

The Sign of the Son of Man

Matt. 24:29-35

Intro. When Jesus came the first time, He came in almost total obscurity. Despite the Scriptures that prophesied His lineage as well as the time and place of His birth, only a tiny minority was watching and waiting for His coming. Because there was no room in Bethlehem, His birthplace was a stable. Only a few smelly shepherds acknowledged His arrival. That's history and it's very rare that anyone presumes to challenge it. He came as promised. Today, most of the civilized world celebrates the birth, His death and His resurrection. Yet despite 1,845 Bible verses that speak of His second coming, history is repeating itself. Once again, only a small minority really expect Jesus to return.

This morning our excitement about Christ's second coming should at least match the soul-lifting exhilaration of the song we just sang. Behold He comes. It makes you want to shout something, doesn't it? Jerry Demick wishes he could smash his base guitar and Gail wishes she could kick over her piano bench! The reality of Christ's return ought to produce something in us...don't you agree? It ought to wake us up, revive us and stir us to renewed commitment and action.

Unlike the obscurity of His first coming, when Jesus returns to earth the situation will be entirely different. A short time after He airlifts His Church to the place He prepared, the Tribulation will begin on earth. The Tribulation is 7 yrs. of the most intense catastrophes in history. Jesus compared this time to a woman about to give birth. Like her birth pains, the first 3 ½ yrs. will gradually intensify. The early pains will then give way to hard labor...or the remaining 3 ½ yrs. Unlike natural disasters, these disasters are punishments sent from God and people on earth will know it. These disasters and war will claim more than half the earth's population. The Tribulation will begin with the opening of the first seal and the white horse rider of **Rev. 6. Dan. 9:27** indicates he will rise out of territory once held by the Roman Empire. The Bible calls him the **AntiChrist / the man of sin / and the first Beast of Rev. 13**. He will successfully negotiate a multi-national peace agreement that for a 7 yr. term, promises to protect Israel while allowing the nation to rebuild their Temple and resume their worship. His rapid rise to world domination may be facilitated by the Russian led invasion of Israel sometime after the peace agreement is ratified. Because of divine intervention, this invasion will go terribly bad for Russia and the coalition of Arab states. (**Ezek. 38, 39**) With Russia and the Arabs neutralized, this powerful world ruler may seize the moment.

Yet this personality who first appears as a peacemaker will be Satan's pawn and a deceiver. At the midpoint of the Tribulation, or after 3 ½ yrs., the AntiChrist, will set up an idol of himself in the Jewish Temple. The prophet Daniel and Jesus called his act the Abomination of Desolations. This peace agreement made with Israel marks the starting point of the Tribulation. His act of sacrilege will mark the mid-point. When those living in Judea see this sign, Jesus instructs them to flee to the mountains without delay. (**v.15**) **Rev. 12** prophesies the whole story of Satan's rage and the way God will supernaturally protect a remnant of His people.

From this time to the end, both Jews and Christians will be hated / hunted down / and persecuted. Any who refuse to worship the AntiChrist and receive His mark will be executed. As the Tribulation winds down, the Scriptures say Jerusalem will be surrounded by hostile armies and 2/3rds of the Jewish population will be massacred. Then in one final act of rebellion, the armies of the world will gather for the great battle of Armageddon. In complete desperation many will cry out and God will hear them and deliver them. Jesus will return with the armies of heaven. Unlike the tiny minority who witnessed His first coming, and unlike the rapture of the Church, the Bible says every eye will see Him when He returns. **Rev. 1:7 - Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.**

In fact, written to believers in this present age, **Col. 3:4** says, **When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.** In other words, 7 yrs. after Jesus airlifts us to be with Him, all who have trusted Jesus during the Church Age will come from heaven to earth when He returns. Paul wrote, **you also will appear with Him in glory!**

So this morning, let's unpack the verses where Jesus spoke of this momentous event. I've divided the passage into five points.

