

THE STAGE is SET

ISRAEL, THE END TIMES,
AND CHRIST'S ULTIMATE VICTORY

BRYANT WRIGHT



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To the people who have been with us
on our sixteen Bible study tours of Israel,
where biblical prophecy comes alive.

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Introduction

That We Are Living in the End Times Is Indisputable

As a pastor, I am continually asked, “Do you think we are living in the end times?”

“Absolutely,” I answer, “it is indisputable.” Yet current events are not the main reason. What may surprise you is how long we have been in the end times. When Peter stood to preach on the very first day of the church at Pentecost, he explained what was happening through the lens of Scripture. He quotes the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28) when he writes, “AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,’ God says, ‘THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND’” (Acts 2:17). God’s Word is clear. We are living in the last days. The end times are here!

In that light, Peter’s sermon at Pentecost serves as a great model. It has a blend of Old and New Testament prophecy that explains why we are living in the last days. That will be central to this book. Studying the biblical prophecies of the Old and New Testaments together gives the complete

picture of where our world is headed and why I believe we are living in the end times of “the last days.”

Scripture is very clear: the world is headed toward a time when all hell will break loose on the face of the earth, especially against Israel. Anti-Semitism is on the rise like no other time since before World War II. Islamic regimes and ideologies fuel this rise. With the increase in the number of Muslims in Europe, fear of offending Muslims causes the most secular regimes of the world to reek of anti-Semitism, for secular people often turn their backs on supporting Israel to appease Muslims riddled with anti-Semitism.

Nationalism is on the rise in places like China and Russia. More and more business has the feel of a global village—one world, one expanding economy. A growing unease in feeling things are out of control and falling into chaos is making everyone wonder about the future.

When the worldwide economic bubble finally bursts, the world will seem to be falling into hopeless despair. There is no question: the stage is set.

It is sobering. It can be frightening. But followers of Jesus have great hope! Even in the midst of our increasingly evil and chaotic world, we live with the hope of Christ’s coming again. When He does, He will come to judge evil. But that’s not all. It will mean salvation for Israel in more ways than one. It will usher in a new age in which His kingdom will come, and His will be done on earth as it presently is in heaven. At last, life on earth will be as we long for it to be! It will be glorious.

Yet the most important question is this: Will you be included in the celebration of this new age? Or will you be left out? I hope to help you to see what Scripture reveals, and I pray it will help you prepare for the future.

1

Birth Pangs

The Signs of the End of the End

In early January 2016, the Chinese stock market sent shudders throughout the financial world. The Dow on Wall Street saw its sharpest one-week drop in all of history. Everyone wondered, *Where are we headed? What's going to happen?*

By now, that is ancient history. Yet it is one of thousands of reminders that everyone is interested in the future, particularly with regard to the economy. *How will it affect my job, my investments, my retirement?* We live in a 24/7 news cycle when it comes to the economy, and when the market has a dramatic drop, people tend to panic and worry. They ask, *What does the future hold?*

Those of us who have lived for a while contemplate the future for our kids and grandkids. *What will they do? What*

will they become? What kind of world will they have to navigate? The potential is unlimited, but the dangers are frightening.

In 2014, the press bombarded us with a deep-seated fear of the Ebola virus. *Could this become a plague that infects and kills millions?* Yet by the time you read this, the crisis will have been largely contained. The Ebola scene that absolutely dominated the news is now long gone from the news cycle. By early 2016, Zika was another new virus to become the world's concern. Every day it seemed a new crisis became the focus of our attention. They caused us to ask then what we ask now—*What does the future hold?*

Islamic terrorism stunned our world on 9/11. Today it is a daily concern—not only in the Middle East but also here in the United States. Outside threats keep Americans on edge. ISIS stays on the move either in gobbling up territory or being in retreat. Vladimir Putin seems determined to restore Russia to the status of being the United States' top competitor on the world stage. Then there is China, which seems poised and determined to replace the United States as the number one world power. What adds to this fear is most Americans' unease at the thought that the United States is losing its grip on world leadership. Donald Trump went a long way pouncing on that fear.

We are all interested in the future, and Jesus's disciples were no different. In the last week of Jesus's ministry, they were sitting with Him on the Mount of Olives, looking at Jerusalem. Centered in their sights was the temple of the Jews that had been dramatically renovated under King Herod the Great. It was an awesome sight. Nothing in their world could compare to its majesty. Some of the boulders in the giant wall around the temple weighed more than two hundred

tons. The columns on the Temple Mount were breathtaking. It was built to last.

