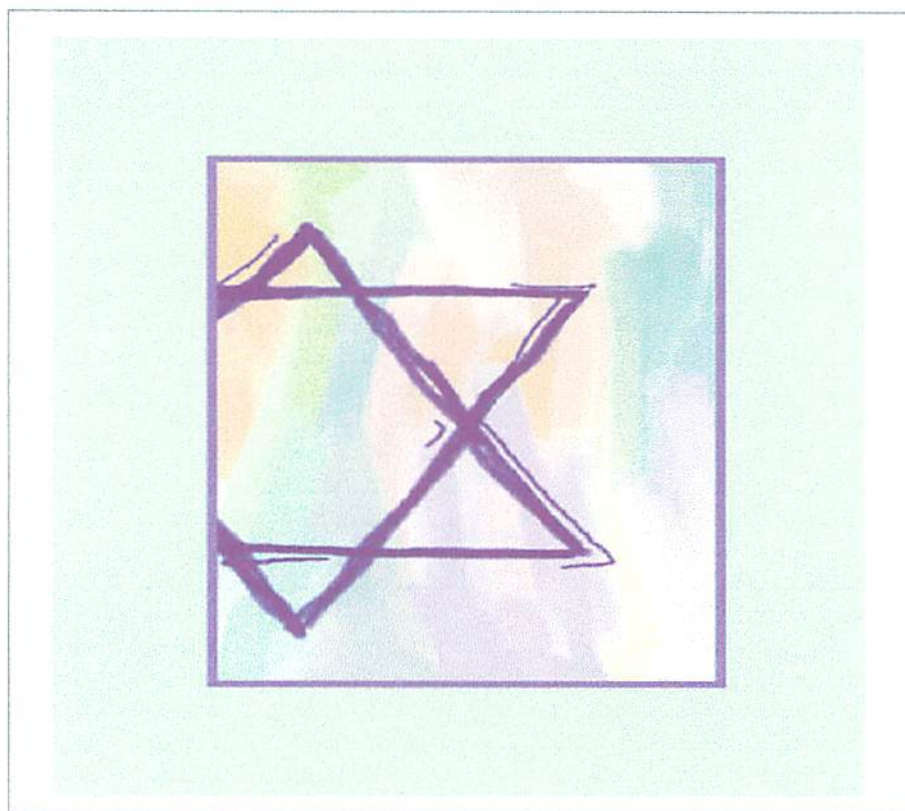


Signs of the Times

The Blessed

HOPE



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# **FINAL JUDGEMENT AND THE BLESSED HOPE**

## **Introduction**

“Joy to the World” is not a Christmas carol. It is, of course, an Advent hymn based on Psalm 98. The words were written by Isaac Watts and the music by George Frederick Handel. The subject is the second coming of Messiah as King of Kings.

As we enter the beginning of a new millennium the thoughts of Armageddon, Apocalypse, catastrophe, judgment, computer collapse and the resultant world chaos, have filled the air. Christians have always believed that Jesus, exalted by his Father, would return to judge the earth. Jesus taught it. The Apostles preached it. The Church has believed it from the beginning. It was incorporated into the most basic creed of the Church - The Apostles Creed. Of Jesus the Creed states, “He shall come to judge the living and the dead.”

When Paul preached in Athens his conclusion was, “He (God) has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

In the spirit of this new millennium I am setting down some thoughts on the final judgment, not with an intention to persuade or frighten. It is only my desire to say that Christians have been thinking about this for a long time. The Church has written hymns about it. It has entered our theology, our worship, our preaching and our practical attitude toward life.

There is a tendency among the more liberal elite to blame such ideas as Messiah's Second Coming on a lunatic fringe or the radical right. Of course they are lying, and they know better. The only question is really why anyone would tell such a lie. I suppose they want the Church to change its mind, but after 2000 years, that is not likely to happen.

There may be those who say they are Christians but do not believe Jesus is coming back to judge the world. I'm not sure on what such a person would base their claim to a Christian identity. Its like a football player going out for the team, being assigned a playing position, getting into the game, and then calling a time out in order to change the rules. The borders of the Christian faith are well defined in Scripture and the Apostolic preaching.

