”!
It was the end of the world! Tens of thousands of people believed that Jesus was about to return. Farmers released their livestock, people literally threw away their money, thousands gathered in churches and homes and camped in meadows, anticipating the most dramatic event in history.

As night fell, the excitement and anxiety was intense. Believers sang hymns, prayed, talked with each other about what it must be like in heaven. As midnight neared, the feeling of expectation was almost unbearable.

Then midnight passed. Confused and stunned, people waited through the early morning hours until dawn revealed that Jesus hadn’t returned.

The date was October 22, 1844. The event is known as the Great Disappointment, and it contains lessons for those who are still waiting for Christ’s return.

Are you anticipating the return of Jesus Christ? Are you struggling with how to live day-by-day while maintaining focus on His return? How are you preparing?

The Great Disappointment

We can learn a lot from those who experienced the Great Disappointment, especially from their misunderstanding of biblical prophecy and the events that will lead up to Christ’s second coming.

Those anticipating Christ’s arrival, or advent, in the mid-19th century became known as Adventists. It was a major religious movement that crossed denominational boundaries. The aftermath was devastating on many of those who were anticipating Christ’s return.

One despondent believer, Henry Emmons, wrote: “. . . And dear Jesus did not come—I waited all the forenoon of Wednesday, and was well in body as I ever was, but after 12 o’clock I began to feel faint, and before dark I needed someone to help me to my chamber, as my natural strength was leaving me very fast, and I lay prostrate for two days without any pain—sick with disappointment” (quoted by George Knight, Millennial Fever and the End of the World, 1993, pp. 217-218).

Another disappointed believer whose faith was shattered was Hiram Edson. He said: “Our fondest hopes and expectation were blasted. And such a spirit of weeping came over us as I never experienced before. It seemed [as though] the loss of all earthly friends could have been no comparison. We wept, and wept, till the day dawned” (quoted by Knight, p. 218).

Many of those who believed that Jesus would return simply went back to their old lives. Some lost their faith entirely. Others searched the Scriptures to find out where had they gone wrong.

If those involved in the Great Disappointment had had better prophetic understanding of what the Bible teaches about Christ’s return, they would have known that it wasn’t going to happen in October 1844.

What does Bible prophecy say about the second coming?

Let’s look at some prophecies concerning Christ’s second coming. An important place to start is what is called Jesus’ “Olivet Prophecy” recorded in Matthew 24.

Here we have the often-quoted description of what Jesus said it would be like before His return: “For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows” (verses 7-8).

Throughout history, people have observed wars, famines and disease epidemics and claimed that Jesus’ return was imminent. Many Europeans in the Middle Ages looked at the Black Death, economic troubles, famine and unending wars and concluded that Christ’s return was looming on the horizon.

But one specific statement of Jesus supplies vital information about the time before His return. We read this in verses 21-22: “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh...
would be saved [alive]; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened.”

It is this global collapse into war, famine, disease pandemics and natural disasters that hadn’t happened in 1844. Actually, it’s easier to see how Europeans in the Middle Ages, faced with the devastation of the Black Death, thought that they were living in the time of the end. But even the horrendous events of disease, wars and famine that swept across Europe in those days pale when compared with the disasters of the Olivet Prophecy.

Global collapse into chaos

Here’s one point those involved in the Great Disappointment misunderstood: Christ’s return is preceded by global catastrophes.

The world that you and I live in today is unprecedented in history. The destructive power of nuclear and biological weapons, the speed at which diseases can be spread through mass transportation, the uneasy global economy where an event in one part of the world can affect everyone, the concentration of millions of people in tightly packed cities with limited food supplies—these all point to conditions preceding what Jesus foretold would be like no other time.

A time is coming, commonly known as the Great Tribulation, in which the world will be engulfed in such chaos and violence that humanity will be on the brink of total annihilation.

The Olivet Prophecy and the book of Revelation show that during this time of global disaster, people throughout the earth—from the crowded cities to the dirt farmer in the most remote area—will see Christ coming in the sky. It will be the most dramatic and frightening event in history.

Fierce resistance to Jesus Christ

According to the book of Revelation, armies will gather to repel this invasion from outer space. Which brings us to a second point the people of the Great Disappointment misunderstood: Human beings will fiercely resist Jesus Christ at His return.

The apostle John records his vision of this event in Revelation 19: “Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God.

“And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (verses 11-15).

John received an amazing vision—Christ in all of His glory, shining like the sun, destroying the armies gathered to resist Him!

Now we are faced with a question that eluded the seekers of the Great Disappointment: Where will these armies gather to fight against Christ?

Preparing for the return of Jesus Christ

The Adventist movement of 1844 wasn’t a denomination, but an ecumenical movement. Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and other participants were not only disheartened when Jesus didn’t return, but some of them found themselves ridiculed by their neighbors. In New York, some Adventist meeting halls were destroyed.

Where had their calculations gone wrong?

This brings us to a third prophecy that is central to understanding Christ’s second coming: Jesus is returning to the Mount of Olives to establish God’s Kingdom on the earth.

The believers in the Great Disappointment thought Christ was going to take them to heaven and immediately destroy the earth with fire. But an important Old Testament passage that when coupled with the Olivet Prophecy and the book of Revelation gives us a clear picture of Christ’s return. Here’s what it says:

“Behold, the day of the Lord is coming, and your spoil will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem . . . Then the Lord will go forth And fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east” (Zechariah 14:1-4).

Here we discover exactly where Jesus Christ is going to return—the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem. It is outside Jerusalem that the armies will gather to fight against the Prince of Peace. Zechariah 14 reveals that Christ won’t destroy the earth, but will set up God’s Kingdom in Jerusalem to rule
over all the nations on the earth.

**Disappointment and disillusionment**

Those involved in the Adventist movement of the mid-19th century could’ve avoided their error if they had understood just these three biblical prophecies (and there are many more).

After the Great Disappointment, they returned to everyday life. It wasn’t easy. They struggled with their faith. Many had closed their businesses, taken their children out of school and sold their property. They faced scorn from neighbors. Picking up the pieces of their lives was a hard struggle.

Those who suffered through the Great Disappointment aren’t the only ones who have expected Christ’s return and were disillusioned when it didn’t happen.

So how do we, those who are still looking ahead to the establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth, keep our focus on that future while living in an increasing secular and anti-biblical society? How do we stay focused while dealing with the day-to-day issues of family, job, finances and the stresses of the modern world?

**Steps to stay focused and engaged**

Here are three steps you can take to stay focused on God’s future while staying engaged in daily life:

- **Anticipation.**
  
  When Jesus was eight days old, His parents took Him to the temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised. There they encountered an old man who was eagerly anticipating the coming of the Messiah. His name was Simeon. God revealed to Simeon that he would see the Messiah before he died. When Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple, Simeon knew that God had kept His promise.

  Simeon walked up, took the infant Jesus in his arms, and praised God, saying: “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel” (Luke 2:25-32). Simeon is an example of someone who anticipated the first coming of the Messiah.

  You and I live in a wondrous time. We live between the two great salvation events—the first coming of Jesus the Christ as the Redeemer for humanity and His second coming to set up God’s Kingdom on the earth. Understanding our time in history needs to be central to our daily lives.