Yet what Jesus told them must have stunned 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” (Matt. 24:2).

They were absolutely dumbfounded. How could it be? It was inconceivable to them. It would be like you and me standing on the Jersey shore in the spring of 2001, looking out across the Hudson Bay at Manhattan and a religious leader we respect saying, “See those twin towers of the World Trade Center? They will be completely demolished. Not one stone will be left standing.” That would have been inconceivable to us then. And yet the inconceivable occurred the morning of September 11, 2001.

What Jesus said stunned His disciples. They responded like we would, “Tell us. When will all this happen? What sign will signal your return and the end of the world?” They were just like us. They were interested in what was going to happen in the future.

Jesus’s prophecy about the destruction of the temple would be fulfilled about forty years later when Rome completely destroyed the temple in AD 70. Not many of the disciples would live to see that day, but Jesus did answer their question by speaking of the signs of the times.

Sign #1: Many False Messiahs Will Come

And 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 will mislead many.” (Matt. 24:4–5)

False messiahs are not new. A great example of one occurred in AD 135, a time when persecuted Jews were desperately looking for a messiah to rid their promised land of the deeply resented Romans. Rome had totally demoralized the Jews with the destruction of their temple in AD 70.

Amazingly, in AD 118, when Hadrian had become the emperor of Rome, he was sympathetic to the Jews. He allowed some of the Jews who had been expelled from Israel to return to their homeland and even granted permission for the rebuilding of the temple. But then he went back on his word and began deporting Jews to North Africa.¹ Rome had taken them through one disillusionment after another.

Sadly, by AD 132 Hadrian began to build a temple to the Roman god Jupiter on the site of the Temple Mount where Rome had destroyed the Jewish temple. This understandably led to a huge Jewish rebellion. This revolt was led by Shimon Bar-Kokhba. He began to be seen as the Jewish messiah to save the Jews from the yoke of Roman rule. Speculation of him as the Messiah was heightened because the Bible refers to the Messiah as a “star,” and Kokhba means “star.”² But even more important, he was a descendant of King David, which the Bible says clearly the Messiah would be:

When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you.

Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever. (2 Sam. 7:12–16)

For a time, Shimon Bar-Kokhba led the Jews to many victories over Rome, but the might of Rome was too great and by AD 135 the revolt was crushed. At this point all Jews were expelled from their land, and Israel was no more. To add insult to the Jews, Rome renamed their Judean land Syria Palestina. Palestina was the Latin derivative of the ancient Jewish enemies, the Philistines. Thus, for almost two thousand years the land was known as Palestine. It was not until May 1948 that the nation of Israel was reborn, and not until the Six-Day War in 1967 that Jerusalem and the Temple Mount were again part of Israel—a key miracle that is central to much prophecy of the end times being fulfilled. But Shimon Bar-Kokhba would be one of many false messiahs to appear on the world scene. In every age, Jewish moms-to-be would speculate if their son to be born was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah.

In the twentieth century, especially with the rebirth of Israel, the number of false messiahs skyrocketed.

Many Jews around Brooklyn began to speculate that Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who was the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, could be the Messiah. I remember standing at the western wall in Jerusalem in the early 1990s and seeing Jewish banners that read, “The Messiah is coming.” The Rebbe never claimed to be the Messiah, but amazingly, after he died in 1994, many Orthodox Jews expected him to rise again. Even when he didn’t, some still believed he was the Messiah.³

Yet what is so interesting is that many who claimed to be the Messiah in the last fifty years were not even Jewish.

The second half of the twentieth century saw a rise of false messiahs.

Jim Jones, the pastor of the People's Temple in Redwood Valley, California, became famous for his followers "drinking the Kool-Aid" (they were told to drink Kool-Aid that had been poisoned with cyanide) in a mass suicide in the jungles of Guyana on November 18, 1978. Like so many false messiahs, he instilled in his followers the vision of establishing a utopia here on earth—with himself as the all-powerful unifier and leader.⁴ I was in seminary when the world heard the news of the mass suicide of his cult. It terrified me to think a religious leader could have that kind of influence in people's lives. Yet all false messiahs are evil, if not this obviously.