I am aware that it is not exactly prudent in our society to look for the Messiah of Christian faith to return to judge the whole world. I mean, Christians do believe Jesus will judge the unbelievers as well as the believers. This was Paul's point on Mars Hill in Athens. There will be no appeal to an Islamic court or a Hindu court or any other court. Whether or not you believe this, Christians do. They always have.

We will be looking at some aspects of final judgment as Christianity has understood it. In the context of cataclysm stories and Armageddon like scenarios let it be known that Christians have "been there, done that." We are now waiting for our "Blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus the Messiah."

## PERSECUTION AND THE END OF THE AGE

In this period of transition into a new millenium it should be understood that the excitement about climax and culmination is not something the Christians cooked up. The Jewish year is 5760. The Muslim year is 1419. The Gregorian calendar is about three years off from the birth of Jesus. But, Western civilization seem unhappy with the way humanity has conducted itself on the planet. There is this pall of anxiety draped over the conscience of the West as we enter a new millennium.

Jesus, unlike some of his followers, was unwilling to give a date for the judgment. He states clearly (Matt. 24:36) that we cannot know the day or the hour when the trumpet of judgment shall sound. There are, however, some preparatory circumstances which we can look for. One of these states of affairs is the persecution and suffering of the believing Church. Jesus calls it a time of "great distress." The Revelation quotes the "souls who had been slain for the word of God" calling out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood." The Apostle Paul tells us to "mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days."

Nina Shea in her recent book "In the Lion's Den" observes that more Christians have been martyred in the 20th century than in the past 19 centuries combined. Christians worldwide celebrated on November 14 an International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. The numbers are absolutely staggering, and we in the United States are, by in large, insulated from the awareness.

In the Republic of Sudan alone, the largest African country, two million people of southern Sudan have been killed since 1985, most of them Christians, as a result of the genocide being carried out by the Islamic government. Schools and churches are bombed. Church leaders are sought

out and killed. It is impossible to give any comprehensive concept of the scope of the world wide persecution in this short article. However, the U.S. State Department lists more than 70 countries where persecution of Christians is either promoted or permitted.

William L. Sanders spent last Christmas with the Sudanese of the Nuba Mountains. His larger report can be found in his May, 1999 article in "FIRST THINGS." In part he says, "What we saw and heard and touched is the material of nightmares, a human hell."

In 1998, in the Republic of Indonesia, official sources list 465 churches destroyed, burned or closed within the first six months.

In Egypt there are about 4 million Coptic Christians in a population that is 90 percent Muslim. Christians have been attacked without warning. Christian girls are abducted, raped and forced to convert to Islam. The US State Department reports that, "Both extremists and ordinary citizens have committed acts of violence against churches and Copt-owned businesses."

In Saudi Arabia no expression of religion is tolerated besides Islam. Christians cannot worship even in their private homes. If anyone is caught, even a foreign visitor or worker, the penalty for the "crime" may include lengthy imprisonment without trial, torture and even death.

If we are not seeing the "Great Tribulation" what are we seeing? Jesus Disciples asked him, What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age? Persecution was one of them.

## **WORLD EVANGELISM AND THE SECOND COMING OF MESSIAH**

The paradox attending the Millennium madness we have seen present at the beginning of this third millenium after Christ is that those who do not believe Jesus is coming back to judge the world have seemed agitated and deeply afraid of some catastrophic event. It might be ecological, technological, a natural disaster, an attack from outer space, whatever. One need only look at the stuff that has come to us on the screen, large and small, and in the popular press. On the other hand, those who believe Jesus is returning to judge the world are quite calm, and even joyful. Most Christians do not profess to know any timetable. They are quite willing to leave that up to God.

There are some things that presage that event which will culminate history as we know it, according to the Bible. Jesus said it quite simply in answer to the Apostles question about signs of his “coming, and of the end of the age (Matt. 24:3).” Jesus said, “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world, as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

Beginning in May of 1995 I wrote a series of articles about the spread of the Christian faith from Jerusalem to “the ends of the earth.” I took that progress by centuries from the first to the sixteenth, tracing the spread of the Gospel through 52 generations. In 1600, 23 percent of the world has been evangelized.

