
Are We Living in the Last Days?

by: Ronald L. Dart

The end of the world.

It's a chilling thought, isn't it? I can remember long summer evenings on the front porch of our house in Arkansas, listening to my elders talk about the Bible as we all watched the stars come out. Whenever the phrase, "end of the world" would come wafting across my ears, I leaned a little closer to hear more about what was being said. This was in the 1940's and the world was at war.

I heard a lot about signs in the heavens and once, when Venus was sharply visible in the evening sky, I remember wondering if that was Jesus returning, it was so very bright. Indeed, today we hear some preachers proclaiming that Jesus could in fact return as soon as tonight. Others think His return will not be for a long, long time. The uncertainty of it all can be quite disconcerting, especially for young people.

Unlike some of us older folks with aches and pains and mortgages over our heads, young people are dismayed at the thought that Christ could come back tomorrow and take away the world as we know it. Young people have plans. They want to grow up, to get married, to have a life. It is a terrifying prospect that they may not get the opportunity to live that life.

There have been those who believed in the eminence of Jesus' return and made major life decisions on the expectation that this life would not last much longer. Some people decided they would never have occasion to retire, so why bother saving for it? Others chose not to get necessary dental work done because, after all, what would be the point? Still others never saved a dime for their children's college education because by the time the kids were old enough for college, they reasoned, Jesus would have done away with all that.

Everyone has their own ideas about the "end of the world" and what it will be like. There are many variations on the theme, but there are four major assumptions that need correcting:

ASSUMPTION ONE:

"The end of the world is going to take place at a point in time that has already been determined."

You may have heard the theory that God ordained seven thousand years to work out His plan here below. The first six thousand years are the time allocated for man to experiment and the seventh thousand-year period is a Sabbath of rest for the earth, with God in charge of everything. If this is true, then the return of Christ to usher in the millennium takes place at the end of six thousand years.

It is calendar driven, and if you know the chronology, you know the time of Christ's return. Since the angels have been with the Father from the start, they surely know the chronology and would know the time of Christ's return. The problem? Christ said that no one, not even the angels in heaven, knows the time of that event.

This suggests that the return of Christ is *event driven*, not *calendar driven*. His return is in response to a sequence of events, it is determined by things that happen, not by the ticking of a clock. We tend to think that the future already exists, and we simply work our way through the future one day at a time. We may have been told that prophecy is history written in advance. The problem with this idea is that the future *does not yet exist*. It is determined one day at a time by the decisions of God and the choices of men.

Perhaps the most classic illustration of this is found in the book of Jonah. Everyone knows the story of Jonah and the great fish, but not everyone has considered the implications of the prophecy Jonah told the great city of Nineveh. "Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown," Jonah cried, walking the streets of the city. But 40 days later, Nineveh was still there. What went wrong? Nothing. Everything worked exactly as God wanted. The prophecy caused the people of Nineveh to make a choice. They repented, and God relented. This is what prophecy is all about. Prophecy is a warning of what will happen if we do not change, if we fail to repent.

So, if it is possible at any time to repent, how can we say that there is a timetable of prophecy? The events of the last days are horrifying and they happen because of the depravity of man, not because civilization is 6,000 years old. If God's message today caused our country to repent and seek His face, the future could be different. Right now, man seems hell bent on a course of destruction, but maybe we can repent, maybe that course can be changed. Even the repentance of one person can make a huge difference. How many people had to repent to save Sodom and Gomorrah? (Genesis 18:32).

Paul said, whether there be prophecies they will fail (I Corinthians 13:8). It is possible for prophecies to fail because it's possible for people to repent. When people repent, God will relent (II Chronicles 7:14).

Assumption Two:

"The tragic events of the end of the world are visited upon men by a wrathful God."

As Jesus and His disciples were walking around the temple one day, Jesus told them there would come a time when not one stone of the temple would be left on top of another. This was unimaginable to them because the temple was so grand.

Later they asked Him when these things would be, and what would be the sign of His coming and of the end of the age (Matthew 24:3).

As you read through these prophecies, you should ask who is doing these things. For example, Jesus said that many would come in His name and deceive many. This is not something God does to man, but something that men do to one another. The same could be said of the wars and rumors of wars that follow.