1. The cosmic disruptions - v.29 - "Immediately after the distress of those days "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken."

vs. 29 begins with the time notation...**immediately after.** Here Jesus begins to reveal an outline of things that will happen immediately after the Tribulation and just prior to His return. Revelation presents the divine punishments as **seals opened / trumpets blown / and bowls poured out.** The **six seals** of **Rev. 6** detail the **beginning of birth pains** Jesus spoke of in **Matt. 24:8.** Once opened, the **seventh seal** of **Rev. 8** consists of **seven trumpets.** According to the analogy of a woman about to give birth, the trumpet and bowl judgments mark the second half of the Tribulation and her time of hard labor. Like an orchestra that builds crescendo to an explosive climax, the judgments increase in intensity and severity. The **seventh trumpet** introduces the **seven bowl judgments** of **Rev.16.** These punishments are horrific and unbearable. As Jesus said in **vs. 21, 22 - For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.** Here in **v.29** Jesus explains what will happen **after the distress of those days...that is...after** the **seven bowls** are poured out.

Now remember, the Bible says the Tribulation will last precisely 7 years. This is confirmed several times where each half is said to be **1,260** days or **42** months. But in **chap. 12** Daniel prophesied, **"From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days."** This again is speculation, but it seems possible the additional 30 days which move the count from **1,260** to **1,290**, are days that follow **the distress of those days** when the signs and events of **vs. 29-31** unfold. The **45** remaining days that move the count to **1335** may represent the judgment of the nations described in **Matt. 25.**

Jesus said, **'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'** This total blackout and the cosmic disruptions He prophesied were anticipated by the OT prophets.

- **Isa. 13:10 - The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.**
- **Joel 3:15, 16 - The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.**

At this critical moment, the Creator will switch off the houselights. Like a theater just before a presentation begins, the sun and moon will cease to illumine the earth. As a warning to all, God will dial down the dimmer switch sometime earlier. **Rev. 8:12** says, **The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night.** But at this precise moment God will shut off the lights entirely. This judgment is retributive which means it's a punishment that matches the crime.

In **Jn. 3:19** Jesus said, **This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.** It's as though God says to humanity... *"You love darkness instead of light?... Then darkness is what you will have!"*

The implications of total darkness are not too hard for us to imagine. Many of us have experienced a night-time power failure. But the sun, moon and stars do more than provide light. They are vital to navigational systems. The warm temperatures generated by the sun will quickly turn to an icy chill. Whatever solar power is generated at the time will shut down completely. Even the equilibrium that allows us to walk without stumbling will be affected. How many have taken a fall in the dark?

But that isn't all. Jesus said **the stars will fall from the sky, and heavenly bodies will be shaken.** The Bible says the stars and planets are held in place by the power of God. Science and the secularist laughs at such beliefs. But they will sober up when God relaxes His grip and allow these heavenly bodies to go careening through outer space. Against a backdrop of utter blackness, the sky will look like a failed fireworks display. The Greek word translated **star** is *aster* which can refer to any luminous body in the sky aside from the sun and moon. Dr. Henry Morris suggests these **stars** are meteors and asteroids that **fall from the sky** and pummel the earth.

Dr. Luke includes the physiological effects these disruptions will cause. **Lk. 21:26** says, **Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.** We know what an earthquake is, but this is a sky quake. Though we can't really imagine what this will be we can be sure it's not a misprint or copyist error. In **Haggai 2:6** the prophet wrote, **"This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land.** This verse is quoted by the writer of Hebrews. **Heb. 12:26-28 - At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken--that is, created things--so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."** Notice the adverb **Therefore** in **v. 28.** **Therefore** means the impact of these prophetic warnings and promises should impact our lives. If we believe them as we should, they will make us thankful worshippers. Why study prophecy?... Because embracing the truth about who God is and His righteous judgments will awaken a sense of reverence and awe in us. We can't truly believe these promises and remain unchanged! Next, in **v. 30** Jesus prophesied a sign that would be entirely unique and unmistakable.