In 1993, **David Koresh** was the leader of the Branch Davidians cult outside of Waco, Texas. Born Vernon Howell, he changed his name to David Koresh, which is a Hebrew transliteration of Cyrus, the Persian king who allowed the Jews held captive in Babylon to return to Israel. He convinced the followers in his cult that he was the modern-day head of the biblical House of David, which is essential for the biblical Messiah.⁵ He followed a long line of false messiahs that led many of their followers to self-destruction. He died on April 19, 1993, at the cult's compound after a fifty-one-day standoff with federal agents.⁶

Sun Myung Moon, whose followers were known for selling flowers on street corners and holding mass weddings of up to two thousand couples at a time, is probably the most famous self-proclaimed messiah of the twentieth century. His followers were known as Moonies. He was born in what is now North Korea and settled in the United States in 1972. At a banquet in March 2004, which included hoodwinked

members of Congress at the Dirksen Senate Office Building in Washington, DC, he shocked the attendees by saying that emperors, kings, and presidents had “declared to all heaven and earth that Reverend Sun Myung Moon is none other than humanity’s savior, messiah, returning lord and true parent.”⁷ He died in September 2012 at the age of 92. He’s still dead, along with a long line of false messiahs.

That’s a character trait of all false messiahs. When they die, they stay dead. Eventually, their movements die with them. Obviously, Jesus is very different. He predicted not only that He would be executed but also that He would rise from the dead on the third day (Matt. 16:21; 17:22–23; 27:62–28:15). And He did.

It is amazing that despite the huge number of false messiahs and self-destructive cult leaders of the twentieth century who mislead so many, there appears to be even more in the early days of the twenty-first century.

In Japan, **Mitsuo Matayoshi** is a political figure who has called for a world economic cooperative. He, of course, would be the leader and sees himself as “the only God Mitsuo Matayoshi Jesus Christ.”⁸

In Brazil, **Inri Christo** is a classic false messiah who fits the stereotype of so many false messiahs—a religious man who wants to justify having many women around himself. He sees himself as the reincarnation of Jesus.⁹

In the Philippines, **Apollo Quiboloy** claims to be the appointed son of God and is the founder of an organization he calls “The Kingdom of Jesus Christ, The Name Above Every Name.” Amazingly, he has more than six million followers.¹⁰

And in the United States, in South Florida, **José Luis de Jesús Miranda**, founder of the Growing in Grace movement, claimed to be Jesus Christ and the Antichrist at the same time.¹¹ He died in August 2013¹², and like all these other false christs, he has not come back to life. And like so many cult followers, his many followers had their false faith shattered.

In our increasingly biblically illiterate culture, more and more people are prone to follow false messiahs. As a matter of fact, LifeWay Research tells us that there may be up to five thousand cults in America today. Estimates show their followings are growing by 180,000 people a year.¹³ Rational thinkers would think surely by now people would not be so gullible as to follow these megalomaniac cult leaders, but the number of cult leaders is only increasing.

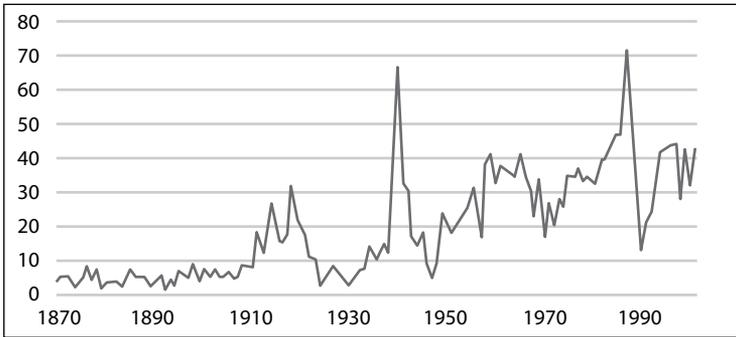
Jesus very clearly said not to be deceived by the many imposters who claim to be the Christ. He also said not to be surprised, “For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will mislead many” (Matt. 24:5). God is the only one who truly knows the future.

Sign #2: Wars and Rumors of Wars

You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. (Matt. 24:6–7)

It is fascinating how wars and their casualties have increased over the last 150 years. Wars have occurred in every century, but the number in the last 150 years has skyrocketed. Look at these two graphs that give some historical insight.