  When faced with the injustices and sufferings of daily life, we should remember that the time is coming when Christ will stand on the Mount of Olives to bring mercy and justice, to eradicate poverty and violence, to bring all humanity to God. You can experience hope by anticipating the future. And you can only maintain that anticipation now properly through daily prayer and Bible study. Anticipation is flamed by daily communication with God.

- **Preparation.**
  
  The second coming is far more than just a nice idea of a fantasy future. You must be spiritually preparing for that event. What you learn from the Bible must become an integral part of your daily life.

  Jesus taught: “Blessed are those [servants] whom the master, when he comes, will find watching . . . But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour [when] you do not expect” (Luke 12:37-40).

  This is a stern warning from Jesus Christ. Many people will believe in His return but will not be prepared for it.

  Let’s face it. Are you living a pseudo-Christian lifestyle, a little Christmas, a little Easter, a little gospel music, but when it comes to honesty, your marriage, your Friday night partying, your real, daily obedience and worship of God, you are in fact no different from the non-Christian who lives next door?

  If this describes you, Christ’s return is going to catch you unaware. It is time to wake up, watch and be prepared. It’s time for a major spiritual lifestyle change!

- **Declaration.**
  
  What do I mean by declaration?

  I’m not saying that you should go door to door and try and convert all your neighbors. But if you are truly anticipating and preparing for Christ’s return, you will by your very actions declare that you are a citizen of the coming Kingdom of God.

  You can’t hide your light under a bushel. We must, through our Christian example, declare Christ’s return until He stands on the Mount of Olives.

  We have to be developing the character of Christ. We have to be doing those things that He did. The apostle Paul said, “Imitate me, just as I also as I imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). We need to look at ourselves and say: “Where am I? Am I really preparing to be with Him? I’d better be acting like Him now if I’m going to be there.”

  We declare that we believe in the return of Jesus Christ by our example. How do you live your life? What is your mindset? How do you treat others? Are you exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control?

  We should be righteous people striving to obey God and love our fellow man, developing righteous character and doing those works in our own lives that reflect the Word of God and His law and teachings. When we do that, the rest will take care of itself, and we will be prepared to meet Jesus Christ at His return.

**We have to put on the character of Christ, and be doing those things that He did. As Paul said, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.”**

Many people believe Jesus Christ will return. But why will He come back? What will He do? You need to understand what the Bible reveals about His return and its amazing purpose! Download or request our free study guide The Gospel of the Kingdom. 

[BTmagazine.org/booklets](http://BTmagazine.org/booklets)
Lately, it’s been getting harder for me to read the Bible. It’s not that I don’t want to, or don’t see the need to. I’ve just found it harder to stay focused on the words and actually read them. My brain feels like slush when I try. It takes me several minutes of reading the same passage over and over before I feel like I get into “Bible mode” and can actually read.

I blame it on my smartphone, or more specifically, my smartphone habits. You see, I have a lot of noise in my head these days. When I wake up, I check my phone to see what has happened overnight. I check my text messages, Facebook, Mint, my Etsy shop app, Google News, Pinterest, my workout app and Instagram. Instantly my mind is loaded with information, ideas and those all-too-powerful images of other people’s lives—both the good and the bad. And each interesting morsel is quickly scrolled past to find what the next interesting thing will be! I don’t feel like I even truly process much of what I see before I succumb to the urge to scroll to the next thing. I can almost compare it to the feeling of being hungry—hungry for more entertainment, or information, or validation.

This routine of checking all these apps can repeat itself multiple times throughout the day. It feels satisfying and important, but I’m starting to wonder if I have a problem. It’s hard to stop all this “checking” when it’s time to pray and read God’s Word. It’s hard to stay focused enough to read the Bible without my hand seemingly unconsciously unlocking my phone! It’s embarrassing to even write this, but my guess is that I’m not the only one struggling.

I have a theory: My mind has grown dependent on the constant influx of new information. Now when there is a dull moment (or a Bible passage that challenges me), I seek relief in the distractions always readily available on my smartphone. I feel really uncomfortable with this. Is this really the way God wants me to live?

The physical vs. the spiritual

In Psalm 19:14 King David writes, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.” The meditation of our hearts is simply what we continually think about throughout the day. If God desires purity in our thoughts, then what is constant social media and news-checking doing to help or hurt in this process?

For me, it seems like social media tends to get me thinking more about my physical life instead of my spiritual life. Seeing other people’s physical accomplishments—outfits, vacations, workouts, political views, food, families and activities—gets me focused on these types of things.

This is not to say that I think it’s bad to post on social media. There can be many good uses such as checking on sick friends, or staying close to out-of-town friends or family! But when I spend hours of my free time immersed in thinking about the physical sides of life, it doesn’t leave much time for thinking about the spiritual side of life. “The meditation of my heart” becomes a futile exercise in increasing worldliness.

The problem with social media distracting us from God’s Word may come from how much easier it is to look at photos and read other people’s ideas compared to sitting down, focusing and studying the Bible. Reading the Bible requires us to calm and quiet our minds. It requires us to think and wonder what a passage might mean. It requires us to pray for guidance. It really takes a lot

Is your phone’s endless supply of information and entertainment drawing you away from God?

by Joy Porter

If You Must Be on Your Device

If you find it really hard to put down your smartphone or tablet, there is the alternative of using it for reading the Bible and spiritual study. You can spend time on Bible apps, follow friend recommendations on useful reading, and peruse our website, which is filled with mobile-friendly articles, study guides, sermons and Beyond Today videos. Above all, read the Bible itself. Of course, it takes wisdom and discipline to not be easily distracted on electronic devices and to spend your time well.
of time to truly dig in. If your attention span has been totally shot by all the instantaneous distractions of the Internet, it can be very hard to adequately study the Bible!

Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God.” There is a stillness and a quietness of mind that I feel is being completely stolen by constantly checking our phones. There is no time for reflection, no peace, and no place for the Holy Spirit to guide us.

I really want to improve in this area. It’s frightening to think that it’s become difficult to stay focused on God’s Word!

So what can I do?

I want to properly balance my life so that my meditation is pleasing to God, my mind isn’t continually distracted, yet I can still use social media for its good aspects. Here are a few ideas that I have just started trying:

• **First things first.**
  I bought a regular clock so I can put my phone away at night (instead of using it for an alarm). I have been trying to not check my phone until I spend some time praying and reading my Bible in the morning.

• **Delete apps.**
  There is no need for me to have instant access to some apps. I can check Facebook or Pinterest on my computer, for example. It’s okay for people to not be able to reach me instantaneously. My connection with God is much more important!

• **Use a timer.**
  I found an add-on for my Internet browser to limit my time on Facebook. When the time’s up, I can’t access the site anymore. This causes me to quickly check on the events or people that I need to and then sign off as fast as I can. I also put an app on my phone which tracks how much time I spend using it and notifies me if it’s too much.

• **Take some time off.**
  I scheduled a few days a week for myself that I am calling “screen-free days.” I’m sure that I will still have to check my phone some, but the hope is that instead of spending my free time on the Internet, I can instead spend time outside, read a book or just think.

