

Unfulfilled Prophecy: How Near Is The End?

Dr. Robert C. Newman

(transcription of a talk apparently given at Ithaca College)

Our subject for this evening relates to prophecy that has not yet come to pass, though we think that it might in the near future. A subtitle of our talk might be How Near Is The End?

This is an interesting question. Many people who would not make any claim to be Christians are interested in it. It's not been ten years now since Isaac Asimov, among the two hundred and some books he has written, wrote one called *A Choice of Catastrophes*. He starts out by first listing several catastrophes that would wipe out the whole universe, that would end everything. Then he moves on to discuss disasters in which our sun might stop working; then catastrophes in which the earth might be so messed up that life could not continue on it; and finally disasters that would mess up things badly enough that, though human life might still continue, there would no longer be any civilization.

Well tonight we want to look at what the Bible has to say about 'the end' and how near it is. I suppose the first question we'd like to ask is 'Can we tell how near the end is?,' This question has got a strange sort of answer: both 'yes' and 'no.'

The Bible, on the one hand, says that we cannot in advance tell exactly how near the end is going to be. Let's look at Matthew chapter 24, verses 42 through 44. Here Jesus, in what we call his 'Olivet Discourse' C his last public speech in some sense, says to his disciples:

Therefore be on the alert for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this: if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason, you be ready too, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.

The picture we get here is that there's going to be something surprising about the coming of Jesus to bring an end to this phase of history as we know it, and yet it's something that we should keep in mind; it's something that we should 'keep an eye out for.' It's rather like a homeowner C if he knew that his house was going to be burglarized on a particular night, he would have stayed up and watched for it; but, not knowing the particular night, he doesn't. Well, we can't stay up all the time; after about ten nights of that, you run out of steam! But you can be on the alert. The picture here is: you can't tell exactly, but there's a hint that maybe you can keep an eye out for things and you will be able to know what you need to know.

Just a few verses earlier in this same discourse, we have another remark of that sort. Jesus says:

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But of

that day and hour [of his return] no one knows, not any of the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

Here we have a rather interesting remark. Verse thirty-four has often been taken by people to say ‘Jesus said that he was coming back in his own generation.’ However, if you read the passage carefully, you’ll see that he’s talking not about his own generation, but the generation that sees certain things that he has just described in this passage; *that* generation will see him come back. Apparently He means that, when things begin to wind up, they will do it quickly, and therefore we should be on the alert. But the exact day and hour nobody knows. We don’t know on earth; the angels don’t know; and at this point the Son C Jesus himself C did not know. I suspect that that’s not the case now, but at that point in time he did not know; only the Father knew at that time. So again, the picture is: we don’t know exactly when Jesus will be coming, but we ought to be on the alert.

In the letter which Paul wrote to a group of Christians in a church he had founded in the Greek city of Thessalonica, he says to them:

You yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.

Paul is probably quoting Jesus’ words from this very incident we’ve just looked at in Matthew chapter twenty-four. Like Jesus, he says the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. It will catch people by surprise.

Now Paul is not saying it’s going to come like the sort of thief who sneaks quietly into your house, tiptoes over, opens the drawer, takes out your silverware, and slips away without your knowing it. We see from another passage where this image is used that it’s like someone who sneaks up to your door and then breaks it open, comes in, ties you up, and carries off all your loot and leaves. You will know it when it happens, but it will take you by surprise, unless you’re watching quite carefully what’s going on.

And yet, though these passages point rather clearly to the fact that we don’t know exactly when it’s going to happen, yet both passages suggest that we should be able to recognize its approach. We should be able to tell when it’s getting close, that it’s not necessary for us to be caught totally by surprise. Let’s look again at the same passage, but now I’ll read the whole text:

Now as to the times and epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you; you yourselves know full well that the Day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they’re saying, ‘Peace and safety’ then sudden destruction will come upon them like birth pangs upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.

So, just as the time of birth can ‘sneak up’ and suddenly come on while the mother is not expecting

it for several weeks, so here. That complicates things! Recall all those stories of people who didn't quite make it to the hospital in time, because the birth came up too suddenly.

But you, brethren, are not in darkness that the day should overtake you like a thief.

So, it will be a surprise C nobody knows the exact day C but it will really be a surprise to people who aren't looking for it. Paul is talking to believers when he uses 'you' here, to unbelievers when he uses 'they.' See he says 'they're' saying 'Peace and safety,' 'destruction will come upon them suddenly.' 'But you, brethren, are not in darkness that the day should overtake you like a thief.'

You are all sons of the light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of the darkness, so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.

Paul is not saying that we should never have any time to sleep C we've got to have that C but he's saying in a figurative way 'Don't go to sleep.' He's saying 'Don't let the things that mark the end of the age sneak up on you and catch you by surprise because you aren't paying attention or because you don't believe that these are signs of what, in fact, the Bible says they are.'

So, we see right in this very passage, where Paul is speaking of the Day of the Lord coming 'as a thief in the night,' he says on the other hand 'it shouldn't overtake you in a surprising way if, in fact, you are "staying awake," so to speak; if, in fact, you are being sober.'

When we go back to the Matthew passage we were just looking at, we see the same sort of thing there too. We see there "of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven," etc., and then a few verses later the remarks about 'being on the alert,' 'you don't know when,' 'it will come when you don't expect it,' but now notice how it goes right here:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky, the power of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky; then all the tribes of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. He will send forth his angels with a great trumpet. They will gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

Now learn a parable from the fig tree. When its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. Even so, you too, when you see all these things [the things He's just been talking about] recognize that He is near [Jesus; or it is near C the Second Coming C would be an alternative translation], right at the door. Truly I say to you, this generation [when you see these things] will not pass away until all these things take place.

Well, here's a picture that certain things are going to happen C we've even got a sketch of some of

these things: sun darkened, moon not giving its light, stars falling from the sky, sign of the Son of Man, etc., and then He gives this little parable. He says ‘Look, it’s like a fig tree. How do you tell when summer is coming? Well, the fig tree begins to put on buds, begins to put forth leaves C that’s an evidence that summer is near. So, when you see certain precursors of the Lord’s return, that will be an evidence that He is about to come back.’

This passage has been badly misinterpreted, at times, by evangelical Christians. One rather famous writer, Hal Lindsey (who's written a very helpful book), has yet climbed out on a limb here and got himself ‘cut off from it,’ and that warns us of the need for care in handling God’s Word. He looked at this passage and he said, ‘Aha! It’s a parable...so it must be that it’s allegorical.’

And so he looked through the Bible to find out how ‘fig trees’ were used allegorically. And with a little work, he found a passage that Israel was pictured as a fig tree. And he said, ‘Hmm...what does “branches becoming tender and putting forth leaves” represent? Well, that’s when the fig tree begins to show signs of life at the end of the winter.’ And so he looks around and says ‘Now when did the nation Israel begin to show signs of life? AHA! C the nation Israel became a nation again in 1948 for the first time for almost 2,000 years.’

And then he went down here and he read, “This generation will not pass away until all these things take place...” C ‘How long’s “a generation”?’ (Well, in fact, the Bible doesn’t give any definite answer to that, but he found one C if you work on it a little bit you can do that.) He found that in “forty years wandering in the wilderness,” one generation of the Israelites “passed away,” and so a “generation” equals about forty years C so 1948 plus forty is 1988.’

Now, Hal Lindsey believed that the Christians would be taken out of the world seven years before the Second Coming, so he began to predict that Jesus would ‘take away’ all His followers in 1981. And this, of course, was pretty exciting in the 70s, the late 70s and such. But, he was disappointed as you are aware (things have gotten worse since '81, but I don't think they've gotten bad enough that all the Christians ‘slipped out’ without our knowing it).

I think what he did wrong was he didn’t look at the parallel passages, first of all. If you look at the other accounts of this incident in the gospels of Mark and Luke, you'll find in the gospel of Luke that Jesus apparently said a little bit more here in verse 32 than we’ve got in Matthew. He said “Now learn a parable from the fig tree and all the trees.”

