

THIEF IN THE NIGHT

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It seems only appropriate that I comment today on what *didn't happen* yesterday, May 21, 2011.

89-year-old Harold Camping, a radio broadcaster for over 50 years, mounted a massive radio, book, Internet, and billboard campaign to announce the end of the world and the return of Jesus Christ.

According to his calculations, taken from information he found in the Bible, May 21, 1988 was the last day of the Church Age, and the beginning of the Great Tribulation, which would last for 23 years.

Yesterday, May 21, 2011, marked the end of the 23 years, and was to be the rapture of the church and the beginning of the end of the world (with massive, successive earthquakes around the globe). Calamities of equally massive proportions would continue for five months, until October 21, 2011, when the earth and the entire universe would be utterly destroyed.

Thousands of people around the world took his message to heart, leaving their jobs, selling their homes, and hitting the road to announce the end.

However, as you doubtless realize, the predicted time frame (6:00pm) passed without notice.

This is not the first time Camping has predicted the world's end. By what he now calls a miscalculation, he first plotted the end in September, 1994.

The tragedy is that he and thousands of other thinking, caring people really believed their own message, and now must reconstruct their lives—many of them, with shattered faith.

We should not mock them. They are sincere, though deluded.

We should not belittle them. Deception is an equal opportunity employer and all of us are, by human nature, susceptible.

We should pity them, and pray for them, for you would need the same, had you fallen into such a trap.

We should also review what the Bible says along these lines to strengthen our own faith and embolden our compassion for others and revitalize our love for Jesus Christ.

What Did Jesus Say?

So, let's turn to Matthew 24. Matthew has recorded for us here the "Joe Friday" version of the end of time—just the facts. Jesus' intention was to speak plainly to His followers, but the nature of the topic—a future event such as has never happened before in human experience—makes it difficult to put into words that we can thoroughly understand.

Matthew 24:37-25:46 adds parables that describe what our attitudes and behaviors ought to be in the light of the impending end of all things. Today, however, we will focus on the facts outlined in the first 36 verses of chapter 24.

¹ As Jesus was leaving the Temple grounds, his disciples pointed out to him the various Temple buildings. ² But he responded, “Do you see all these buildings? I tell you the truth, they will be completely demolished. Not one stone will be left on top of another!”

This prediction stunned Jesus’ disciples. The Temple had been destroyed before, but they had generally assumed that Jesus had revealed Himself as Messiah in preparation for ending the hostility toward Judaism and the Jewish people and vanquishing their enemies. Destruction and calamity were not on their radar.

However, they did know the ancient prophecies regarding the end of the world, and His words now stirred those perplexing thoughts again.

³ Later, Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives. His disciples came to him privately and said, “Tell us, when will all this happen? What sign will signal your return and the end of the world?”

⁴ Jesus told them, “Don’t let anyone mislead you, ⁵ for many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah.’ They will deceive many. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and threats of wars, but don’t panic. Yes, these things must take place, but the end won’t follow immediately. ⁷ Nation will go to war against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in many parts of the world. ⁸ But all this is only the first of the birth pains, with more to come.

Misleaders abound; beware! Why would anyone want to mislead you about such a sober event? Most do not, but are sincerely misled themselves.

And something in the human genes loves to scoop others, to be the first to bring news. This commonly causes unfortunate rumors of all sorts, and is the substance of tabloid newspapers and magazines and not a few Weblogs (blogs) and podcasts.

The very same catastrophic events that you hear announced as the signals of the end today, Jesus plainly said are *not* the end, but only the beginning of trouble. There will be more.

Difficult Days Ahead

⁹ “Then you will be arrested, persecuted, and killed. You will be hated all over the world because you are my followers. ¹⁰ And many will turn away from me and betray and hate each other. ¹¹ And many false prophets will appear and will deceive many people. ¹² Sin will be rampant everywhere, and the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it; and then the end will come.

Think for a moment what it would be like to live in a world like that: a world of prolific natural disasters, general persecution of Christians, mistrust and betrayal within the church, numerous false prophets declaring their own imaginations as fact, rampant sin, and a scarcity of compassion.

It is in just such a time, and against just such mounting pressures, that Jesus says the Good News of God’s Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world. Won’t that be a desirable career?!

¹⁵ “The day is coming when you will see what Daniel the prophet spoke about—the sacrilegious object that causes desecration standing in the Holy Place.” (Reader, pay attention!) ¹⁶ “Then those in Judea must flee to the hills. ¹⁷ A person out on the deck of a roof must not go down into the house to pack. ¹⁸ A person out in the field must not return even to get a coat. ¹⁹ How terrible it will be for pregnant women and for nursing mothers in those days. ²⁰ And pray that your flight will not be in winter or on the Sabbath. ²¹ For there will be greater anguish than at any time since the world began. And it will

never be so great again. ²² In fact, unless that time of calamity is shortened, not a single person will survive. But it will be shortened for the sake of God's chosen ones.