• **Ask God for help!**
  I had to admit to God that I was sinning by making an idol out of my smartphone and all that it offered me. And even now, I still feel majorly tempted to overdo my use of my smartphone. I pray that God will help me through His Spirit to overcome!

In Matthew 4:4 Jesus said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” We, too, cannot subsist on the distractions of the Internet. Yes, there are good things, but no, it can never fulfill our deep hunger for God’s Word. We have to make room in our minds and carve out a quiet place where we can feed on His Word so that He can work in our lives.

### LEARN MORE

How few things can be more important in our lives than learning more about God through serious study of His Word. But how do we best accomplish that? Where and how do we start? How can we get the most out of studying the Bible? What are some of the vital keys to understanding God’s Word? To learn more, be sure to download or request our free study guide *How to Understand the Bible.*

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Substance Abuse Is Not the Answer

by Janet Treadway

Why do some seek a temporary high? The short answer is that they are trying to fill a void in their lives. They go to a wrong source in hope they can fix or better cope with whatever they’re going through.

Recently news outlets here in Ohio published a photo of a man and woman passed out in the front seat of their car. Their backseat passenger was very alert, awake and alone—he was the 4-year-old grandson of the unconscious woman!

The safety director in Cleveland, Ohio, who released the photo said he and others wanted to send a strong message to addicts. They should find safe places for their children when using debilitating drugs. I can add to that: The adults need to seek help!

Seek God and a personal relationship with Him. Don’t go for a temporary fix that will only get worse and wreak havoc on you, your family and others.

More than 30 million Americans are currently struggling with substance abuse or alcoholism. Fatalities, traffic accidents and injuries related to substance abuse take thousands of lives each year, not to mention the accidental overdoses that occur more frequently among prescription drug addicts. Early in 2016 my son-in-law lost a distant cousin and her husband. They were hit head-on by a man who was drunk and going the wrong way on the interstate.

In August, Cincinnati police saw a staggering 200 overdoses. Eight people could not be saved. Besides those who die from overdoses, there are other victims—children, like this 4-year-old—who reap, arguably, much worse consequences. Children who face being taken away from their parents or, if not taken away, being abused, neglected or exposed to harmful drugs themselves.

One 3-month-old from Dayton, Ohio, was born addicted to heroin and spent his first month in a neonatal intensive care unit. The infant was on a morphine drip for that first month. What a terrible way to start life!

In many instances, children who end up in foster care are from drug-addicted parents who can no longer care for them. Many grandparents and other relatives have to take on this additional responsibility.

This problem is not limited to the United States. The problem of alcoholism and drug abuse is rampant in countries around the world.
Looking for a way out

Why does this happen? Because people are looking for an easy way out or a form of escape, not thinking how the people around them will be affected, including their children.

Recovery Connection lists 10 reasons people abuse drugs. Four that affect young and old alike are:

- Feelings of emptiness. People are looking to fill a void.
- Experimentation. Sometimes people are just looking for an escape from boredom, so they experiment with drugs to get a temporary high.
- These can make you feel good for a while. They can help you relax from the temporary pressure of life.
- Peer pressure. Everyone wants a sense of belonging, and some think drugs or alcohol can help in this.

While working on this article, I talked with Don, one of our delivery men. Don walks with a limp. I never knew why until our recent conversation. He told me that in 1993 he was hit by a drunk driver. His neck was broken, and he lost part of his leg. He is in pain every single day. Don is a victim of someone seeking a temporary fix, a temporary high, with no thought of anyone else.

Because of so many overdoses occurring, police, teachers and workers in the medical field are supplied with Narcan, an antidote that can often revive a victim after an overdose.

This temporary measure may save a life, but it’s no solution. Don told me that he knew a man who worked in an emergency room that treated overdoses. One night they revived an overdose victim, and no sooner had the doctor turned his back than the patient already started trying to shoot up again for his next high.

Where to turn for help

While people will need treatment to overcome this drug and alcohol addiction, the real fix is turning to God for help. He is the only One who can truly fill the emptiness and heal the broken lives. If you have a problem with drugs, do seek professional help, but turn to God for complete emotional healing. His fix is not temporary!

Without Him we are incomplete. Jesus said: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

All the things you use to fill the void—drugs, material possessions, whatever else—will never make you complete. It is only as good as your next high. Fill your empty hearts with God! Lay down those temporary fixes. Of course get the professional help you need, but do so while seeking God’s help above all. Do it for the sake of your family, your friends and yourself!

Here is the number for American Addiction Centers, experts in addiction treatment: (888) 970-8544. For those residing in countries outside the United States, you can find local help and support agencies listed on the Internet. Get help today! 

Who’s Behind Beyond Today?

Who’s behind the Beyond Today magazine and television program? Many readers have wondered who we are and how we are able to provide Beyond Today free to all who request it. Simply put, Beyond Today is provided by people—people from all walks of life, from all over the world, as enabled by God.

And those people have a common goal—to proclaim the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God to all the world as a witness and to teach all nations to observe everything Christ commanded (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).

We are dedicated to proclaiming the same message Jesus Christ brought—the wonderful good news of the coming Kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 8:1). That message truly is good news—the answer to all the problems that have long plagued humankind.

Through the pages of this magazine, on our TV show, and in dozens of helpful study guides (also free), we show the biblical answers to the dilemmas that have defied human solution and threaten our very survival.

We are committed to taking that message to the entire world, sharing the truth of God’s purpose as taught by Jesus Christ and His apostles.

The United Church of God has congregations and ministers around the world. In these congregations believers assemble to be instructed from the Scriptures and to fellowship. For locations and times of services nearest you, contact us at the appropriate address on page 39. Visitors are always welcome.

For additional information, visit our website:
During an appointment with his doctor in October 2012 Randy Halverson weighed in at 329 pounds. Not only was he significantly overweight, but he was also diagnosed with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, high cholesterol, prediabetic blood sugar levels and other ailments. Facing this alarming situation, Randy determined to get fit. Employing a diet high in fruits and vegetables and walking on his treadmill six days a week, he lost 130 pounds within a year. His blood sugar and cholesterol levels returned to normal, and his other ailments became virtually non-existent. His waistline shrank from 56 to 34 inches. Following his success Randy wrote: “My outlook and attitude are vastly improved! I’ve begun a journey that I believe will continue for the rest of my life.”

Today’s fitness plight

While Randy Halverson expended energy and determination to restore his health, others who ought to be doing so are not. Although heredity, age, disability and other conditions are limiting factors for some people, a major reason others lack fitness is that they simply don’t take personal responsibility. A February 2011 Harris poll found that 73 percent of adults who set a fitness goal as a New Year’s resolution quit before accomplishing it!

To build good health and fitness, people need to carefully manage their diet, nutrition and exercise. The website MedicalNewsToday.com stated on Dec. 10, 2014: “Since 1990, obesity has increased 153%, from 11.6% to 29.4% of adults,” and “physical inactivity remains high at 23.5% of adults.”