By 1815, 59 generations after Christ, over 30 percent of the world had been evangelized, with the printed Scriptures available in 86 languages. In the nineteenth century there was an explosion of world mission efforts. In 1793 William Carey sailed for India, and in 1816 Adoniram Judson followed him. In 1840 David Livingstone sailed for Africa, and in 1865 Hudson Taylor founded the China Inland Mission.

In 1940 Christians first broadcast the Gospel over Television. In 1949 the first Billy Graham Crusade was held in Los Angeles. New technologies - radio, television, efficient printing, and now the Internet have taken the message of Messiah and the invitation to forgiveness and eternal life to every corner of the globe.

I truly believe the Apostle Paul set out to complete the Great Commission of Jesus in his own time. He pressed on from Rome to Spain, which for that day was the “ends of the earth.” Paul was in the right spirit. He simply did not know how large the task was.

But, as we approach the beginning of the third millennium after Jesus great redemptive acts in his life and death, we can with reasonable certainty say, “The job is done.” How much mop up work God expects of his Church no one can say but God himself. “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father (Matt. 24:36). But, when Joan and I stand upon the Mount of Olives, which we have often done, and look to heaven, we can say with some expectation, “Father, would not this be a good time.”

The world has heard. The requirement is not that the whole world believe, only that the whole world hears. So, Christians are not afraid of the coming judgment. The anxiety driven secular world is not calling it that. They don't even believe that. Their anxious state comes from a sense that all is not well, and entering a new era is fearful. Only those who know what they are looking for will have any real joy.



## ISRAEL AND THE SECOND COMING OF MESSIAH

There is a story told of Fredrich the Great of Prussia (r. 1740 - 1786). Fredrich was personally an atheist. However, he had a physician who was a sincere Christian. In the midst of one of their frequent conversations he demanded of his doctor, "Give me proof that there is a God! But, hurry up, I have no time." The gentleman physician replied immediately, "The Jews, your Majesty!"

In Matthew 24 Jesus speaks to his Disciples about the signs of his return and the end of the age. He ends the first part of the discourse with these words. "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

Here is a picture on which Hollywood is not apt to do a film in commemoration of the millennium. At least I hope not, because they would only distort the truth. I mention it only because this statement is followed by an assertion that gives us one of the boldest prerequisites for the coming of the last judgment. Jesus then says, "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened."

It is unfortunate that this statement in the Greek is translated the way it is, because it is misunderstood, and loses its power. The Greek word used and translated "generation" is "genea." It is the word that stands behind our English word "generate" or "generic." The better translation in this place would have been "people." Jesus is saying that "this people," the Jews, will not pass away before these things take place.

Of course the Disciples had no way of knowing that the return of their Messiah would be delayed at least for two millenniums. But, the prophecy is therefore more amazing. In the beginning of this century few would have granted that Israel would ever become a nation again. However, in 1948 a Jewish state was born again. Once again the Chosen People were living in the Chosen Land under their own sovereign rule.

One more phrase needs to be added to sharpen this prophecy. In Luke 21:24 Jesus is quoted as saying, "Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." Jerusalem had been under Gentile, or non-Jewish, sovereignty since 586 BC when it was overrun by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Jesus said that this situation would come to an end as a prelude to the return of the Messiah, the Son of Man.

Only in our own time have we seen this take place. Israel is again in the land. In 1967 the city of Jerusalem came under Jewish sovereignty along with the area on which the Temple originally stood.

Again, let me make clear that Christians who know the Bible well do not attempt to put God on a timetable. We are not looking to the new millennium with baited breath, expecting the clouds to rent asunder and the Messiah to appear. We only know what the Bible teaches are the signs of his coming. The new millennium is not for Christians a time of fear. But, we might be excused if we sing the old spiritual with some enthusiasm, "Soon and coming soon, and we shall see the King."

## **FALSE PROPHETS AND THE SECOND COMING**

As we look at expectations for this new millennium as they relate to Christian hope for the second coming of Jesus, we have highlighted several signs offered by Jesus himself that would point to the end of the age and final judgment. We have looked at Jesus' prediction of the completion of the task of world wide evangelism. We have focused on his teaching that the Church would undergo great persecution prior to his return. We have looked at the promises of preservation in regard to Israel as a nation and a people. Another of Jesus specific teachings was that we could expect an increase of false alarms as the time approached. The text of Matthew reads, "At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect- if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time. (23 & 24)."