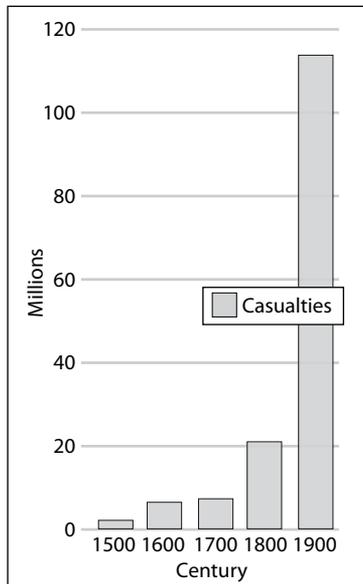
Militarized Disputes between Pairs of Countries Since 1870



<http://warwick.ac.uk/markharrison/data/frequency>, Mark Harrison and Nikolaus Wolf

The frequency of wars increases and then declines, while the overall frequency continues to increase. Don't forget that. It is important.

War Deaths per Century, 1500–1995



“Technology and War” by Alex Roland, <http://www.unc.edu/depts/dipolomat>

In a study by the University of North Carolina covering the casualties of war from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries, the increase is astounding.¹⁴ Many scholars believe there were more casualties of war in the twentieth century than in all nineteen previous centuries since the time of Christ combined. Obviously, one reason is the increase in world population. Yet think what this says about what's ahead in the twenty-first century, when the world population is expected to grow from 7.3 billion in 2015 to 11.2 billion in 2100.¹⁵ It will be a century in which more and more rogue nations will acquire nuclear bombs. When nations like Iran and others led by radical Islamists obtain nuclear weapons to join nations like North Korea, it makes me shudder to think of what may happen in the twenty-first century. After all, this is the century that began with the shock of 9/11.

Sign #3: Natural Disasters

And in various places there will be famines and earthquakes.
(Matt. 24:7)

In other words, Jesus was describing the increase in natural disasters. The Emergency Disaster Database (EMDAT), maintained in Brussels, Belgium, indicates that “the total natural disasters reported each year has been steadily increasing in recent decades from 78 in 1970 to 348 in 2004.”¹⁶

The number of natural disasters since 1900 has increased and then decreased, yet overall it has spiraled upward. When natural disasters hit—such as a hurricane like Katrina in 2004 or the great tsunami in Southeast Asia in 2004 or another in Japan in 2011 or the incredibly destructive and deadly tornadoes in the United States in 2011—we tend to think,

What's going on? I've never seen damage from nature's power like this.

Birth Pangs

Finally, Jesus said all these signs are like the beginning of birth pangs (Matt. 24:8). Of course, I've never had a baby. About 50 percent of the population can relate to that. My wife, however, experienced birth pangs with the delivery of our three sons. I have learned from her experience that at the onset of labor, the birth pangs are not that painful. They are also irregular in frequency. Then, as the birth of the baby gets closer, the birth pangs become more frequent and more intense. They intensify and subside, intensify and subside, with greater and greater intensity and frequency.

We were prepared for this as my wife and I waited for the birth of our first son. Like all good baby boomers, we attended a Lamaze class. We sat around the instructor along with eight or nine other couples holding pillows in our hands, learning how to breathe and push. I thought to myself, *All the way back to Neanderthal man people have been having babies, but we baby boomers think we need to have a class to learn how.*

Later on I realized these classes were as much for the men as for the mothers-to-be; we are supposed to be our wife's great encourager and source of support through the ordeal of labor. With our first child's birth, my role in labor and delivery was to rub my wife's back. After I had been doing that for a couple of hours, I complained to my wife, "This rubbing your back is wearing me out!" I have a great wife, a kind wife, a wife with a beautiful smile. But at that moment

in our marriage all I saw were ferocious daggers from her eyes, staring at me with rage. She replied, “It’s making *you* tired?” It may have been one of the all-time stupid moments in the history of husbands. Thankfully, she was so focused on her pain that she couldn’t kill me on the spot.

Jesus’s insight on the signs of the times leading up to His second coming is amazing. He compared them to the birth pangs of a woman in labor, increasing in frequency and intensity as the birth approaches. And they are just like the increases in wars and natural disasters. Increase, then subside. Increase, then subside. But on an ever-increasing frequency and intensity until Jesus comes—like the birth pangs preceding the birth of a baby. There will be many difficult days. It will get worse and worse before relief comes. Then, like the joy of new life in the birth of a baby, Jesus will come to end the pain, fear, and evil in this world. He will bring judgment on evil and usher in a new age for all the earth when His kingdom finally comes.

Like a mother after the birth of her child, the pain will be quickly forgotten with the joy of Jesus’s coming.