I think Lindsey could have gotten around that if he’d tried hard. He could have said ‘Oh, well; all the other trees budding must be the other nations; and, when did all the other nations “bud?” C why, when the United Nations was formed, and all of the colonies were given up by British and the Germans and the Italians and such,’ and he could have done that, and that would have been about 1948 also, and worked on.

But I think the thing to do is to look and see that we’ve got an analogy here: when a fig tree begins to bud, summer is near; when these things begin to happen, He is near [the Lord] (or it is near [the

Second Coming]). Now, if you go that way, that just leads you back to find out: ‘What are “these things” in this passage?’ And that’s the thing we’d like to have a look at tonight, then.

So, we want to take a look at what we call Jesus’ ‘Olivet Discourse,’ Jesus’ message of ‘the end,’ that He gave on the Mount of Olives, and look and see what it has to say about “the end of the age.” So...

First of all, in verses one and two we see the setting laid for Jesus’ speaking these words about the end of the age:

Jesus came out of the temple and was going away when his disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to him. And he answered and said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down.’

So Jesus, as he and the disciples leave the temple grounds for the last time in Jesus’ earthly career (they’re looking at the beautiful buildings C it’s a very beautiful building there [actually, ‘building’ is not the right term; it’s a huge terraced platform about 1,500 feet from north to south and about 750 feet from east to west], with right in the middle of it a very beautiful marble building with gold-leaf inlays on it C it was considered even by many non-Jews as one of the most beautiful buildings standing at the time of C well, this would be the time of the Emperor Tiberias, about 30 A.D.) and I guess the disciples didn’t get down from Galilee too often, and so they’re really gazing at the buildings in awe; and Jesus says there’s going to come a time when ‘not one of these is standing upon another.’

And so the disciples then (a little bit later, when they’ve crossed over the Kidron valley and come up on the Mount of Olives, which is just east of the Temple, and got a nice view of the Temple and of the city of Jerusalem from that slope C as he was sitting on the Mount of Olives the disciples) came up to him privately, saying:

Tell us, when will these things be? What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?

So, they ask kind of a multi-fold question: ‘When will this happen?’ (“...not one stone upon another...”); ‘What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?’ And Jesus begins to answer those questions for us.

The first thing he says, in verses 4 through 6:

Jesus answered and said to them, ‘See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in my name, saying “I am the Christ,” and they will mislead many. And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but the end is not yet.’

So, first he characterizes a period of time from his own departure until his return, and he says, 'Look, there are going to be lots of wars [Don't think that because you get caught in a war and your life is in danger that that's necessarily the end of the age C it may be 'the end of the age for you' C but it's not the Second Coming yet]. Okay?

There are going to come lots of people claiming to be "the Christ" C don't listen to them! (He'll come back and explain why we should not; He'll say down near the bottom of our passage, 'You won't need anybody to tell you when the Lord comes back.' You won't need any second-hand information; therefore, anybody who gives you second-hand information that he's back C they're wrong. We'll wait until we get to the passages that explain that a little further, just a bit down here.) But notice he says there's going to be an intervening time; it's going to be a long enough time to have some wars; it's going to be a long enough time to have some false Christs.

Well, we've had some wars. We're having plenty of them right now, but we've had plenty of them over the whole of history, and we've had plenty of people who've claimed to be the Messiah, the Christ. Within a generation of Jesus' own time there were apparently several people who claimed to be the Messiah and emboldened the Jews to revolt against Rome and many, many Jews were killed; we think over a million Jews were killed in the siege of the city of Jerusalem, the starvation that went on during the siege, the civil war that went on inside the city while they were defending themselves against the Romans. There are some hints that suggest that several of the leaders claimed to be the Messiah at that time.

We know, a generation later, that when the Jews revolted against the Romans a second time, when the Romans were about to build a pagan city on the site of Jerusalem, a person came forward to lead them in a revolt against Rome, and he claimed to be the Messiah. We call him "Bar Kochba" today; his name was actually Simeon Ben Koseba and he apparently claimed to be the Messiah, was recognized by at least one of the major rabbis as Messiah, but he wasn't.

There have been other claims down through the centuries; some of them have been in Jewish contexts, claiming to be 'the Messiah;' some of them have been in Christian contexts, claiming to be the Second Coming of Jesus C you've perhaps heard of the Swedenborgian religion (maybe not C it's a smallish group, started by a very brilliant Swede, named Emmanuel Swedenborg, who, in his middle age, after having a brilliant career in mathematics and science, suddenly claimed he was beginning to have visions, and that the revelations he was getting meant that 'this was the Second Coming.' But nothing spectacular happened C the sun did not turn dark, the stars did not fall from the sky, no vision in the clouds C anything of that sort; as we'll see, this passage would not allow Emmanuel Swedenborg to be the Second Coming of Jesus). Well, a number of other examples of that sort C I'll get to a couple of them as we get down here a little further.

In verses 7 and 8...

For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and in various

places there will be famines and earthquakes, but all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs [‘birth pains’ if you like].

What's Jesus saying here? Well, warfare between nations, and famines and earthquakes are in some sense “the beginning of birth pangs.” Ah, “birth pangs” (or birth pains) is an analogy used not only in the Gospels C and also, if you noticed, in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians that we mentioned a minute ago, ‘it will come upon them suddenly, like birth pains upon a woman with child’ C it was, in fact, a standard term used by the rabbis at this time, to represent the disasters coming before the coming of the Messiah. I'm not sure how far we want to press the analogy, but pains, of course, birth pains are something that the woman can't escape from. There's nowhere to run! It's right there, it's all around you, OK? C you can't get away.

Some have suggested that a characteristic of birth pains C and I don't know about this, I've never had 'em! C is that they get closer together and stronger, as you get nearer the time. OK? (I'll take the word of it from people who know those things; some have suggested that that's what we've got here). Warfare, famines, earthquakes: there have been those all through the period from Jesus' ascension until now; and, in fact, all through human history since things got botched up at the beginning. But, as we get near the end they're going to get closer together and worse.

Now, that still doesn't tell you exactly when it's going to be, just like ‘How close do the birth pains have to be before the baby starts to come out?’ Well, you know, so ‘How close do these have to be before the Second Coming?’ But ‘they're going to get closer together and worse,’ I think, is probably the point here, so He's saying now, ‘I'm beginning to give you some signs of the end’: “warfare between nations, famines, earthquakes” getting worse and worse.

Then, in verses 9 though 14, He says

Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of my name. And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another, and hate one another, and many false prophets will arise, and mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations and then the end shall come.

So we see there are going to be more false prophets, this is going to characterize the period in some sense C there've certainly been false prophets scattered throughout history; going to be lawlessness C that's going to somehow characterize this last period. The effect of this lawlessness and the false prophets will be: it will be very hard to show love and trust for other people; that will begin to ‘cave in.’ But then a good note: the gospel C the message which Christ has sent his followers out to proclaim to the world, good news C that, if you're trusting in Jesus, He's paid for your sins; if you're trusting in Jesus, He's provided your righteousness; if you're trusting in Jesus, God will forgive you, because He can do it and be just, whereas if you're trusting in your own works C our

works aren't good enough. Our best works C when looked at under the scrutiny of God who can see our motivations C they look like “filthy rags” to Him (and He's really got the true insight on the matter). It wasn't Freud who first discovered that underneath the surface inside us there are depths and there are things we don't want others to know about; the Bible's been talking about that for centuries).

So, as a result of these things, it's going to become very hard to love other people, to trust other people. But this “good news” will go to all the nations. God's forgiveness is still available; even though things are getting bad, it is still possible to trust in Jesus, and by trusting in Him, to have a life that in the long run will be better than anything you can imagine, though you may have to go through some great difficulties before the earthly part of it ends for a while.

Then Jesus turns to talk about what we call “The Great Tribulation” C it's the phrase that comes up, in fact, in this very passage.