In a Dec. 18, 2013, LiveStrong.com article, “Importance of Exercise and Eating Healthy,” author Carly Schuna wrote: “In conjunction with regular exercise, a healthy diet can reduce your risk of heart disease, osteoporosis, type-2 diabetes, high blood pressure and some cancers. If you’re overweight, eating healthfully and exercising regularly can help you lose weight safely and keep it off. If you don’t have a weight problem, physical activity and a healthy diet can help you maintain your current weight and reduce your risk of gaining weight as you age.”

Three vital keys to fitness

If you want to begin a fitness program, be sure to first consult your doctor for guidance. Additionally, you can find many books, videos and Internet articles to determine a method that could be most effective. The following advice from FamilyDoctor.org may be helpful:

“Choose an activity you like to do. For example, if you have arthritic joints, swimming might be a good option. Exercising with a friend or relative can make it more fun. Vary your routine. You are less likely to get bored or injured if you have some variety in your exercise routine. Walk one day. Ride your bicycle the next. Don’t get discouraged. It can take weeks or months before you notice some of the benefits of exercise, such as weight loss.”

Besides following such counsel, there are three keys that can help you accomplish your fitness goal. These are:

1. Sustain a clear vision.
2. Be fully committed.
3. Exert maximum effort.

While these keys can aid you in building physical fitness, they are significantly more applicable in developing spiritual fitness. As 1 Timothy 4:8 explains, “For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.”

Taking good care of your body, mind and spirit is vital because you owe it to not only yourself and those who depend on you, but especially your Creator. Why? Because He literally owns you as your Maker and Redeemer! As 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says: “You should know that your body is a temple for the Holy Spirit that you received from God and that lives in you. You don’t own yourselves. God paid a very high price to make you his. So honor God with your body” (Easy-to-Read Version, emphasis added throughout).
Becoming fit for the Kingdom

Jesus Christ spoke about people not being “fit for the kingdom of God” if they were “looking back” to their former life (Luke 9:62). The Greek word for “fit” is euthetos meaning “suitable or useful.”

A person seeking the Kingdom of God would not be considered spiritually “fit” if he was not engaged totally in pursuing his divine vocation. If he begins “looking back,” perhaps longing for his former way of life, or if he becomes indifferent or careless about his calling, he would render himself unqualified for eternal life.

In this regard, let’s examine the three keys cited earlier to determine what you need to do to be fit for the Kingdom.

1 SUSTAIN A CLEAR VISION

Thousands of years of history have demonstrated unmistakably that human beings are incapable of properly governing themselves. But this problem has a marvelous solution. Jesus Christ, at His second coming, will replace every human government with His dynamic and benevolent rule (Revelation 11:15). Cherishing and sustaining this magnificent vision of God’s coming divine Kingdom is essential in your quest for spiritual fitness.

This vibrant, exciting future includes the following biblical facts that should continually inspire and motivate you.

• At Christ’s return He will remove the wicked influence of Satan the devil and his demon cohorts (Revelation 20:1-3).
• After that significant event, Jesus will direct a complete transformation of the earth and human society. The world’s desolate wastelands will be renovated to become like the Garden of Eden (Isaiah 51:3).
• Over a period of time the planet will become enormously fruitful and productive (Amos 9:13).
• People of all nations will dwell together in tranquility and no longer learn war or experience its tragedy and torment (Micah 4:3).
• Additionally the nature of animals will be changed so they will all coexist peacefully (Isaiah 11:6-8).
• Plus, the world will be filled with “the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (verse 9).

Under Jesus Christ’s leadership, wonderful blessings of righteousness, peace and prosperity will encompass the lives of all people. To be spiritually fit, you need to treasure this transformative and transforming vision of the future. Doing so will help you maintain a confident and optimistic outlook as you make every effort to live your life in godly righteousness in this current evil age (see Galatians 1:4).

2 BE FULLY COMMITTED

Jesus Christ explained that being absolutely committed to God and His way of life is a crucial requirement in building spiritual fitness (Matthew 6:24). He will not settle for distracted, halfhearted, conditional service. Anything less than our best effort is unacceptable.

Jesus underscored this point when He said, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things [material needs] shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus cautions you to examine your priorities to determine whether you are truly devoted to seeking His Kingdom and following His way of life (Matthew 10:37-39). There is nothing more important you can do than to place your life in the service of the Master of the entire universe (Matthew 13:44-46). A fabulous reward awaits you, which is worth far more than anything you could ever imagine, if you remain unconditionally committed to God (Colossians 3:23-24).

3 EXERT MAXIMUM EFFORT

As Jesus Christ illustrated, those called to follow Him needed to fully and steadfastly focus on and pursue the life ahead that God was calling them to. Likewise, in your quest for the Kingdom of God you must exert maximum effort as you “press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14, King James Version).

In doing so you need to grow daily in grace, knowledge and the “patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” while exercising living faith (1 Thessalonians 1:3; see also 2 Peter 3:18; 2 Corinthians 5:7). In applying these qualities you must be willing to sacrifice in an all-out effort to obey God to obtain the “crown of righteousness” (Romans 12:1; 2 Timothy 4:8).

Indeed, the very purpose for your life is to prepare for a responsible position of service and authority in God’s coming peaceful global society (Isaiah 35:1–2; 10; Revelation 1:6; 5:10). Becoming spiritually fit for those eternal responsibilities requires that you pray daily for God’s mighty help while studying the Scriptures and putting them into practice.

Moreover, you must “stir up the gift” of God’s Holy Spirit to produce the fruit of “righteousness and holiness,” which includes service to others (2 Timothy 1:6; Ephesians 4:24; John 15:12). Doing all this requires that you humbly rely on God’s strength, guidance and wisdom, without which you are utterly helpless (John 15:5; Philippians 4:13).

Finally, God wants you as one of Christ’s disciples to “bear much fruit” (John 15:8). If you are faithfully doing so, He will reward you according to your work (Revelation 22:12). And that is the vital point in taking good care of yourself both physically and spiritually.

Just at it is impossible to become healthy by merely reading books or articles on physical fitness, you cannot develop spiritual fitness by simply reading the Bible or listening to sermons. Rather, you must apply what you are learning by energetically doing the will of God. As James 1:22 explains, we must “be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

So is anything holding you back? To obtain God’s Kingdom and His righteousness you must sustain a clear vision, be fully committed and exert maximum effort. If you apply these critical keys you can be spiritually fit now and forever!

LEARN MORE

How can you become spiritually fit—growing stronger and more like God? Does the Bible provide clear answers to help? Be sure to download or request our study guide Tools for Spiritual Growth. A free copy is waiting for you!

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A few years ago I was given the gift of a mustard seed. The seed is in a small clear case, and I can attach it to my suit jacket or sport coat to wear on the lapel. I receive a lot of questions from people asking, “What’s that?”

Telling them it’s a mustard seed gives me an opportunity to relate a short parable of Jesus Christ where He used a mustard seed to explain the Kingdom of God. (Matthew records Jesus using the term “kingdom of heaven” as a euphemism for “kingdom of God” because religious Jews of that time didn’t speak the name of God out of reverence and lest they break the Third Commandment against taking God’s name in vain.)

Here is what Jesus spoke in a very short parable recorded in Matthew 13:31-32: “Another parable He put forth to them, saying: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.’”