Jesus talks about men hating the disciples and killing them, but it is men who do this, not God.

In Matthew 24:3 the disciples equated Jesus' coming with the end of the "world." This is a poor translation in the King James because the Greek word translated *world* *aion* which means "an age or period." The disciples were Jewish and as such they knew the prophesied Messiah was not going to destroy the earth but renew it. They did not expect the world to end, they expected Christ to make all things new, to usher in a new age of God's rule on earth.

Isaiah prophesied this long ago. Looking ahead to the future Kingdom of God, Isaiah says: "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the *earth* shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9). In another place he said: "He shall cause them that come of Jacob to take root: Israel shall blossom and bud and fill the face of the *world* with fruit" (Isaiah 27:6).

It is easy to see that the "end of the world" spoken of by Jesus does not mean the end of human history or the destruction of planet earth. The *end of the age* simply means the end of a period of human misrule, a time when the Messiah will come and rule the earth with a rod of iron. This concept was far from terrifying to Jesus' disciples. It was, in fact, their hope, their salvation, a long-awaited event, not something to dread and fear.

The assumption that the events associated with the "end of the world" are visited upon men by a wrathful God is not supported by the very description of these events in Revelation. Consider this passage from the trumpet plagues of Revelation 8. "The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up" (Revelation 8:7).

This is an ecological disaster. We don't know where it happens, but we do know that God would not have to lift a finger for this disaster to occur.

With new weapons being created daily, this type of disaster is well within the capacity of man and his wars. Then the second angel sounded, "And as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea: and the third part of the sea became blood" (Revelation 8:9).

There are certain forces at work in nature, earthquakes, tidal waves, and volcanos, which make this planet what it is. None of these require God to do anything. They are simply a part of how this planet works. If people decide to build skyscrapers along a fault line, who is responsible if buildings collapse and kill people during an earthquake? If a village in Indonesia exists in a flood plain, who is to blame if the village is destroyed when the rains come?

Certainly not God. These things don't happen because God is punishing people.

They happen as a result of choices men make.

Some of the events of the last days could even describe biological warfare. "And the third part of the creatures which were in the sea, and had life, died; and the third part of the ships were destroyed" (Revelation 8:9).

With our advanced technology, it no longer requires God's intervention to cause a disaster of this magnitude. Besides, He is not interested in destroying all the world and everyone in it. God loves the world. He loves the world so much that He gave Christ to be sacrificed so that the world might be saved'. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16, KJV).

The revelation which Jesus showed to John leaves no doubt that there is coming a terrible time of calamity on the earth. God can see the greed, sinfulness, arrogance, hatred and violence that exist in the hearts of men all over the globe. He can reasonably forecast that men will bring these days of darkness upon themselves.

There is hope, however, for those who have a relationship with God. In one of the prophecies of the last days, the ecology is preserved, and all the people who belong to God are protected: "And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads" (Revelation 9:4).

The woes of Revelation 8:13 are essentially war, one nation attacking another nation. It is important to remember, however, that somewhere there will be people who have the seal of God in their foreheads. These people will be protected in a way known only to God.

There's a tendency to think that the devastation found in Revelation is a result of God's wrath. Most of it is not. Man is going to come frighteningly close to annihilating himself before God steps in to save mankind and planet earth. God does not want to destroy mankind, he wants to save it. It was Jesus who said: "For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:56, KJV).

**Assumption Three:
"The world is going to end."**

There is going to come a time when God's wrath will be unleashed, when He shall destroy those who destroy the earth. But God is not going to bring an end to this world, only to the age of man's misrule over planet earth.

The entire purpose of Christ's second coming is to save mankind from itself. We can be certain that mankind will survive, that no matter how dark it looks during these last days, the world will go on and people will continue to live and love and laugh.

When God's wrath finally comes upon the earth, there will be no doubt that it is coming from Him.

When all the seven angels have sounded and the terrible destruction by man is nearing a climax, one more angel blows his trumpet: "And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever. And the four and twenty elders, which sat before God on their seats, fell upon their faces, and worshiped God, Saying, We give thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because thou hast taken to thee thy great power, and hast reigned. And the nations were angry, and thy wrath is come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that thou shouldst give reward unto thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and them that fear thy name, small and great; *and shouldest destroy them which destroy the earth*. And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in his temple the ark of his testament: and there were lightnings, and voices, and thundering, and an earthquake, and great hail" (Revelation 11:15-19).