Therefore, when you see the Abomination of Desolation (which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet) standing in the Holy place C let the reader understand C then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him that is on the housetop not go down to get the things out that are in his house. Let him that is in the field not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babies in those days. But pray that your flight may not be in the winter or on a Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall. [Other than this time C OK? That's the point here.] And unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect, those days shall be cut short.

Then if anyone says to you 'Behold, here is the Christ' or 'There He is!' C don't believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders so as to mislead if possible even the elect. Behold, I've told you in advance. If therefore they say to you, 'Behold, He's in the wilderness!' C don't go forth; or, 'Behold, He's in the inner rooms!' C do not believe them. For just as lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so shall the Coming of the Son of Man be. 'Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather together.'

This is an interesting passage; it speaks first of all: “...when you see the ‘Abomination of Desolation’ spoken of by Daniel,” C do something about it, etc. That phrase occurs three times in the book of Daniel; one of the times when it occurs, it refers to an incident that took place about 200 years before Jesus' time, and gives us what is probably the best ‘dress rehearsal’ for the event that we have. This is an incident that occurred at the time of the Maccabean revolt (actually just before the Maccabean revolt) when a Greek ruler of the Middle East, a fellow named Antiochus (we call him Antiochus IV; historians putting numbers on the guys) C he was actually known at that time as Antiochus Epiphanes. “Antiochus” was just his name; “Epiphanes” was his nickname. The word “Epiphanes” means ‘manifestation,’ and to be understood ‘he's the manifestation of the god Zeus.’

So, here was a ruler who thought pretty highly of himself C that's not been uncommon, particularly for dictators, to think highly of themselves; in a polytheistic culture it's not uncommon for a dictator to think himself to be god, or at least to 'use the PR' that he's god C this fellow thought himself to be the manifestation on earth of Zeus, and so he was very offended when he wasn't worshipped. And the Jews, as you know, are not 'enthusiastic' about worshipping humans, and so they resisted. And he finally decided, that to have things run the way he wanted them to in his empire, the Jews would have to be taught a lesson. And so he moved his troops into Palestine, into Israel at that time (about 168 B.C.) and he tried to get a hold of all of the copies of the Bible that he could and burn them; he forced people to stop kosher, and so began to try to force them to eat pork and those sorts of things; he tried to stop the parents from circumcising their children; he took over the temple and he set up an idol in the temple C it was apparently a statue of the god Zeus with a face that had a distinctly 'Antiochus' appearance to it, from the best we can tell; and he began to sacrifice pigs on the altar in Jerusalem.

The word "abomination" in the Old Testament is a rather standard word, a standard euphemism if you like, for an idol, and so probably the force of the phrase as it's used in Daniel is, 'The idol that causes desolation,' and the picture here is that this Antiochus Epiphanes set up an idol in the temple and tried to take over the temple of God for the worship of himself.

Well, Jesus is well aware that this event happened 200 years before his time in 168 B.C. He's saying Daniel is not just talking about that, but that the other passages are talking about something still to come, something at the end of the age, and hinting that this particular incident gives us an insight into that incident. And I think that's what we see here then C there's going to be someone who's going to try to take over the temple of God in Jerusalem in the interests of having himself worshipped. We'll come back to that in just a bit.

The advice for anybody around Jerusalem is to 'GET OUT OF THERE!' C that's the advice. And, as we see it mentioned here, and in Mark's and Luke's parallel passages, Jesus even goes so far as to say, 'If you're up on the top of your home...' (and he's thinking about the flat-roofed homes in Palestine) 'and you see this thing happen or you hear about this thing happening, don't go downstairs and go inside to get some stuff out; you go downstairs and get out of there.' C it doesn't sound like you've got a lot of time to fool around. 'If you're out in a field, don't go back home to get an extra coat C get out of there.' C a very, very strong statement. And it's followed by this remark: "Woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babies in those days." Why? It's hard to get out of a place C fast C if you're pregnant, or if you've got a small child to carry. "Pray that your flight may not be in the winter..." Why is that? Well, it's not hard to guess: it's tougher camping out in the winter; it's tougher making speed in the winter (we're not talking in general of deep snow in Palestine in the winter, but of harsh weather C cold rain, that sort of thing C so that seems to be the picture we've got here). "Pray that your flight may not be on a Sabbath..." Why on earth would anybody say that? C well, it sounds like it's going to occur in a time when some kind of Sabbath regulations are functioning. Take, for instance, right now; there are places where it is hard to buy gasoline in Israel on the Sabbath, because the Orthodox Jews have sufficient influence to discourage certain types of business activity C a thing of that sort seems perhaps to be envisioned at that

particular point.

Then notice this next remark ('Nothing to match it in human history') C it pictures a very, very scary time: "...great tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall. Unless those days had been cut short..." C unless God intervened in a striking way C 'nobody who is one of His people would survive,' a strong statement there.

Then notice, He comes back to this theme about false Christs C apparently, that which has been mentioned all the way up here (not yet the end) is going to become much worse as you get to the end: "For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible the elect" C even in the middle of all this trouble you're going to have people claiming to be the Christ, you're going to have people claiming to be prophets, and they would mislead C if it were possible C they would mislead those who are God's people. So He says they shouldn't be able to, because 'I've told you how it's going to be in advance,' and then He gives this rather striking test: He says, 'Look, if they have to tell you where the Messiah is C that's not the Messiah's Coming.' 'If they have to say, "Look! He's out there" C that's not the Messiah's Coming.' 'If they have to say, "Look! He's in here" C that's not the Messiah's Coming.'

And then there's this: "Just as lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." Here's the point, I think: when you are standing outside and a lightning bolt flashes, you don't need to be looking in the direction of the lightning to see it C you'll see the flash light up the whole sky. It may flash in the east, and you're looking west C you'll see the lightning, OK?

Then He gives another example: "Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." When you're out in a desert area where there are vultures around, you don't need to stumble over a corpse to find it; five miles away you can see vultures circling around over the spot and dropping down occasionally to pick off a piece [or something of that sort]. So, the Coming of Jesus: you don't have to be right where He is; you can be a long way away and you'll know about it.

This is an interesting passage that has been regularly mishandled by persons claiming to be the Messiah. It's happened at least three or four times in the last century that persons wishing to claim that they're Messiah will say, 'This passage fits me perfectly!' The Achmadiya Muslims, for instance, believe that their teacher Achmadh is the Second Coming of Jesus, and they say, 'Look! This is about him: he was born in Pakistan C the east; and his message is being proclaimed in the west C "...for just as lightning shines out in the east and comes to the west..." Here we are C I'm the guy!' But then, he has to tell you, you know, 'Achmadh was the guy! He died fifty years ago, but Achmadh was the guy,' and this passage says 'you don't need anybody to tell you; you don't even need to be looking in the right direction; when it happens, you'll know it,' OK?

Sun Myung Moon uses this passage as well. He says, 'Look! Sun Myung Moon came from Korea C the east; and he's proclaiming his message in the west,' C Sun Myung Moon. But, the followers have to say, 'Yeah, Sun Myung Moon is the Messiah.' When the Messiah comes you won't need

anybody to tell you he's the Messiah; you'll know it!

This passage is very nicely set up so that it undercuts the claims of all the false Messiahs right off the bat. If everything is not caving in around you, that isn't the Messiah. If you don't see the light in the sky, it isn't the Messiah. If you don't see the sun and moon dark and then the stars falling (probably a great meteor shower or something of that sort), it isn't the Messiah C pretty straightforward. That's what this is about C the Lord's return is unmistakable.

Now we actually get a narration of the Second Coming in verses 29 through 31:

But immediately after the tribulation of those days...

C immediately after this great tribulation, worse than has ever been (there ought to be some straightforward historical ways of judging whether something's worse than anything you've ever heard of anyway; that should be straightforward enough); immediately after the tribulation of these days

...the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky and the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky...

And then notice this next phrase:

...and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn.

It's not going to be a happy time for many, many people, when they find out that their worst fears have been realized, that they thought, 'Well, there's no god...' (and find out there is one); or, 'There's not going to be any judgment...' (and find out there is one C that's a scary, scary time). One of the reasons Jesus has told us this is so that we don't wait until it's too late to find out C why else tell us? God's not interested in 'gloating over us.' He wants us to know.