This passage refers to an ancient Jewish prophecy that was familiar to His hearers, that will launch a period of trouble on earth that eclipses everything that has preceded it (v.21). The magnitude of this calamity will threaten to extinguish human life globally, but because God has promised to bless His chosen people, He will abate the destruction.

For emphasis and clarity, Jesus repeats His dire warnings.

²³ *"Then if anyone tells you, 'Look, here is the Messiah,' or 'There he is,' don't believe it. ²⁴ For false messiahs and false prophets will rise up and perform great signs and wonders so as to deceive, if possible, even God's chosen ones. ²⁵ See, I have warned you about this ahead of time.*

²⁶ *"So if someone tells you, 'Look, the Messiah is out in the desert,' don't bother to go and look. Or, 'Look, he is hiding here,' don't believe it! ²⁷ For as the lightning flashes in the east and shines to the west, so it will be when the Son of Man comes. ²⁸ Just as the gathering of vultures shows there is a carcass nearby, so these signs indicate that the end is near.*

²⁹ *"Immediately after the anguish of those days,
the sun will be darkened,
the moon will give no light,
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

I hope you recognize the increasing intensity of these tragic events as days and months pass. And the nature of the events will shift from the earth to the heavens. These words are describing things that have seldom been witnessed by anyone, and never all together like this. These are not events created by human carelessness or selfishness. These are acts of divine judgment.

Global Harvest

³⁰ *And then at last, the sign that the Son of Man is coming will appear in the heavens, and there will be deep mourning among all the peoples of the earth. And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with the mighty blast of a trumpet, and they will gather his chosen ones from all over the world—from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven.*

Then, with a tsunami of conviction and sorrow sweeping the globe, people will turn to the Lord, and all of God's people—those who remain on earth and those who have preceded them to heaven, by death or by rapture—will be gathered together with the Lord.

³² *"Now learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branches bud and its leaves begin to sprout, you know that summer is near. ³³ In the same way, when you see all these things, you can know his return is very near, right at the door. ³⁴ I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass from the scene until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear.*

³⁶ *"However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows.*

"Take a lesson from the fig tree." You can tell the divine season. You will "see all these things" happening around you, and that will be for you a signal.

"However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen...only the Father knows."

If we knew where tornadoes would touch down, we could prepare. If we knew when the earth would quake, we could prepare. If we knew when the heavens would pour down more water than we could manage, we could prepare. If we knew where and when disease would break out, we could prepare.

What We Do Know

We don't know the day or the hour for any of these things. For all the advances of our collective science and technology, we still only know the seasons (and some of them cover decades). Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians becomes particularly meaningful here.

1 Thessalonians 5

¹ Now concerning how and when all this will happen, dear brothers and sisters, we don't really need to write you. ² For you know quite well that the day of the Lord's return will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. ³ When people are saying, "Everything is peaceful and secure," then disaster will fall on them as suddenly as a pregnant woman's labor pains begin. And there will be no escape.

Book after book will be written on the theme of "how and when all this will happen," but the Holy Spirit said there is no point to this exercise for the whole-hearted follower of Jesus Christ. For two reasons: (1) the world will remain oblivious until they are suddenly afflicted, as in the days of Noah, and (2) the Church has a built-in warning system (and I am not referring to the proliferation of so-called "prophets").

⁴ But you aren't in the dark about these things, dear brothers and sisters, and you won't be surprised when the day of the Lord comes like a thief. ⁵ For you are all children of the light and of the day; we don't belong to darkness and night. ⁶ So be on your guard, not asleep like the others. Stay alert and be clearheaded. ⁷ Night is the time when people sleep and drinkers get drunk. ⁸ But let us who live in the light be clearheaded, protected by the armor of faith and love, and wearing as our helmet the confidence of our salvation.

⁹ For God chose to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ, not to pour out his anger on us. ¹⁰ Christ died for us so that, whether we are dead or alive when he returns, we can live with him forever. ¹¹ So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing.

You have the Holy Spirit. If you think you lack any needed wisdom, ask Him; He will give you what you need.

God is not hiding Himself or His plans from you; He is not keeping you in the dark. You are a child of the light. If you are watching for Him, He will prepare you when you need it. If you stay alert and clearheaded and faithful, you will be aware and you will be safe.

God chose you to save you (not to trouble you or punish you). Don't ever forget it, no matter how difficult things seem to be at the moment. Even if death should take you before His return, He will not forget you. You will not be left behind.

Therefore, encourage one another—to stay alert, to stay clearheaded, to stay faithful, to stay together.