It is the releasing of the restraint God has put on some "powers that be" which causes the havoc. There are those who are called "God's elect" who will be protected somehow from the wrath that God will unleash upon those who would destroy the earth. "And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree. And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads" (Revelation 7:1-3).

The very point of Jesus' return is to save the world, not destroy it. There is good reason to be optimistic. There will still be a world a hundred years from now and it will be better than the one in which we live today, but there are hurdles to be overcome between now and then.

If we are living in the last days of man's rule over this planet, then we know it is critical to develop a close and personal relationship with God. This relationship should be based, not on fear, but on hope.

We have hope for a better world and a chance to live a life which is more fulfilling than the one we have now. Christ's return should be a much-anticipated event, longed for by all those who love God. It is not something that children should come to dread and fear. And that brings us to the fourth misconception about the last days.

Assumption Four:

"The end is coming soon and there is no time to have a life."

Some churches have had a preoccupation with prophecy. One of the assumptions these organizations have propagated is that there is no need to plan for the future because there's hardly any future left to plan for. The biggest single effect this has had on people is that they stopped living their lives, they simply sat back and waited for the end. They just stopped living. This may be one of the reasons God has not allowed man to know the hour of His return (Matthew 24:36).

There is a passage from Jeremiah which sheds some light on what God expects from us when we are facing the "last days" or "captivity," or simply the end of life as we know it. God sent a message to Jeremiah in the dark days of the siege of Jerusalem. He had already incurred the wrath of the establishment for prophesying the fall of the city. The king had jailed him for being a bearer of bad news. As he sat in the court of the prison, God spoke to him and said: "Behold, Hanameel the son of Shallum thine uncle shall come unto thee, saying, Buy thee my field that is in Anathoth: for the right of redemption is thine to buy it" (Jeremiah 32:7). When his cousin came with the offer, Jeremiah knew that this was the word of God and that he should follow through with the purchase-in spite of the fact that he knew the city would fall and everyone would go into captivity. So, he bought the field. He weighed out the money, subscribed the evidence of the sale, and sealed it before witnesses. When he had done all this, he gave the title, deed and the rest to Baruch with this message: "Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Take these evidences, this evidence of the purchase, both which is sealed, and this evidence which is open; and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue many days. For thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Houses and fields and vineyards shall be possessed again in this land" (Jeremiah 32:14-15).

This was God's way of showing that although there would be a period of destruction and punishment, His mercy would prevail, and the people would return again to possess the land after their captivity. The point is, *Life would Continue even after God's punishment on disobedient Israel*. There is a distinct parallel with the days of Jeremiah and the days in which we live today.

If captivity is going to come, it's going to come. *Why stop living life in the meanwhile?* Quit when you're forced to quit, but not a minute before. Even when captivity comes, that doesn't mean the things you own won't be yours. It doesn't mean that the inheritance you laid up for your children won't be theirs.

As it says in Proverbs 13:22, "A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children: and the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just."

Just because we believe we are living in the last days, this is no reason not to plan, for if there is one thing we know for certain, it's that we cannot know for certain when Christ will return. Jesus gave us explicit instructions on this: "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the good man of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore, be ye also ready: *for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh*. Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Verily I say unto you, That he shall make him ruler overall his goods. But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; And shall begin to smite his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 24:42-51).

He's coming when we think He's not! What if the race turns out to be longer than we originally thought it was? We must pace ourselves and finish the race, no matter how long it may turn out to be. The only thing we can do is be ready. Our motto should be two short sentences: "Be ready, but live life," and "Live life, but be ready."

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think that we are living in the last days?
2. Has date setting for the end of the world ever affected how you lived your life?
3. Do you agree with Mr. Dart that the end of the world is "event driven, not calendar driven"?
4. Do you agree with Mr. Dart that if we could change the future if we repented?
5. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's assumption #2?
6. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's assumption #3?
7. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's assumption #4?
8. Have you ever had any of these assumptions?
9. Do you have a differing opinion than Mr. Dart?
10. Are there other assumptions that Mr. Dart did not cover?