So, very straightforward. It's going to be a spectacular, visible coming surrounded by the worst disaster, as far as humans have been involved in, in their whole history. It's going to have the darkening of the sun, the moon, the stars falling, the powers of heaven shaken; the Son of Man will show up and He will gather His people from all over. Well, that's certainly a detailed narration of signs of the end, and you can see them all sketched here for you.

The Apostle Paul gives us some material that reinforces that, plus some material that supplements this particular material. First of all, some supplementary material C in the third chapter of Paul's first letter to his associate Timothy we have this passage:

"Realize this..." he says, "...that in the last days difficult times will come."

Well, you can kind of see how that fits in with what we've been discussing here C the worst

situation that people have ever gone through in the history of mankind. And then he begins to point out that certain other features will be there that we haven't seen much of in Jesus' remarks:

Men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, and yet holding to a form of godliness, though they have denied its power. Avoid such men.

'Religious' in some sense, but with no power. And this whole list gives traits C just the kind of things that you would hate to be around somebody characterized by these C will become very, very prevalent, apparently. That suggests Matthew 24:12 C "...because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold." This gives a supplement to that, describes the kind of thing that's going on there.

Paul also gives us a supplement to the remarks of Jesus related to the "abomination of desolation," which we had not been told much else about; we see this in the second letter of Paul to the Thessalonian Christians, to the Christians at the city of Thessalonica, chapter two, verses 1 through 12 .

Paul is writing to a group of Christians in a city called Thessalonica, north of Athens about two or three hours. He had founded the church there; he had done the first evangelistic work there. He had had to leave because of opposition raised against him, and they apparently had forced some of the Christians to put up bond, that there'd be no more trouble, and so Paul felt that, at least to make it very difficult to charge that he had made trouble, he left; and things apparently died down.

But then people began apparently to try and turn this people away from Paul's teaching, and there are some hints here in the first two verses, apparently, of what was being done C it was apparently by opponents who had raised the riot against Paul.

Now we request you brethren, with regard to the Coming of our Lord Jesus and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure, or be disturbed C either by spirit or message, or by a letter as if from us C to the effect that the Day of the Lord has come.

Paul doesn't sketch this in detail, so we're not sure whether these are alternatives, or whether all of these had been happening, but the picture apparently is that somebody had claimed to have a letter from Paul (that the Day of the Lord had come); perhaps somebody had claimed to have a message from Paul, or perhaps they claimed to have a spirit of prophecy themselves, and saying, 'Thus says the Lord, "The Day of the Lord has come."' Now he sets out those three alternatives and doesn't tell us for sure which of those were happening, or whether all three of them had actually happened. He says, 'That can't be, because something important hasn't happened yet that has to happen before the Day of the Lord comes.'

Let no one in any way deceive you for it will not come [the Day of the Lord] unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction.

The word apostasy typically represents a rebellion against God (normally – though it can be used for a secular rebellion), and so seems to picture the idea of a rebellion against God, and perhaps that is hinted at in the passage that we just read in I Timothy chapter three, where we find that these people who are “lovers of self, lovers of money,” etc. C that whole long list C that we’re told they have a “form of godliness” but they deny its power. Perhaps the apostasy is rebellion against a supernatural and intervening God, perhaps that’s the possibility here. But there’s some kind of departure, some kind of rebellion, and then this “man of lawlessness will be revealed, the son of destruction.”

We saw already that “lawlessness” is mentioned in Jesus’ remarks in Matthew as characterizing the events approaching the end of the age, and now we’re told there’s some particular man of lawlessness, someone that will characterize it in a strong way. He’s called the “son of destruction” C a rather standard sort of Semitic phrase, meaning, probably, one destined for destruction, and we’ll see how that’s explained further on in the passage if we take it that way. What about this person? Well C

he opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship so that he takes a seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God

Does that sound familiar? That sounds like what Antiochus Epiphanes did in 168 B.C., which Daniel called ‘the abomination of desolation’ and then uses that term for someone still future; and Jesus says, ‘When you see the abomination of desolation...get out of Jerusalem.’ So now we’re given a little detail: someone is going to enter the Temple of God and claim to be God and demand worship. When you see that happen, you’re very close to the end.

Verse 5 merely tells us that Paul is not giving this to them new; he had already told them about this at the time he was with them and founding the church. Then he says something that’s been argued about over many centuries, but I think we’ve got a reasonable explanation; he says to the Thessalonians:

You know what restrains him now so that in his time he may be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.

The picture seems to be that there is a restraining power, and the restraining power can be spoken of abstractly C “what restrains” C but can also be spoken of personally C “he who restrains.” There’s been some argument over this but most commentators think that probably it’s referring to the action of God’s Spirit in the world, resisting the action of evil. In the days before the Flood you have God saying, “My Spirit will not always strive with men...” C you’re in a place where there is a great rebellion, where there’s a great moral collapse before God sends the Flood; and you have the picture

of God's Spirit "striving with," resisting, struggling against man. And finally God says 'Enough! I'm going to send judgment.'

You kind of get the picture that something of that sort is going on right here: there's a restraint going on even now, a rather interesting picture, then. Things may seem bad now, and they may have seemed bad for the past 2,000 years, but if God's Spirit hadn't been restraining them they could be a whole lot worse. It doesn't tell us how He restrains them; I think there are several suggestions we could make. He has restrained many dictators by the fact that somebody assassinated them. He's restrained dictators by the fact that they lost some battles; and, though they wanted to conquer the world (and would have made quite a mess of the place C a small 'hell on earth' if they'd succeeded), they didn't succeed.

There are other ways in which He has perhaps raised up particular people, who have struggled against some moral evil and been able to turn it back for a while C something of that sort; we're not told the details of how all this works, but there's some restraint going on. It's obviously God's restraint (certainly not Satan's restraint!), and it probably is working through His Spirit C and whether it's specifically working through His people, whether it's working providentially through events, etc. C that's not laid out for us.

Then the lawless one [the "son of lawlessness," the "man of lawlessness" (up here)] will be revealed...

And then he characterizes what will happen to him eventually:

...whom the Lord will slay with the breath of his mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His Coming.

This "lawless one" is going to be destroyed personally by Jesus at His return. But now Paul comes back to sketch the career of this "lawless one":

...that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish because they did not receive the love of the truth, so as to be saved.

He says: 'When this fellow shows up, he's going to be able to work miracles.' And if secular humanism is still a big deal when that happens, that's going to get blown away like a little bit of smoke in the wind. The moment somebody shows up who can do public miracles, zap! the theory that miracles don't occur is down the drain like that. OK? Everybody that hasn't already got a set of standards that will allow them to identify who this guy is C they're going to tend to be swept up by him.

Now there may be some people who, though they're not Christians, have some moral standards and they see he doesn't fit them, but what are they going to be able to do? But those who are Christians will actually be encouraged in one sense, disaster as this is, by seeing that this guy C whatever his

miracles are C he fits into the picture that the Bible has already given. We're told back in Matthew that the false Christs and such who will come, finally the last ones will begin to do miracles and they would "deceive even the elect if it were possible...*but I've told you in advance.*" "You don't need to have this happen' C "I've told you in advance."

This is very scary right here {points to part of the passage}; the fellow is going to be deceptive C wicked deception. It's going to deceive those "who are perishing" C but there's a reason: they weren't willing to "love the truth;" they didn't care that much about truth. If you care enough about truth, you'll die for it if you have to; but if living is what really counts C if you 'only go through life once and you've got to get out of it all the gusto you can' C if you're going to avoid anybody who will kill you if you possibly can, you're going to figure out some way to give in to them if you 'need' to.