The parable is short, and using a mustard seed fits the brevity of His point. But the message, as usual, is quite large and filled with profound insight. Let’s examine what we can learn from the parable.

Starting small amid opposing factors

The context of the parable in Matthew 13 follows the long parable of the sower and the seed and the parable of the tares sown by the enemy among the good seed of the field. The earlier parables in this chapter focus on the results of the sowing of the seed of the gospel or good news of the Kingdom through the preaching of the word. Some seed falls on rocky ground and doesn’t sprout, some falls on other ground and grows for a little while but withers in the heat of the day. Other seed falls on good ground and produces much fruit.

The parable of the tares shows the focused opposition of Satan the devil to God’s purpose of “bringing many sons to glory” (Hebrews 2:10). But God’s plan will not be hindered. In the harvest God will have the tares separated from the good grain. His purpose shall stand.

Now, with the parable of the mustard seed, Christ adds another dimension of understanding to His teaching about the Kingdom. In the present world the Kingdom starts small, among the smallest of matters, but its power is strong and enduring, and it will grow to become something far greater.

Another lesson on small beginnings

In the days of the Jewish return to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, God sent the prophet Zechariah to stir the people to action in their important task. They had stopped work on rebuilding the temple, the very purpose for their return from captivity in Babylon.

The small group of Jews were a fraction of their former state before their captivity. Demoralized from the years in Babylon, their confidence in both their ability and God’s presence among them was weak. They began the work of rebuilding, but had let opposition from the neighboring peoples bring the project to a halt. God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to stir them to renew their effort.

In a vision of the temple, Zechariah saw lampstands, a bowl and olive trees. It was a vision God wanted conveyed to the leader of the Jewish community, Zerubbabel. The message was one of encouragement that God was with the fledgling community and that the people’s work would be successful, yet they had to continue.

“This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts. ‘Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain! And he shall bring forth the capstone with shouts of “Grace, grace to it!”’ . . . “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; His hands shall also finish it” (Zechariah 4:6-9).

God does His work among men by the power of His Holy Spirit. The power of the returned Jewish exiles was very
Like that mustard seed, that Spirit must be planted within us the Kingdom of God. God's Spirit must be a part of our life. The power is great and significant, but it starts small, like a mustard seed. The power is great and significant, but it starts small, like a mustard seed. It has the purpose of God is like a small mustard seed that would grow large, and be visible and apparent when God's followers are His perfect work in you. Christ is preparing places for His followers in His Kingdom.

Prophecies concerning the birth, life and death of Jesus the Messiah had yet to be fulfilled. God’s purpose would stand. Though it seemed small at the moment, God was working! God’s Kingdom is like a grain of mustard seed. It has the smallest of beginnings, yet has the greatest of power and potential. Do not minimize the power of the Spirit of God! Notice how Christ answered His disciples’ confusion over their lack of spiritual power. They hadn’t been able to overcome the dark power of the demonic world and came to Christ asking what they were doing wrong. His answer connects to our parable. “So Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain [an obstacle blocking what needs to be done], “Move from here to there,” and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. However, this kind [of powerful demon] does not go out except by prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17:20-21)—drawing closer to God. Never underestimate the power of God’s Spirit to begin and to finish His perfect work in you. Christ is preparing places for His followers in His coming Kingdom. He is working within His Church now, a small body of believers (Luke 12:32)—but a body which will later be visible and apparent when God’s followers are transformed and His Kingdom rules over all nations.

Where and how to begin

How does it begin? God promises the power to turn from sin and to obey Him in all parts of life. We find the beginning mandate in God’s plan in Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, where he spoke the convicting words that lead to life: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

Do you wonder what it means to “repent”? This is not a word we hear often. It means to stop living the way that brings problems, heartache and tragedy and ends in broken lives that are hard to fix. To repent means to change destructive and addictive behavior that not only damages your own life but that of others in your family who love and care for you. To repent in a biblical sense means to look into the mirror of God’s perfect law of liberty and ask if you are a Christian and know God, and compare that to the standard of righteousness defined by God’s law.

Does this help you to begin to make some sense of what may be missing in your present life? If you’ve been struggling as a God-fearing person and wonder if something is wrong with you, then take a lesson from this parable.

Planting the mustard seed in your life

Here is a lesson for us. When Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is like a small mustard seed that would grow large, He was showing the power of God to do work through whatever instrument He chooses. It will often be in a small way that He works, but that is to His glory!

The apostle Paul similarly wrote: “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair” (2 Corinthians 4:7-8).

God gives the power of the Holy Spirit to work faith and righteousness in His chosen people. It is the mighty power by which He raised Jesus from the dead. That same power can work in us to produce fruit for the Kingdom of God. The power is great and significant, but it starts small, like a mustard seed.

This power of life and faith is available when people realize they don’t have the real power of God inherent within them. They must receive it from God.

How about you? Are you at that point yet? The key to living by every word of God and facing the challenges of life with courage and confidence is having within you the Spirit of God, the down payment of eternal life, the life of the Kingdom to come.

Frankly, without that power none of us can expect to see the Kingdom of God. God’s Spirit must be a part of our life. Like that mustard seed, that Spirit must be planted within us and begin to grow to produce spiritual growth.

Never underestimate the power of God to finish His perfect work in you. Christ is preparing places for His followers in His Kingdom.
We all enjoy garden settings. We often allude to “taking a walk in the park” or encourage people to “take time to smell the roses.” Gardens are delightful spots, with color and calm that allow us to come into alignment with our Creator and that provide peace and restoration.

Perhaps you’ve never considered the Bible in quite this manner, but all Scripture is placed between the bookends of two garden-like settings. Yes, one right at the beginning called Eden and another at the conclusion in Revelation 22 that describes the new heaven and new earth in Eden-like terms.

Another crucial garden setting appears in the middle of the Bible, uniting the other two in a singular purpose. It’s the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem, which is vital to entering the setting displayed in Revelation 22. Without the middle garden this column would end here, but the good news is that it doesn’t! This good news elicits important questions: Why? And how are the three gardens interlinked?

We embark here on an exploratory journey through each of these gardens. And as we journey, realize that we are never alone. The One who said “Follow Me!” to His disciples will be front and center each step through these garden settings as we enter them one at a time over the next three columns. In our first stop we meet Him as the Word by whom God created all things and by whom God has interacted with humanity (John 1:1-3, 14; Hebrews 1:1-2; Colossians 1:15-16).

We will meet Him again as Jesus, the Son of Man (Isaiah 53:7-8), and ultimately as the exalted Christ (Revelation 4:11). And in all this journey down through the ages He continues to bid us, “Follow Me!” no matter what humanity has done or what you have done before, so as to meet His Father, our Father, who gave His Son to be a ransom for many (Matthew 12:28).

This is in fulfillment of the purpose laid out in the first garden. Indeed, God tells us that He declares “the end from the beginning,” stating that His will and desire will be accomplished (Isaiah 46:8-10).

Let’s consider that first garden, then. Given the coming restoration of Eden, what will be restored? Is it simply plants, trees and domesticated animals—or something more profound? Just what was established in the Garden of Eden?

