

Is Jesus Coming Back Soon?

Written by admin

Sunday, 25 September 2011 11:30 - Last Updated Tuesday, 04 October 2011 08:17

By Jim Barringer

I'm writing this a few days after the failed May 21 prophecy, which set off a frenzy of discussion within and outside of the Christian community. Now that the chaos has died down a little, I think it's time to take an objective look at Scripture and see if Jesus is really coming back imminently. In Matthew 24 he gives us four signs, by which we can know that the end is near. Are these four signs being fulfilled in our time?

Before I answer that question, I have to introduce you all to a psychological phenomenon known as confirmation bias. Simply put, confirmation bias is the tendency of all humans to notice evidence that supports your viewpoint and ignore evidence that doesn't. This is why scientists manage to find support for evolution and a lack of support for God in every study they do, regardless of what the objective data say. It also shows up in marital conflicts; a spouse may put his laundry away 80% of the time and leave it on the floor the other 20%, and the other spouse will often say something like, "You never put your laundry away!" Well, 20% doesn't equal "never;" she's just selectively seeing certain data and ignoring the rest. On a more personal level, a lot of people are genuinely convinced that they encounter more red lights when in a hurry. I bet if you actually counted the red lights when you're in a hurry and when you're not, you'd find that's not true; confirmation bias just causes it to appear true when your brain latches on to certain data and ignores data that would cause you to reach a more balanced, and more correct, belief.

I say this because confirmation bias frequently plagues those people who believe that Jesus could come back at any moment. They know two or three of the signs that Jesus gave, such as earthquakes, so after every major earthquake you'll hear some fellow go, "You know that's a sign of the end times." A month after that earthquake, though, what has happened? Jesus hasn't come back, but that doesn't stop the person, the next time he hears about a war or a rumor of a war, from going, "That's a sign of the end times!" All of this emphasizes the need to be objective when we evaluate the four signs that Jesus gave us. Otherwise we're likely to leap to incorrect conclusions on the basis of confirmation bias.

The four signs that the end is near are: (1) "Many will come in my name, saying 'I am the Christ,' and lead many astray;" (2) "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars;" (3) "there will be famines" (4) "and earthquakes in various places." Are these four signs present in mid-2011?

Regarding the first, I can only observe that there is a serious lack of claimants to the throne of Christ. The few who are out there are certainly not leading "many" astray. In fact, there hasn't been a serious person with a messiah complex since Sun Myung Moon started the Unification

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Church back in the 1970s. He has a decent-sized following in South Korea, but he hardly fulfills the qualification of "many" falsely claiming to be Christ or leading "many" astray. This sign certainly does not seem to be present in the world today.

The second claim, wars and rumors of wars, gets trotted out quite bit, but the objective data don't bear it out. The 21st century, so far, has been one of the least violent and least bloody centuries in the history of the world. True, the United States is tangled up in two wars overseas and is assisting with the bombing of Libya, but those wars have not resulted in significant casualties. Most of the rest of the world is at peace. If we look at the actual numbers of how many wars are going on right now, and how many people are dying right now, 2011 matches this particular sign worse than almost any other century since Jesus rose from the dead.

Regarding famines, I'd challenge you to name me two or three places in the world that you know for a fact are seriously experiencing famine. What percentage of the world's population are these famines affecting? A fraction of 1%? I don't think that a few low-level famines are what Jesus intended as a sign of his return.

I'd also say the same about earthquakes. What are the last major earthquakes you know of? The one that struck Japan earlier this year certainly qualifies, but in case you didn't know, Japan sits right smack on a 10,000-mile-long fault line called "The Ring of Fire." They have major earthquakes regularly. What was the last major one before that? Many people would say the one that hit Haiti, but that was actually a very mild 6.5 on the Richter scale. The only reason it caused such destruction is that Haiti is a very poor nation and so their buildings are not up to what we would consider code. What about the last major one before that? Can you think of any? So basically, we have one major (8.0+ on the scale) earthquake in the last ten or so years. That hardly fits the sign that Jesus was talking about.

These are supposed to be "signs," after all, and like street signs, they're supposed to be big enough and bold enough that you look at them and know exactly what they mean. One small (or even one large) famine, two or three earthquakes, a tsunami that kills a quarter-million people, these are terrible and violent, but also isolated, incidents. Jesus was talking about things on a massive - can I say Biblical? - scale, things that would indicate to everyone who saw them that the end is near.

So if we put away the confirmation bias and objectively evaluate the data, we find that there are very few false messiahs out there and they are certainly not leading "many" astray. There are fewer wars in this century than at almost any other point in all of history, especially the previous three centuries. There is very little in the way of famine, and there are definitely not large numbers of violent earthquakes. We have to conclude, if we're going purely by the four signs that Jesus gave, that his return is extremely unlikely at this moment.

Now granted, God is God and can (and does) do whatever he pleases (Psalm 115:3). But he also gave us these signs so that we would know when the end is near. He could send Jesus back whenever he wants, but if he sticks to his word and gives us these signs as warnings, then we have to conclude that none of the signs, and most assuredly not all four, are present in the world today. This could all change six months from now, or next week. My point is not to say

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when Jesus is or isn't coming back. It's really to teach you how to evaluate this prophecy for yourself, to be aware of confirmation bias in your theology and to run the numbers instead of saying, "Well, it seems to me..."

May God grant you success in your study and may he grant you love for him.

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