But if you really love the truth, you try and resist this person, though in fact resistance may not do any good (in one sense – the guy will be too powerful to stop; but it'll do some good in another sense: you don't want to be a person identified with helping that; you want to be identified as a person who is against that. It reminds me a little bit of Winston Churchill's statements at the beginning of the Second World War when they'd gotten into a situation where it looked like they were going to lose, and he said 'Well, we've got to do something...' [I'm giving a paraphrase; he's a much better speaker than I am] '...and we may have to die now, but it's better that we resist and die resisting this power of Nazism, than that we go along with it in any way.' And notice this very scary thing in verses 11 and 12:

*For this reason [that they "didn't receive the love of the truth so as to be saved"]
God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they may believe what is false.*

The work of this "man of lawlessness" C though he's sent by Satan, though he's under Satan's control C there's some sense in which it's also sent by God. A rather interesting feature of all the Bible's teaching about history C everything that happens, there's some sense in which you can say: 'God did it,' 'God sent it,' etc. That's why Job, I think, doesn't immediately jump to the Satan-hypotheses to explain the disasters coming upon him, because he knows that finally it's got to be God that allows it. God doesn't do any evil, but He will allow the actions of evil men, and even of evil spirits, to do things which He will overrule, in a very striking way, and in this case that's what's going on.

God is not deluding these people C Satan is C but there's some sense that God 'sends' it; some sense in which it is planned by God so that they believe what is false, but the reason He does it is a further judgment because they wouldn't believe the truth, and because they enjoyed sin. They preferred wickedness to doing what God wanted. They knew in their hearts that they ought not do these things; they knew that they didn't like other people doing it to them, but they weren't willing to abandon it if it cost them anything. And so God, as a judgment, allows this to happen.

So we see something very scary here, then, about Paul's predictions: there's not only going to be

this moral collapse that we see in 2 Timothy 3:1B5, but there's going to be this “man of lawlessness”; he’s apparently going to commit the act which is called “the abomination of desolation,” and many people are going to be swept up in following him because he’s going to work miracles, and the miracles are going to mislead. They’re going to cause people apparently to believe C in some sense C that this fellow is God. Note how 2 Thessalonians 2:4 says:

takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.

That’s doubtless part of the deception: a claim to powers that cannot be, because God’s already sent His Son, and He’s already told us that when He comes back again we won’t be able to mistake it, and He’s going to be preceded by this guy. So, the first guy that shows up claiming to be the Messiah C that really looks like he’s got some goods C he’s the Antichrist, not the Messiah. (The term is not used here by Paul; it comes up in the Apostle John’s remarks)

And it’s to a revelation given to the Apostle John that we turn now [I’m sorry that I don’t have this on an overhead, but I’ll run through an outline again like we did for the Matthew passage]. This is the thirteenth chapter of the revelation received by the Apostle John late in his life (while he was on the island of Patmos, a very dinky volcanic island in the Aegean Sea, between Greece and Turkey near the coast of what is now Turkey; Asia Minor, then), a vision given in a sort of parabolic style, allegorical figures. Revelation chapter thirteen, verses 1B10 speaks of the coming of a “beast up out of the sea.”

And I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads [strange animal!]... And on his horns were ten diadems [little crowns] and on his heads were blasphemous names. And the beast I saw was like a leopard, and his feet were like those of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion, and the dragon gave him his power and his throne and great authority.

Let’s stop for an explanation. The dragon has shown up in the previous chapter of the book of Revelation. The dragon is identified for us as Satan, and as the “serpent” in the garden of Eden in Genesis (in the account of the fall of Adam and Eve); and this dragon in fact was just mentioned in the sentence before where I started as “standing on the sand of the seashore,” perhaps calling up this beast.

This beast looks very much like the dragon. Both of them we’re told have “seven heads” and “ten horns,” though there’s a little difference about them: the one’s got seven crowns, the other’s got ten crowns and such. Here’s a beast then, that resembles the dragon very, very much, and yet there’s also another thing going on here: again and again in the book of Revelation the writer is referring back to incidents in previous prophecy in the Old Testament. And the prophet Daniel (about [well let’s see; must have been around 530 or something, so it’s about 600, almost 650 years before this time]) had had a vision of four world empires; and one of them was “like a lion,” and one of them was “like a bear,” and one of them was “like a leopard,” and the fourth one was indescribable (though he does give some description, says it is a ‘terrible’ beast, and talks about ‘iron claws’ and ‘bronze teeth’ and that sort of thing).

It's interesting that this beast looks like he's a combination of those four previous empires. We're told of him here that he's a beast, OK, and it says some things about ferociousness and some things about blasphemous names, etc., which seem to line up with the fourth beast in Daniel chapter seven. And then it mentions he 'looks like a leopard' (and one of the beasts in Daniel 7 was a leopard) and he's 'got feet like a bear' (another of the beasts there was a bear) and he's 'got a mouth like a lion' (another was a lion). Thus it looks like it's a combination of some sort of the world empires that had gone before.

It fairly clearly has got Satanic backing. It's possible that the sentence right before we started has Satan, has the dragon 'calling him up.' He at least (the dragon) is standing by the seashore watching. And then it says

The dragon gave him his power, and his throne, and great authority.

If you remember the gospel passage about the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, Satan said to Jesus, 'If you'll fall down and worship me, I'll give you all the kingdoms in the world, because they're mine.' Here is somebody to whom Satan is going to give all the kingdoms in the world. (We may guess that, perhaps, he has worshipped Satan to get this sort of thing.)

And I saw one of his heads [the dragon with seven heads ... ah, excuse me, the beast with seven heads] we're away from the dragon now; the dragon's the one who's given him power]...I saw one of his heads as if it had been slain, and his fatal wound was healed and the whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast and they worshipped the dragon because he gave his authority to the beast and they worshipped the beast, saying 'who is like the beast?' and 'who is able to wage war against him?'

The picture here: a fatal wound healed [we've got a problem in these kind of passages: we're in an allegorical passage. The beast apparently represents an individual (and perhaps his empire as well); the dragon represents Satan; and so the question is, what does the 'wounding of the head' represent?]. Does it represent some damage done to a part of the empire? Does it represent some damage done individually to this particular person? I think we're going to have to wait and see what happens there; it may be an assassination attempt that's pretty close to being successful. (It apparently amazes the people; that sounds a little more impressive than just that 'one seventh of his empire got mashed up somehow and he was able to rebuild it,' which doesn't explain as easily "the whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast." So, we're not told exactly what's going on there. They worshipped the dragon [Satan] because he gave him his authority, and they worshipped the beast [who's like him]. Here is an individual, I think, showing up Satanic backing and he's going to receive worship from mankind.

Now we begin to get a little insight into some chronology:

There was given to him a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemy, and authority to act for forty-two months was given to him. And he opened his mouth in

blasphemies against God tot blaspheme his name and his tabernacle, that is those who dwell in heaven. It was given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them; and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him. And all who dwell in the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the Book of Life of the Lamb who was slain. If anyone has an ear, let him hear. If anyone is destined for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone kills with the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and faith of the saints.

The picture here: he's going to have a limited time in which he will be in power, and it's sketched in words that sound like they're literal: "forty-two months." (Elsewhere in our own passage there's a remark about "1,260 days" and there's a remark about "a time, and times and half a time," which should probably be understood as three and a half years.) Those all collapse together then: forty-two months is about 1,260 days; "a time, and times, and half a time" taken as three and half years is also forty-two months, etc. There seems to be a rather definite statement about the length of time that this being will have power. We don't know for sure when it starts (I'm suggesting from some parallel passages in Revelation that it starts at the "abomination of desolation"; that when he takes his position for worship in the temple, that's when the period starts and it runs for three and a half years, and it's apparently "cut off" [as we see in the Thessalonians passage, we identify this fellow with "the man of lawlessness"] it's cut off by the Second Coming. Jesus Himself personally destroys this particular opponent.

Then we get another beast in the same passage; he's called the "beast from the earth" because he's so characterized in this passage. Notice back in verse 1:

I saw a beast coming up out of the sea...

Now in verse 11:

I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and he spoke like a dragon.