Frank Peretti's latest book, "THE VISITATION" is based on such a scenario. Peretti tells a good story, but some of the book seemed to me a bit silly. But, we are familiar with false prophets and false messiahs in our time, although it did not begin in our time.

During the Second Jewish Revolt, 135 AD, Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph recognized the leader of the revolt, Simon bar Koziba, as the Messiah. He renamed him Bar Kokba, son of the star, following the prophecy of Balaam in Numbers 24:17 - "A star shall rise out of Jacob, a scepter shall rise out of Israel." Both Akiba and bar Kokba were killed by the Romans as a result of the revolt.

In our own time we have Sun Myung Moon, David Koresh, the Heaven's Gate Gang, Rabbi Schneerson, a host of oriental gurus, and assorted others who claimed, or were claimed, to be messiahs. Added to this only partial list we must add the numerous cult prophets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Any claimant to the office of Prophet or Messiah must be Jewish. It was the Apostle Paul who said the Torah and the promises belong to Israel (Romans 9:3 & 4). That eliminates a lot of confusion. Moreover, any pretender to the Messianic office must be of the tribe of Judah and a descendent of David. Genesis 49:10 sets down the perimeters. "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet." The Messiah was, and is, to be a shoot from the stump of Jesse, father of David, whose dynasty was promised to last forever.

The proliferation of modern day prophets and messiahs is, on the one hand, aggravating to Christians. On the other hand, it is encouraging. We were told about the phenomenon by the Messiah himself, "Jesus, the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1)."

The timing of the "that day," in the language of the Bible, the final judgment, is in the hand of the Father only. But, the signs multiply.

## **THE PLACE OF JESUS' COMING AGAIN**

When the Magi went looking for the Messiah, who was to be the King of the Jews, they went to Jerusalem. This was an informed decision. These Persian priest-scholars were acquainted with the writings of Daniel, as there was a large Jewish community in Mesopotamia. They knew that Jerusalem had always been the capital of Israel. Where else would they look but Jerusalem?

When the question shifts to the second coming of Messiah as King and Judge of the world, the location does not change. Messiah, or Christ, is of the line of David. From where else would a Davidic king rule than Jerusalem?

The news channels discovered that a substantial group of religious people were going to Israel on the eve of the new millennium to await the coming Messiah. To those of us who are acquainted with the Israel scene this is hardly news. The land of Israel holds an emotional charge, especially for Christians, that is so strong it is difficult to handle, especially for the spiritually immature. Israel has an entire department at the Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem devoted to what is called "The Jerusalem Syndrome." They deal with hundreds of cases each year. As the millennium approached the problem got worse.

Of course there is nothing in the Bible that says Jesus is going to return at the dawn of this new millennium. However, when the hope for Jesus' return is exposed to the energy of being in the

Land of the Lord and the Land of the Book it can be unsettling. I felt this as I watched Pope John Paul II travel through the Holy Land in March of 2000. I am sure he felt great spiritual energy as he ministered here at the beginning of a new millenium.

It needs to be said as we conclude this series on Messiah's Second Advent, that the emotional imbalance of some of these folks was not a symptom that they are in Theological error, except for the date setting. When Jesus teaches his Apostles concerning his second coming he places the event in a Jerusalem setting. He links the final judgment to events in Daniel, when a blasphemer by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes profaned the Temple. Paul also teaches that the "tribulation" of the end time will be introduced by a defiling of the Temple at Jerusalem. When Jesus recommends fleeing the city when these things begin to happen, the setting is Jerusalem. The geography and the climate are in a Jerusalem context.

Luke records that the angels promised Jesus would return as he left. That would be a return to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

The Magi went to the right place. We need to keep perspective when we observe the overzealous as the calendar pages turns. We may not know when Jesus will return. But, as Christians, we do know he will return. We do know how he will return. We do know where he will return. We do know what title he will bear upon his return. George Frederic Handle knew it as well - "King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And He shall reign for ever and ever."