2. The unmistakable sign - v.30 - "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.

Ever since **v.4**, Jesus has been answering the disciple's questions. **v.3 - "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"** Instead of naming a date, Jesus described the conditions and events of the Tribulation that would lead to His **coming and the end of the age.** This is how He answered the "WHEN" part of their question. In other words, when all these things happen, the time is near. But here in **v. 30** Jesus answered the "WHAT" part of their question...**what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"** Jesus said His second coming will be signaled by an unmistakable sign he called **the sign of the Son of Man.** The Greek language is helpful here. The subjective genitive translated **the sign of the Son of Man** tells us the sign is the **Son of Man** Himself. The **sign** that will be visible to everyone on earth will be the way Jesus comes to earth **on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.** In other words, the sign of His coming will be so gloriously spectacular, no one will miss it. Though His feet will touch down on the Mt. of Olives, the glory of His return will be universally observed.

Arnold Fruchtenbaum explains... *“As this sign is coupled with God’s glory, it is obviously the Shekinah Glory light that will signal the Second Coming of the Messiah...There will be a “total blackout with no light penetrating at all, followed by a sudden glorious, tremendous light that will disperse the blackness. This Shekinah light will be the sign of the Second Coming of the Messiah.” This brilliant display of light will be followed by the return of the Messiah Himself.”*

Thomas Ice adds, *“The sign will likely be some form of the Shekinah Glory that has been manifested throughout history. After all, it was the sign of Christ’s first coming...the Shekinah Glory...that flashed upon a darkened sky announcing His birth to the shepherds. It was the Shekinah Glory that led the Wise Men from the East. So it is that His sign, the sign of the Son of Man, will once again be His trademark, the Shekinah Glory Cloud.”*

No human being has ever seen the full unveiled glory of God in Christ, and no one will ever see it until Christ returns. Peter, James and John saw an amazing preview when Jesus was transfigured. But notice, **v. 30** says, **all the nations of the earth will mourn**. The same response is indicated in **Rev. 1:7**. The survivors of the Gentile nations will **mourn** when they see this impressive sign. For some, their mourning will accompany repentance and salvation. That will be the response of many survivors in Israel. **Zech. 12:10** says, **“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.** But for the most of the survivors on earth, the mourning will be an expression of anger / outrage / fear / and frustration. **II Cor. 7:10** says, **Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.** But no longer will fallen humanity be able to laugh, deny or resist this glorious One who is the way, the truth and the life. The unsaved will be confronted by the truth they persistently denied.

3. The gathering of the elect - v. 31- And He will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

In **Matt. 23:37** Jesus revealed the heart of God toward His wayward people. He said, **“...how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.”** Now this same Jesus promises to return at a time when Jerusalem is again in great peril. He will supernaturally deliver His people and gather them together. This future gathering of **the elect** was prophesied in **Isa.11:12 - He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth.**

The fact that Jesus will employ angels at the time of the end is seen in **Matt. 13:41, 49 - The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil...This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous.** But prior to this gathering of the unsaved wicked during that 45 day period Daniel alluded to, Jesus will send his angels to gather His elect. **His elect** refers to Jewish people who have survived the Tribulation / have repented or changed their mind about Jesus and have embraced Him as their Messiah. Those who are gathered will enter the Millennial Kingdom that Jesus will establish following the judgment of **Matt. 25**.