I don't know for sure what the distinction between "coming up out of the sea" and "coming up out of the earth" is; commentators have made some guesses. I could make the same guesses, but I don't know. Some suggest the one arises "from the sea," pictured a few places as the nations of the world, and the other arising "from the earth," the word 'earth' in Hebrew is often used for the land of Israel, but I don't know that. We'll have to wait and see whether that's the right interpretation.

This rather cryptic remark about "two horns like a lamb but spoke as a dragon" I suggest is to be understood this way: horns are typically used to represent power in Scripture, on the analogy that an animal with horns uses his horns to wield power against another animal. And so my suggestion is the "horns like a lamb" mean he's going to have power like Jesus' power, but that his message is going to be like Satan's message. So here, a rather important figure; I've already given away some things here which I'll come back and try and justify here in just a bit.

Verse 12:

He exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence. He makes the earth and those who dwell in it worship the first beast, whose fatal wound was healed. He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling all those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who had had the wound of the sword and has come to life. And there was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast that it might even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

Clearly, he's going to work miracles on behalf of the first beast; he's going to lead worship of the beast (and that's why we call him a 'prophet' here C one who tries to bring worship of another; you could call him a 'priest' if you'd like C that's also a possibility. He's called "the false prophet" further on in Revelation; that's why I've adopted that particular name. I haven't explained why I've adopted that name; we'll get to that in just a bit through this passage.

Then we move into something which if you've seen some of the films about the end-times, will ring a bell for you: the idea of forcing all people to receive a mark.

He causes all [verse 16] both small and great, the rich and the poor, the free and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead and he provides that no one should be able to buy or sell except the one who has the mark: either the name of the beast or the number of his name. Here is wisdom; let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast. The number is that of a man; his number is six hundred and sixty-six.

So, basically we have this: a mark of some sort. Probably the mark represents either ownership (you're admitting this person has ownership over you), or allegiance at least (you're admitting allegiance to this person, the beast). There's obviously enough control of the economy that without this mark a merchant will not dare sell to you, and without this mark, nobody would buy from you C that seems to be the sort of thing. We don't know exactly how that'd be enforced, but the fact that the beast and the false prophet will be able to work miracles suggests that people would be afraid to cross them.

The mark, we're told, is in an obvious place: hand, forehead; and then we have this rather interesting comment. The mark will consist either of the name of the beast or the number of his name. I'd put a question mark after the name of the beast; we're not told what his name is. The number of the beast, however, we are given: it is "six hundred sixty-six." There's been an awful lot of discussion over the question of what this might mean, and I don't know what it means. It seems to relate to a practice at the time this book was written of using the letters of the Greek alphabet to represent numbers.

Today we use a separate set of symbols for our numbers: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6... All of you are familiar with Roman numerals which use just a small set of letters out of the Roman alphabet: they use “I” and “V” and “X” and “L” and “C” and “D” and “M,” and use those to represent different things, and then they put them together in different combinations. But the Greek alphabet (and actually the Hebrews used a similar technique) used the first letter of the alphabet for 1, the second for 2, etc., all the way up to 9; then the tenth letter of the alphabet stood for 10, the next stood for 20, the next stood for 30, 40, 50, 60, etc., up to 90, and then the next letter for a hundred, and the next for two hundred, three hundred, four hundred.

The Greek alphabet, as it was used in Jesus' time, had only twenty-four letters; but there were some letters that had been used earlier that had dropped out of use for the regular words but were kept in, in order to have twenty-seven letters in the alphabet for number purposes. And the result was you could do 1 through 9 with the first nine letters, 10 through 90 with the next nine letters, and 100 through 900 with the next nine letters. For numbers over a thousand they started over again but put a little mark below the letter instead of a mark above it, to show that the letter is being used as a number and it is over 1000.

Well, six sixty-six could be understood as a cryptogram, in which you take whatever this guy's name is (written presumably in Greek) and you add up the numerical value of each of the numbers, and you get the value 666, OK? And that may well be so, that may well turn out to be what happens. The most striking thing I have seen, however, that might be helpful in understanding this number is more definite than this. The one unique way of writing six sixty-six is to use the letter that stands for six hundred (that's the Greek letter Chi). The letter for `sixty' is Xi, and the letter for `six' was a letter Vav or Digamma, which was typically written in John's time by the so-called final form of the letter Sigma. And so, you get this monogram when you do it that way:

ΧΞΣ

What's interesting about this combination is that the Chi and the Sigma was the standard abbreviation for Christos (Christ); but it's got something in the middle C a snake! Thus, the ‘Snake's Christ’ C I think this is a hint of the Apostle John that the fellow we’re looking at is the anti-Christ. It may also turn out to spell his name or something eventually; we’ll have to wait and see how that works out. But this is the one simple interpretation of the structure that actually is a unique way of getting it; it’s the number for six hundred, the number for sixty, and the number for six, put together in that order. Otherwise you have a four hundred here and a two hundred there and such, and you can get all kinds of possibilities if you just have them add up to that particular result. So that’s my suggestion right there.

Okay, we’ve been through a tour then, of signs of the end. We suggested that there's going to be warfare, and famine, and earthquakes; they’re spoken of as “the beginning of birth pangs” and if we press the analogy of ‘birth pangs’ (I’m not sure we should do that), it would suggest that as birth pangs get closer together and worse as the birth approaches, so perhaps the famines and wars and earthquakes will get closer together and worse as we approach the end of the age.

We suggested that there will be a persecution that will occur near the end; there will be a general hatred of Christians beginning near the end (though there's certainly been some of that going on all through church history); there'll be betrayal, false prophets, increased lawlessness (and that is worked out in great detail by Paul in his second letter to Timothy); that there'll be love "growing cold," that there'll be the gospel preached to all the nations; that then this fellow will come, characterized by Paul as the "man of lawlessness," characterized by the Apostle John as the "beast from the sea" (probably a cryptogram for the antichrist), and he will apparently carry out the act called "the abomination of desolation," which, to judge from what happened in Antiochus Epiphanes' time, means 'getting himself worshipped in God's temple as God,' and that is spelled out in rather great detail by the Apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2, verses 1 through 12 C when that occurs, you'd better get out of the Jerusalem area if you're there C there's going to be a time of difficulty for humans that surpasses anything that's ever been; and then Jesus Himself will come again: the signs of the end.

Are there any indications where we might be in all of this? Well, I think there are. [Don't have any overheads; we'll turn that off.] Think about something unusual, about our own time: it's hard for children to even realize it; every once in a while they're struck by it, and the kid will say "You mean you didn't have television when you grew up? What was it like to live way back there?" Maybe not many of us come from "way back there" although my father was not a big spender and we never did get a TV 'til I was in the ninth grade (I think it was quite a blessing that we didn't, but that's another matter). There has been a huge surge of technology in the last century. If you go back and think how your ancestors lived a century ago, they weren't any dumber than we are; but because of certain things coming together we're able to communicate with other people anywhere in the world in about a second (ignoring problems like getting through on the phone lines; no answer on the other end; having to go find the other person on the other end; but ignoring those things, we're able to communicate with people anywhere else in the world pretty well in about a second.

We're able to travel almost anywhere in the world (again you get problems of being two hundred miles from the nearest airport, and things like that, but ignoring those, we're able to travel almost anywhere in the world) in a day now. And if you don't worry about the expense (think of an astronaut in the space shuttle) you can actually travel anywhere over the surface in about ninety minutes, but we'll ignore that C that's not available in general. Think about that; such rapid travel has made the possibility of a world government far easier to visualize now than it ever was at the time Jesus was speaking, or the time John saw these visions. How could anybody control a world in which by the fastest forms of transportation you could perhaps go seventy miles a day on land C that only by trading horses pretty frequently C a rider can't take much more than that; one horse can't make that in a day; or maybe a little faster than that on sea because you can sleep on the boat which (if it's got the wind going the right way) can keep making maybe five or ten knots for twenty-four hours, but not much faster than that, which meant that you're weeks from most parts of the world C hard to control a world that big.