God’s desire for family and close relationship

“In the beginning” is the renowned phrase that opens Genesis 1, drawing us to a realm of fascination and wonderment. Have you ever asked yourselves what it must have been like to experience a world dramatically different from that of today? As God fashioned the world He emphatically said that it was “good,” even “very good.”

Scripture states, “Then the Lord took the man and put him in the garden of Eden” (Genesis 2:15). The word Eden means “delight.” Imagine a world in which all was in perfect harmony with the Creator—in which there was seamless unity between God, man and nature. Disharmony, discord, disobedience, immorality, ungratefulness, disunity, hatred, impatience, brutality and pride had not yet been given birth in the heart of man. Rather, it was a world that lacked frustration of any sort.

Looking back just before this, we may notice God bending over and ever so gently taking the clay of the earth and sculpting the pinnacle of His physical creation—the first human being. It’s on the sixth day that He moves from saying “good” to “very good,” as He lovingly breathed the breath of life (Genesis 2:7) into the living being that Scripture declares to be a “son of God” (Luke 3:38).

God’s intent in this was presented just before man was formed. The divine Beings we now know as God the Father and Jesus Christ had one purpose in mind from the very beginning when They declared, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Genesis 1:26)—and that is “to bring many children into glory” (Hebrews 2:10, New Living Translation).

Imagine as Adam’s eyes first opened and his ears first received the audible sounds of God’s voice perhaps lovingly saying something like: Just look around! This is all to be yours. But most importantly keep your eyes on Me. Why? You are to be Mine, and I’m to be yours. You were created to reflect Me in all ways, inside and out, and to respond to Me like no other part of the creation—not merely by instinct, but by choice.

The remarkable intimacy of the relationship between human beings and their Maker was designed towards God’s purpose and pleasure—our selfless and total worship in heart, mind and soul toward Him due to His unwavering decision to first love and care for us.

As man looked around, he would see a river, herbs, trees, animals and, yes, after a divinely induced nap, something really special—a woman! (Genesis 2:21-24). But it was God, and He alone in the midst of all His creation, who made everything perfect. We can only intellectually savor what the experience of walking and talking with God with
The woman pointed to the snake. No one took personal responsibility. Some things never change! If the truth be known, they were all pointing the finger of blame at God.

But in the curse God pronounced (Genesis 3:14-19), He specifically and systematically pointed to each of them and sentenced humanity to a frustrating life apart from the delight of the garden experience. But it wasn’t the garden alone that had defined the experience, was it? No—it was being with God!

The relationship bond that initially existed between God and man was broken not by God’s design, but by man’s shortsighted choice. It’s here in the first garden, Eden, that we are confronted with the consistent and systematic life equation that for every cause there is an effect, whether blessing or curse (Deuteronomy 30:19).

There is no way to alter this equation by human means alone. Genesis 3:24 says that God “drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.” A sign went up at the garden gate: Closed until further notice!

The great decision and magnificent choice

Thankfully, however, God has made a magnificent choice transcending our mortal foibles. God made the great decision to create man in His image. But as this required man’s free will to make wrong choices, God had to choose what to do about that. And He revealed His magnificent choice when He proclaimed the first messianic prophecy recorded in all Scripture. It’s found in God’s words to the serpent in Genesis 3:15: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”

So often we think of prophecy in books like Daniel, Jeremiah or Revelation. But prophecy starts here in Genesis! The rest of the Bible is the fulfillment of this singular verse. The rest of Scripture displays how the serpent would be at war with the Seed of the woman—Jesus Christ Himself!

This verse speaks of the wiles of Satan, always nipping at the heels of God’s chosen Savior and covenant people and being an instigator of Christ’s death (yet only by God’s allowance to fulfill His purpose), but how God would ultimately triumph through His only begotten Son and crush the head of the snake (Romans 16:20).

This magnificent choice declared in the first of messianic prophecies would offer hope to the hopeless and a compass to the lost. Yes, even as humanity was being evicted from the Garden of Eden, God was already initiating a plan of return through the shed blood of more than an animal from Eden to provide Adam and Eve clothing (compare Genesis 3:21). Rather, this would require the blood of the very One who made them in the first place—the living Word of God, the One known in the Old Testament period as the Lord God, now in our time revealed as Jesus Christ.

The apostle Peter plainly states that we are redeemed, bought back from sin and death, through “the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb . . . He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you” (1 Peter 1:18-20).

Yes, the Seed of the woman is the way back to Eden—the Seed that would bring forth a precious life, a humbling death and glorious resurrection in preparation to reign on behalf of His Heavenly Father on the earth for a thousand years as a stepping-stone towards eternity.

But let’s not get ahead of the story. Jesus yet tells us, “Follow Me,” directing us to the next garden in Jerusalem, the middle garden, and to enter with Him and linger awhile where once again the echoes of the magnificent choice would further crystallize. He invited His contemporary disciples to come along to this same garden.

He desired their relationship too. Humanly, He needed them! But they fell asleep. And even when they awoke, they fled. In our upcoming visit to the next garden, I plan to stay there with you awhile along with our Master and learn from Him. Will you join me? Most importantly, will you join Him?

Until then, be careful what you bite into at first offer or glance. Not everything that glitters is gold, especially if it harms our relationship with God!
Feedback on most recent issue

Your article “How to Make the World Great Again” explained the subject matter extremely well. I have enjoyed and been enlightened by it so much that I’m at a loss for words as to what to say exactly, except to just simply say “thank you.”

Reader in Zambia

In your article “How to Make the World Great Again” where you explain the Kingdom of God, you left out the location that Jesus stated it resides in Luke 17:20-21: “... For, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” I feel it is important to realize that “heaven” is not a locality but is a spiritual state of consciousness that Jesus was trying to teach us to attain. Do you agree?

From the Internet

Thank you for your comments. Many people believe Jesus Christ taught that the Kingdom of God is something that exists only in the hearts and minds of believers. They base this on Luke 17:20-21, which says: “Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, ‘The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.”

Such assumptions are incorrect for several reasons. While the Greek word entos can mean “within,” as it’s often translated, a better translation in this context is “in the midst of” (Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, “Within”). Several translations, including the Revised Standard Version, English Standard Version, Jerusalem Bible and New English Bible, make this clear.

Jesus would not be telling the religious leaders who opposed Him that God’s Kingdom existed within their hearts or minds—after all, they wanted to destroy Him (Matthew 12:14, Mark 3:6). Instead, in this passage Christ was pointing out the paradox that the Pharisees did not have the spiritual discernment to recognize that the message of the Kingdom of God was at hand or being offered to them (Matthew 23:13).

To punctuate this point, Jesus, referring to Himself, said, “The kingdom of God is among you” or “in your midst.” The spiritually blind Pharisees did not recognize Jesus as the divine representative of that Kingdom. Rather than telling the Pharisees that the Kingdom of God was something in their hearts, Jesus Christ warned them that their spiritual blindness prevented them from recognizing the personification of that Kingdom in Him.

The interpretation of this passage that the Kingdom of God resides in one’s heart is not biblically supportable. We invite you to request a copy of our Bible study aid The Gospel of the Kingdom to learn more about this important subject. Find it by searching online at ucg.org/booklets.