4. The parable of the fig tree - vs. 32, 33 - "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door.

In the spring of the year when temperatures begin to wake and warm things up, nutrients begin to flow in the trunk and branches of trees. This makes the **twigs tender**. The warm temperatures and inflow of nutrients triggers the leafing out process. Jesus said, *“when you see new leaves appearing on your fig trees, you know that summer is near.”* Leafing out doesn’t happen during the fall or the winter months...it only happens at springtime which of course, precedes summer. Then Jesus states His point...**Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door.** Some go to great lengths to explain how the fig tree represents Israel and the budding fig tree represents Israel becoming a nation in 1948. None deny the fact that fulfillment of the prophetic Scriptures demand Israel be a nation, but there’s no need to allegorize or spiritualize anything here. The parable is simple and uncomplicated. Jesus has been talking in concrete terms about observable things. He’s been talking about actual physical disturbances on earth and actual cosmic disturbances in the sky. To explain His meaning He said in **v. 33 - Even so, when you see all these things, (these prophesied conditions and events) **know that it is near, right at the door. All these things** can only refer to what Jesus has been talking about up to this point...the birth pains (**vs. 4-14**) / the abomination of desolation (**v. 15**) / the need to flee because of the impending perils (**vs. 16-28**) / and the catastrophic upheaval of the universe. Like the relation of a tree that is leafing out to the advent of summer, **all these things** are signs that indicate His coming **is near...right at the door.****

It’s an gross understatement to say the seal / trumpet / and bowl judgments will dramatically change life on earth. The Tribulation will radically alter earth’s topography and the configuration of the starry universe. Scenery and things so familiar will pass away. A flourishing economy will be but a memory. Billions of people will pass away. Everything will be in a state of flux. People who disregard God’s Word won’t know what to expect next. Yet Jesus offered hope to those who believe His Words. In contrast with all that is passing away, Jesus reminded them of two unchanging certainties.

5. The things that will never pass away - vs. 34, 35 - I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

First, He said, **this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.** Now remember...one specific people group is in view in **vs. 4-34**. This people group is identified by the pronoun **you** which appears 12 x’s. In **vs 22, 24** and **31** this group is identified as **the elect** or **his elect**. Now in **v.34** this same group is referred to as **this generation**. In each case, this group represents Jewish people living in the Tribulation who will repent and put their faith in Jesus. **This generation** can’t possibly refer to the disciple’s generation or to the nation at large. We know that every person who was part of the disciple’s generation died prior to Christ’s return. Some who hold to other views actually suggest that Jesus was just guessing in **vs. 34**. Though it’s unfortunate for those He misled, Jesus made a mistake. Are you kidding me? Jesus doesn’t speculate about anything and He certainly doesn’t make mistakes or mislead anyone! Divine omniscience precludes guesswork.

So, looking to this future time Jesus said **this generation** of Jewish believers who will suffer and by divine protection, survive the horrors of the Tribulation, will **not pass away until all these things have happened**. So this is the first enduring thing. Speaking to this group directly and in advance of all these things coming to pass, Jesus said, here’s something you can count on. This **generation** of Jewish believers will survive. **This generation** is a remnant God has promised to preserve.

Finally, Jesus said, there’s something else that will endure forever...something else you should anchor your life to. He said, **Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away**. This promise was first made in **Matt. 5:18** where Jesus said, **I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.**

In this verse Jesus promised that God's Word would endure forever and that everything He promised will be accomplished. Now in **Matt. 34:35** Jesus makes a similar promise about His words. Like God's Word, His Words are equally durable and equally reliable. You see, here's the thing about the Word of God...it isn't like pliable or unreliable like the words of a mere man or woman. His promises are never "maybe" or "if things go as planned." God's word is inflexible and entirely trustworthy. They never fail! Do you believe that?

Once again, in the midst of complete chaos where everything once trusted and relied on is coming unglued...Jesus said, *"its not that way with my words. You can trust my words through the fiercest storm. You can rely on my words despite powerful deception / war / famine / earthquakes / and persecution. You can count on my words when the abomination of desolation happens. And my words are still trustworthy when the sun and moon cease to shine and the orderly universe goes haywire. When all around you is changing and passing away, **my words will never pass away.**"*

Friends, this is how it will be when Jesus returns to earth. A time of utter catastrophe and distress will give way to darkness followed by incredible supernatural light. Then Jesus will return. **Mal. 4:2** says, **But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.**