Related to technology has been an amazing population growth. I've heard dozens of times that one out of twenty of the people that've ever lived in human history are alive now. Frankly, I'm not quite

sure how to get that number, there not being any organized censuses in most parts of the world before a few hundred years ago, but we'll take it as a 'ball park' figure. There's no question the population growth has shot way up in the last century due to medical improvements and to agricultural improvements. However, these advances have put us in a situation we've never been in before: we now are in a technological situation where, when the technology is working, the earth can support a population of four and a half or five billion; but if the technology stops working, it can't support a population anything like that. So although there's real advance in one sense, there's a certain fragility in another sense. If anything goes seriously wrong, that fouls the technology up, there're going to be huge famines.

It also makes disease and environmental disaster more severe if anything goes wrong; and you certainly know there's some concerns about environmental disaster right now C that the environmentalists C (though occasionally some of us may be inclined to think that they're overdoing it C that some of the concern over mercury in fish turned out to be misplaced, because they dug fish out of bottles in the Smithsonian Institution that had been put there a hundred years ago and found they had lots of mercury in them too, and some physicist calculated that all the mercury that had ever been mined by man on the earth and put in the ocean couldn't possibly put all that mercury in fish [it turns out fish have a way of concentrating mercury]) C so some of the environmental stuff has turned out to be a 'false alarm' C but it's not clear that all of it is. The ozone concern, for instance C pretty good evidence now that the ozone layer kind of 'dies out' at the poles during the winter, and there's some pretty good evidence that it's gotten worse in recent years. We don't know for sure whether that is some kind of cyclic thing (that it gets worse for a few years and then it gets better for a few years), but most people suspect that a class of chemicals, fluorochlorocarbons that have been put in the atmosphere a great deal since technology really got rolling (they're the stuff that you use in refrigerators and air conditioners as a refrigerant, and which gradually seeps out, so that you have to go get your air conditioners recharged in your cars every once in a while, and that they used to have in spray cans for putting on paint and hair spray and all of that sort of thing) that's been going up there and it's messing up the ozone. Well, if you mess up the ozone bad enough, you begin to get ultraviolet coming down to the surface like it doesn't with ozone there, and you find you can get in a situation where you start getting sunburned in five minutes, instead of several hours, and you get in a situation where it may be very difficult for even plants to live outside very well. Well, trying growing plants inside and feeding the world population C you can see some complications that could develop in that direction. So there are some things going on right there.

Technology, of course, allows for larger scale, more disastrous wars. As far as an individual is concerned, 'when you're dead, you're dead' C you know, whether it was a spear that was stuck through you, or whether you were zapped by a laser beam or something of that sort C but the ability of a few people to kill millions of people is certainly a change from what it was long ago.

And, of course, there's the danger of nuclear proliferation. It's bad enough to wonder whether somebody might accidentally set off the Russian or the U.S. nuclear arsenal, or that somebody might do it intentionally, but it's a little worse when you realize that certain types of nuclear weapons now don't require all that much technology to build. And when you start getting to smaller

nations C you start getting places ruled by Khadaffi and Pot Pol and Idi Amin, and it'd be pretty scary if people like that started getting their hands on nuclear weapons C or, worse than that, a private terrorist group could figure out how to use nuclear weapons or build nuclear weapons or steal nuclear weapons, for that matter. You can see how the pressure, from something like that, might push towards a one-world government as the solution. If only 'one group of guys' has got weapons (well that even doesn't sound very good, does it?!, but...but that's going to sound like a better solution than 'fifty nations having nuclear weapons'). What it will take to convince people to do something about that is not easy to answer, but a small nuclear war would qualify, wouldn't it? We'll have to see what happens there. These things in technology have suddenly made the book of Revelation sound more realistic than it would typically sound to a person ever before in human history.

There's another thing that's happened in the last century or so: the great success of science in explaining things about our natural world has led many people to claim, "We don't need God for an explanation; it all happens 'naturally.'" We tried to suggest last night over at Cornell that that really does not solve the problem by any means; it's accepted by many, many people. Many people today feel that science has 'explained away the need for God' (and if you think a while, 'Well, if there's no God, there's nobody who is going to hold me accountable when I die C and, of course C yeah, I've got to watch what I do, that I don't step out of line and get caught by the government, but the government's just people, and you can do things when people don't see you'), and so you begin to get a 'practical morality' among people that 'If you don't get caught, it's all right.' That has begun to grow and grow and grow in our society (it's always been around; there've always been people who didn't really believe in God, but now there is a phenomenon that's happened in the last two centuries that has caused many people to think there isn't a God and therefore 'it doesn't matter, what counts is "me first"') and suddenly this whole list of things that we saw in 2 Timothy 3 begins to come on far stronger than it's ever been before. Oh, it's been around before C there've always been some people like this C but there've never been so many people like this: "...lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."

I think we see in a strong way how that is true of our generation in a way that, as far as we know, it's never been true before. Before C yeah, there've always been people like this C but there's always been sufficient belief in supernatural religion in most societies that people feared to 'get out of line' too far C because it isn't just a matter of somebody human seeing them, some spirit being will see them and do something to them C but now that's all coming apart as a result of what I call "scientism" or "secular humanism" or something like that.

We saw in the Revelation passage that this antichrist is going to put together a one-world government (or take over a one-world government; it's not clear whether he puts it together or not), and he's apparently going to get rolling a one-world religion (or, perhaps, take one over). It's interesting that there has been a strong force, a stronger force I think than we've ever had, that I know of, to unite all religions in the last century or so. That has been facilitated fairly heavily by the

fact that many of these people who are leaders of religions no longer believe that their religion is absolute, but just that ‘Well, this is our way of trying to put things together,’ and so they can compromise with another group and work things out: ‘We can get along together, but of course we ought to have one world religion; we ought to agree on these things ‘cause that’ll hold our society together.’ And obviously C as you are aware C a lot of the conflicts going on in our society today are religious conflicts. The problem in northern Ireland is a religious conflict. The problem in the Middle East is a religious conflict. Well, if we got all these religions together and they could agree, all those conflicts would go away. You see a force to press in that direction as well.

Israel itself is, I think, an indicator of some sort. I didn’t say anything about it, but you must have noticed by now as we went through the Matthew passage that “the abomination of desolation” has something to do with the temple, and that when that happens, it’s going to be tough if it happens on the Sabbath. It pictures something interesting; it pictures a temple (presumably in Jerusalem, ‘cause it’s ‘get out of the Jerusalem area’ when this happens), and it pictures some kind of society in which the Sabbath is being observed enough that it might hinder your flight C you might not be able to get supplies that you needed, or you might not be able to get an extra tank of gasoline, or whatever it is you need to get out of there.

Well, lo and behold, for the first time in nearly 2,000 years there is a Jewish state in Israel; it started in 1948. They haven’t built the Temple yet, and there are some serious problems that stand in the way of their building the Temple (for instance, the site of the Temple is the third most holy place in Islam C and Muslims might not be too pleased if the Jews had to tear it down to build the Temple C or even if they built the Temple next door (it does now appear archaeologically that probably the Muslim Dome of the Rock is not over the very site of the Temple, but it’s about a hundred yards south of it, so there might be a possibility of building the Temple a hundred yards north) C but there’s some forces around that might open that up. Another war between the Arabs and the Israelis, if a stray missile blew up the Dome of the Rock or something, the Israelis would not be enthusiastic about rebuilding it. And if they still controlled the area they might decide to do something else with the site.

There have been “Christians” trying to ‘help things along.’ I don’t know whether you’re familiar with Herbert Armstrong or not; he has a TV program, a radio program (The World Tomorrow) and a newspaper *Plain Truth* (not a terribly accurate description of the paper). One of his followers, visiting Israel, threw a Molotov cocktail on the Temple platform, but he threw it in the wrong building, in the Mosque of Omar at the south end instead of in the Dome of the Rock in the middle. He didn’t burn the place down, but he did do some substantial damage. I think he was trying to ‘help things along.’ I don’t know how that might happen, but I think it’s fair to say that it’s not unreasonable that some such thing would happen.