Compliments on biblical content

Beyond Today is an outstanding publication, which helps give me insight into the Holy Bible to an extent I could never attain on my own. It has immeasurably changed my outlook on life for the positive.

Reader in Wolverhampton, England

Thank you for your faith-based perspectives on life and the major dilemmas we face today in Beyond Today magazine. Your articles cause me to draw nearer to God, and have confirmed to me that there is a spiritual Body of Christ around the globe sharing the same spirit—God’s Holy Spirit. We are simply trying to be the five wise virgins who take along extra oil to make our lamp glow until we enter the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Subscriber in Indonesia

Thank you so much for your magazine and the articles within. It seems we are indeed in the last of the last days and God has chosen you to reveal His Word in regard to world affairs. May He bless you for your faithfulness.

Subscriber in London

Encouragement in preaching the Word of God

I love the United Church of God and everything I’ve been learning from you. I am a different person now, and UCG has been the vessel that has been guiding me on my spiritual journey to be closer to God. I have yet to visit a congregation, but nonetheless consider myself a member of this church. My family and I watch the lessons taught on Beyond Today television every Saturday. We discuss the topic, how we feel about what we’ve learned, and the world today as it pertains to the Bible. I should thank God more often for this church because I couldn’t learn from a better source. Finally, I found exactly what I’ve been looking for. Thank you.

From the Internet

I want to encourage you in your proclamation of the most important message in the world—the gospel of God’s coming Kingdom! Since I live in Thailand, there is no UCG congregation near me, so the videos are vitally important to me. I am incredibly happy that I am growing in knowledge of God and Jesus Christ though your work. I can tell that this is the true Church by the open, direct, helpful and powerful truths you regularly preach. Keep up this good work, as I know you will, and thank you so much to all of you working behind the scenes.

Viewer in Thailand

Looking for a congregation

I am from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I wish to inquire as to whether the United Church of God has any branches and/or church communities who meet regularly here in Kuala Lumpur. I am asking this as I am interested in keeping the Sabbath on the seventh day (Saturday).
Q: What exactly is repentance?

A: In Jeremiah 4:3-4, God illustrates the process of repentance and helps us to understand its value by comparing it to a farmer preparing the soil before planting seed.

Just as it takes time to properly prepare a field, so it also takes time to come to repentance—time to come to understand how the Bible applies in your everyday life, to recognize and admit the ways that you have sinned or disobeyed God, and for you to turn your life around. All of these matters are part of the process of repentance.

You may be surprised to learn that the word “repentance” doesn’t mean being merely sad, sorry or regretful, even though these adjectives appropriately describe the attitude we need to have in coming to repentance. The apostle Paul refers to a godly sorrow that produces genuine repentance and a worldly sorrow that does not produce the right result (2 Corinthians 7:10).

The word “repent” itself refers to regret producing a turnaround in one’s life. The New Testament Greek word often translated “repent” is metanoia, referring to a change of thinking. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew term shuv, meaning “turn” or “return,” is often used for repentance (the noun form being teshuvah).

More than just turning away from sin, repentance requires that we turn toward God, that we do our best to live as He expects us to live. Consider what John the Baptist said to some who came to him for baptism: “Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Matthew 3:8). Of course, to really change our actions, our inner thoughts and motivations that give rise to them must change.

Showing our repentance through our actions doesn’t mean that we are attempting to earn salvation, which is not possible. Nothing we can do can atone for the sins we have committed. Only Jesus Christ’s sacrifice can pay the penalty of death we have earned. Rather, showing repentance through our actions—completely surrendering our lives to God—is part of the salvation process.

As figuratively portrayed in one of Christ’s parables, some people receive the “seed” or word of the Kingdom in a rush of enthusiasm only to lose interest after a while (Matthew 13:18-23). It is a serious matter to start on the Christian way of life and later turn away from it. Jesus warned that doing so could literally cost us our eternal life (Luke 14:26-35).

True repentance ensures our mind and heart are thoroughly prepared to receive God’s Holy Spirit. Continuing Christ’s farming analogy from Matthew 13, true repentance helps ensure a good spiritual “crop.”

Some wrongly believe that conversion takes place by a momentary prayer of commitment, and that viewing obedience to specific laws as a requirement is “legalism” and contrary to living under grace. However, God is in the forefront of repentance: “The kindness of God leads you to repentance” (Romans 2:4, Modern King James Version).

In the course of attempting to turn your life around spiritually, you will often find that you come up short. But do not let that discourage you. It is only confirmation that you need the additional help of God’s Holy Spirit to be able to obey Him. Baptism and the laying on of hands by a minister of God is the next step of salvation after repentance, and that’s how you can receive God’s Spirit (Acts 2:38).

Be sure to ask God directly to give you repentance. The Bible shows that coming to repentance is unnatural to the corrupted human mind—that it must come from God (Romans 8:7; 2 Timothy 2:25). Add that request to your regular prayers. If you continue to respond to God, He will continue to give you spiritual understanding and lead you into a Father-son relationship.

For more information, be sure to read our free Bible study guide The Road to Eternal Life.

In the meantime, please don’t hesitate to let us know how we can be of service from this office.

Delighted by infographic

I printed a copy of your biblical “Clean and Unclean Meats” infographic from your website. We are having it placed in plastic and framing it by the kitchen so our kids and grandkids can see why Grandma and Grandpa do not eat certain foods. Visual aids go a long way!

We are glad you found it useful! We have a small but growing collection of infographics on our website. Search “infographic” at ucg.org to find more. Individuals are welcome to print off copies of them for personal use, and to share with your family and friends for non-commercial purposes.

Published letters may be edited for clarity and space. Address your letters to Beyond Today, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A., or e-mail BTinfo@ucg.org (please be sure to include your full name, city, state or province, and country).
Welcome to the eighth lesson in the “Bible Prophecy and You” series.

The late Paul Harvey, on his long-time News and Commentary radio program, used to say that the story he would most like to report on would be the second coming of Jesus Christ. It will indeed be the greatest event in all history—the climactic turning point for planet earth!

Lesson 6 in this prophecy series focused on Christ’s first coming—His birth, life, death and resurrection—when “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). As we saw, the Bible contains many prophecies of His first coming. But the Bible has almost three times as many prophecies of His second coming!

Until Christ’s death and resurrection, it was commonly assumed that the Messiah would come only once—that the messianic prophecies were about only one set of events instead of two (though some reasoned there would be two or three messiah figures to fulfill the different passages). Since most believers in the Scriptures were expecting the Messiah of King David’s lineage to be a conquering king, they didn’t recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

Today many people are making a similar but opposite mistake in thinking that Jesus Christ came only once and that He will not return. But how can anyone profess to believe the Bible and not believe the many, many prophecies and promises that Christ will return to set up His Kingdom on earth?

As we saw in the last lesson, Jesus Himself promised, “I will come again.” But at the time of His return, most people will be so deceived and confused by counterfeit teachings that they will reject Him. May that not be true of you!

Perhaps no other study is as exciting as the subject of the return of Christ! The truth of all that will happen at that time is more spectacular than any fictional tale.

An American volunteer working in Jordan shares his perspective: “During the past year, while living and working in Jordan, I’ve been continually reminded of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Most of the people living in Jordan are Palestinian and are not shy about sharing their strong beliefs and angry feelings about the ‘Zionists.’

“I’ve met so many wonderful people in Jordan— hospitable, caring people who would give you anything they had. So it always surprises me, scares me and deeply saddens me to witness the hatred that a group of people can have for another group of people. That perspective and passion is passed down from one generation to the next. I see here in this land the legacy of ancient conflict going back to the time of Isaac and Ishmael. I see how extremely difficult it is for people to forgive and reconcile and love their neighbors.

“I know that this conflict will never be over until Christ returns to the earth and sets up His Kingdom—until the hearts of all people are changed and their eyes are set on God. It will be marvelous to see people and nations learning to live, work and play together in peace under the rule of God’s Kingdom—when the law of love is taught to all peoples and it prevails over all lands. I long to see the day when all people will have the understanding and hope...
from the Word of God that I am blessed to have!"

**Bible prophecy gives understanding**

Bible prophecies are important because they are revelations from God. “Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21).

God inspired many prophets and apostles to write down prophecies of a coming glorious Messiah and “Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14).

The earlier biblical prophets didn’t have full understanding of how their prophecies would be fulfilled. Many questions in their minds went unanswered. Even the angels longed to better understand! (1 Peter 1:10-12). It has been through Jesus Christ, His apostles and the Church that human beings and angels can at last understand the “mystery” of the overall plan of God and the central role of Jesus Christ in that plan through both His first and second comings (Ephesians 3:8-10).

Referring to the spiritual understanding available to us through the Bible, Jesus said, “But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Matthew 13:16-17).

Keep in mind that knowledge is only valuable when it’s used and applied. Also keep in mind that many end-time events and people are connected with the return of Christ that will not be discussed in this short lesson. Many will be covered in other lessons.

Let’s now take note of several important prophecies and their fulfillments.

► **Did Jesus promise He would return “with power and great glory”?’**

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then 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” (Matthew 24:29-30).

He said He would return after the Great Tribulation and after heavenly signs. He also said that “the tribes of the earth will mourn” rather than welcoming Him!  

► **What message did Jesus and the apostles regularly preach?**

“Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God . . .” (Mark 1:14).

His message was “the gospel of the kingdom of God.” The focus of the New Testament is on the exciting anticipation of the coming Kingdom of God (or, as often called in the book of Matthew, “the kingdom of heaven”) and how we may be a part of that Kingdom. The Greek word translated “gospel” means good news. And the message of that Kingdom and how we can enter it truly is the best news possible!

What is the Kingdom of God? It is the direct reign of God over the entire earth, which the Bible shows will begin with Jesus Christ’s return as King of Kings! Therefore, every Bible prophecy of future peaceful, utopian conditions is based on the sure promise that Christ will return to bring about those conditions! (More will be explained in other lessons about the Kingdom of God and its first 1,000 years, often called the Millennium.)

► **What were most of Jesus’ parables about?**

“He answered and said to them, ‘Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given . . .’”

“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside . . .”

“Another parable He put forth to them, saying: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field . . .’”

“Another parable He put forth to them, saying: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field . . .’”

“Another parable He spoke to them: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls . . .’”

“The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness . . .”

“Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear! Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls . . .”

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind . . .”

“Then He said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old’” (Matthew 13:11, 19, 24, 31, 33, 38, 41, 43-45, 47, 52).

Most of Jesus’ parables were “kingdom parables”—giving numerous insights into the Kingdom of God. Such parables about “a man traveling to a far country” who later returns (Matthew 25:14) and about “a certain nobleman [who] went into a far country” and later returns (Luke 19:12) are clearly referring to Jesus going to heaven and later returning to the earth.

► **What will be one of Christ’s first acts as He is returning?**

“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who
are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.

“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

He will resurrect (bring back to life) the dead saints and change the living saints to immortal life! (In the Bible, the word saint refers to any true follower of Christ, one who is led by the Holy Spirit.) As the shout, voice and trumpet in this passage show, there won’t be anything secret about Christ’s return. As other scriptures also show, it will be a spectacular display! (See also 1 Corinthians 15 for a more thorough discussion of the resurrection.)

► We are told to “watch” for Christ’s coming. What does that mean?

“Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

“Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods.

“But if that evil servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 24:42-51).

To “watch” means we need to stay spiritually awake and vigilant concerning our spiritual condition and events signaling the Lord’s coming because we don’t know when He will return. It means to stay close to God—ready to meet our Maker at anytime—since the end of this life comes at death or when Christ returns, whichever comes first.

It means to be busy about our Father’s business—obeying and serving Him and serving our fellow man. It means to watch for events signaling His coming with hope and eager anticipation. “Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong” (1 Corinthians 16:13).

► How does the apostle John describe the return of Christ to the earth?

“And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunders, saying, ‘Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.’ And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he [an angel] said to me, ‘Write: “Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb”’ . . .

“Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on it was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses.

“Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (Revelation 19:6-16).

Here is the vision that Jesus Christ gave to John of what His second coming will be like—majestic, spectacular and awe-inspiring! The saints, then made kings and priests, will “reign on the earth” (Revelation 5:10)—with Christ, under God the Father, reigning supreme over all!

► Does the book of Revelation begin and end with emphasis on Christ’s return?

“How does the book of Revelation begin and end with emphasis on Christ’s return?

“Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen” (Revelation 1:7).

“And behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book . . .

“And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work . . .”

“And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely . . .”

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming quickly.’ Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:6, 12, 17, 20).

“Surely I am coming quickly.” And then John adds, “Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!”

“Truly, God’s people should be “looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

Apply now

In Jesus’ outline of things to pray about (often called “the Lord’s prayer”) in Matthew 6:9-13 and in Luke 11:2-4, one of the things we are to daily pray to God is “Your kingdom come.” This means to pray that Jesus Christ will soon return to establish God’s Kingdom on earth so we will at last have worldwide peace, purity and plenty. It also means to pray that we will be spiritually ready and that we’ll be a light to others to influence them to be ready.

Give this some deep thought. And before the day is over, tell God some of the reasons you long for His Kingdom to come.

To learn more about what this coming Kingdom will be like, be sure to download or request your free copy of our study guide The Gospel of the Kingdom.
### Worldwide Television Airtimes

**BROADCAST TV**

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For thousands of years people have been fascinated with predictions of the end of the world. If we look into the inspired writings of the biblical prophets and apostles, we find many prophecies that refer to the time of the end. Should we take them seriously? Are world conditions such that these prophecies could be fulfilled in our day?

Jesus Christ Himself talked of a future time so horrendous that no human lives would be spared “unless those days were shortened” (Matthew 24:22). Did He have our time in mind?

Many biblical warnings leave us in no doubt that increasingly cataclysmic events will occur before God’s direct intervention in human affairs. These terrifying prophecies will see their fulfillment at some future time. The crucial question is when.

Our eye-opening study guide Are We Living in the Time of the End? examines exactly what Jesus, His apostles and the biblical prophets really said about the intriguing days they referred to as the time of the end. You need this vital information!

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