It’s reported (I can’t verify this) that a newspaper reporter asked an Israeli official in 1967 (that’s when the Jews first came into possession of the old city of Jerusalem C they had not gotten that in the ‘48 war C that had been held by the Arabs, but they got it in ‘67) C the reporter said “Are you guys going to rebuild the Temple now?” And the official said something like, “Well I don’t know;

but thousands of years ago David conquered the city of Jerusalem and within a generation his son Solomon built the Temple. Well, we've now conquered Jerusalem..." I don't know what that's worth, but it's a suggestion that something is happening there. The regathering of the Israelites has produced tension in the Middle East: a superpower confrontation, an oil embargo. And those two things have made that not just a 'little local thing' in the Middle East, but a possibility that that might be something to set off a world war, something to set off a huge oil thing. If you haven't noticed it much, you should go back and read newspapers and listen to TV talk shows and such; the Jews had it pretty good in this country with the media until the first oil embargo. Then the situation began to shift: they didn't have as much black support as they used to have, and they didn't have as much liberal white support as they used to have. This has happened as a result of those things.

It looks like we might be 'setting the stage' for some of these things in what is going on in Israel. A passage I did not read (but which you will find very interesting) is the twelfth through the fourteenth chapters of Zechariah, the next to last book in the Old Testament, where it pictures Israel as being 'a burdensome stone' that 'everyone who tries to pick it up will hurt themselves.' You kind of get the idea that 'the Israel problem' will be an insoluble problem as the end of the age approaches. This seems to fit very well what's happened just in the last forty years now C 1948B1988 C in Israel.

One of the things you've noticed in these passages surely is the disasters. How is that coming? Well, we haven't had much yet. We've had some famines: you've certainly heard about the problems in Ethiopia, the problems in the Sahel, the sort of southern boundaries of the Sahara, and that sort of thing. We've had the usual earthquakes: I've heard several people say 'the earthquakes are getting more and more'; as best as I can tell, there's nothing to that. I'm not a specialist in it; a friend of mine is a specialist in it; he's an evangelical Christian, and has got no 'axe to grind' against it; looking into the details, he couldn't find anything. But, even if the earthquakes remain at the same frequency as they do now, the fact that the population has gotten denser will pretty well guarantee that psychologically earthquakes may begin to get very, very bad.

Take for instance the 'San Francisco' type earthquake. We think they're going to happen every fifty or a hundred years in that area from figuring out the past (what's been happening with the San Andreas fault slippage); that area's way more built-up now compared with 1906. An earthquake of that sort in that area would be bad, bad news.

But the San Francisco earthquake is nothing like the worst earthquake that's ever occurred on earth; if you've ever read anything in the earthquake literature, there's an earthquake that occurred in New Madrid, Missouri in 1811. That earthquake was by far the biggest earthquake that's ever happened in the United States since white men have been here, anyway. But there wasn't anybody out there in 1811 hardly. It had some very big effects, but there wasn't anybody there. There's somebody there now, and if something like that happened (we've no idea how frequently a 'New Madrid' type earthquake would happen), we'd be in trouble.

There are some other things happening that are a little scary. You can't have missed hearing about AIDS by now; everybody hopes, of course, that science will find a quick fix (we haven't). Who knows? If they don't, big troubles are headed our way from that direction. You can guess what

some of them are: a lot of people are going to die; some people who know they're going to die are going to become more irresponsible than they already are. There's already some talk about that. Medicare and such like things are not going to be able to handle that sort of situation. When you begin to run out of money and health facilities there's going to be some pushing and shoving; you can work out some pretty fierce scenarios that could come out of something just like that. There are people already talking in newspapers (and not in the 'Letter to the Editor' column, where all the wackos will send in stuff now and again, but elsewhere) suggesting the possibility that AIDS may reach the proportions of the Black Death. Who knows? Scary.

Where are we now? Well, I can't tell you: "Nobody knows the day or the hour..." But some of the signs that are pictured in the Biblical scenario are pretty obviously beginning to happen. It's hard to see where we're going to go in a generation regarding nuclear proliferation; we don't know what to make of CO₂ and the 'greenhouse effect' and some of those sorts of things.

There's certainly some strong pressure for a one-world government. It looks like to me that there are things happening that strongly suggest we might be in the last generation. How near is the end? We don't know; but it may be close. Whether "the end of the age" is near or not, your end, my end, may be close. We never know when we'll get struck by a terrorist's bomb, something will go wrong with our car and we'll run over the edge, get hit by some disease, get mugged on the street. We really don't know how much time we've got. It might happen tonight, it might happen next year, it might happen ten years from now, we might die peacefully in bed sixty years from now. We don't know. All we know is that we've got now.

The Bible says we should do something about this. We need, first of all, to think seriously about where we stand with God. Most people who think of it at all say, 'Ah, I'm all right.' After all, the Bible says, 'Put your good deeds on a balance scale, your bad deeds on the other balance, and whichever one is heavier, that's it,' doesn't it?

No, it doesn't.

The Bible says "The wages of sin is death." The Bible says, "There's no one that hasn't sinned." We've all sinned and "come short of" what God intended us to be "the glory of God." The Bible says you don't have to take my word for this. Our chief responsibility is 'to love God with all our heart and mind and soul.' The vast majority of people don't 'love God with all their heart and mind and soul,' they don't even know who He is! They've never spoken to Him, never listened to Him to find out whether He's got anything to say to them. They want to 'live their own life,' they don't care whether God's got any purpose for them. What do you suppose God thinks of that? Well, He's told us in His Word.

But God's also told us something else: 'that can change, if you'd like.' 'If you want, you can come back to God; if you want, you can turn a life that's headed for disaster into a life that, although you may go through some very difficult times here, will be joyful and glorious beyond anything you'd imagine.'

What do you need to do?

Well, you need to realize that you're not in good shape with God. Every one of us has got to realize that. We've got to realize that if we keep going our own way, we're going to one day have to face Him and we won't have any answers that are going to 'stand up in court.' We have to realize that God has made a provision; I mean, after all, the Bible speaks of the message that God gave His followers as gospel C good news (you say, 'that doesn't sound like good news!' C well, I haven't gotten to the 'good news' part yet; I'm telling you the 'bad news' you need to know so when you hear the good news you'll realize it *is* good news): the good news is that you don't have to continue in rebellion against God; that God has given us His Word so that we can have a life that is so much better than the life we've got now that we wouldn't believe it if somebody told us.

All we have to do is tell God that He's right C that we have messed up our lives, that we are going our own way, that we don't deserve anything from Him, that we realize now that 'ninety-nine percent is a failing grade' in God's 'final exam.'

We need to depend upon what He's done to straighten things out, that God did something very, very striking in the person of His Son, Jesus: He provided our righteousness if we'll trust in Him; He paid for our sin if we'll trust in Him; and He promises to 'come inside' us and begin to change us if we'll trust in Him. That's the good news!

That good news is offered now, and it'll be offered until Jesus comes again, but we don't know whether we can wait two days, or ten days, or a year, or something of that sort, because we don't know that we've got that much time left in our lives. Whether Jesus comes back any moment or not, we may 'go away' any moment, and we need to be ready to face that.

What do you do to trust in Jesus, and how do you accept Him? Well, you need to tell Him (you don't need to tell us, you need to tell Him), 'Lord, I see now that I'm not what I ought to be, that I don't come anywhere near "loving you with all my heart, and soul and mind..." C I don't know you well enough to love you like that. I want to be different, Lord; I ask that you'll forgive what I've been before, and that you'll change me, and I'm asking this because of what Jesus did C I'm depending on what He did.'

If you do that C if you do that sincerely, honestly C He'll change you; and, although you may have to go through some of this (we may all have to go through some of this C we may have to go through all of this), on 'the other side,' it'll turn out that it was worth it all. It may be we won't go through this C we may go before this happens C but even if we go through this it will be worth it all.

Well, "How Near Is The End?" I don't know; but what we see about the end is important enough that we need to do something about it.