

END-TIME ROAD: AN ALLEGORY FOUR DRIVERS ON THE ROAD TO ETERNITY

INTRODUCTION

Just as many have denied the Bible's account of the beginning of the world, so many have rejected the Bible's account of the end of the world. Some think that the world will just go on and on. Some propose an endless succession of worlds: as one dies another is born. Some fear a great man-made or cosmic accident which will bring this world to a sudden juddering end. However, the Word of God reveals that not only will the world have an end, but that that end is divinely planned, and will be divinely executed, for a divine purpose.

So, the Bible is not only a book of history (it records the past), but also a book of futurity (it predicts the future). This forward-looking perspective permeates the whole Bible. Contrary to what many allege about the Bible just being a historical document, from first-to-last the Bible is also forward-looking and forward-moving. It has much to say about the 'End Times' and especially the signs of the 'End Times.' It is these 'signs of the times' we would particularly like to focus on today.

Our study will be presented in the form of an allegory. I would like you to think of a road. We shall call it End-Time Rd and it leads to a place called The End. This is a dangerous road. However, there are numerous signs on it warning of the dangers. The further along the road the greater the dangers. However, as the dangers increase in significance so do the warning signs increase in size.

There are four men driving along this road: Mr Ignorance, Mr Distracted, Mr Paranoid, and Mr Endurance. **Mr Ignorance** keeps seeing the road signs. However, they are written in a language and use symbols which he does not understand. Oblivious to the fact that they are actually signs warning of danger ahead, he drives on in blissful ignorance. He is in great danger.

Mr Distracted knows that there are dangers ahead, and he is looking for the signs. However, he keeps being distracted by noisy children in the back, his mobile phone, the car radio, and other drivers. He keeps driving past the warning signs without noticing them. He too is facing great danger and he does not know it.

Mr Paranoid has been warned to look out for the signs and his eyes are peeled. Whenever he sees a sign his car screeches to a halt. He is paralysed with fear and anxiety. He cannot go on. He thinks this is the end of the road. However, if he were to drive a little further, he would see that the sign that has panicked him is a small warning sign. It only warns of small falling stones. Also, if he had driven closer he would have been assured by a small sign underneath: "He that endures to the end shall be saved." If he had driven on, he would have seen other regular encouraging signs.

Finally, we find **Mr Endurance** driving along this road. He sees every sign. He understands every sign. He slows down, acknowledges the danger and drives on in faith. As he drives on, the signs increase in size and in seriousness. The first sign says 'Falling stones,' the next 'Falling boulders,' the next 'Avalanche.' However, he also sees the regular re-assuring signs, "He that endures to the end shall be saved." Further he is encouraged by other signs which appear regularly along the way. He drives on. Stones fall, boulders fall, avalanches fall, but he endures to The End and is saved.

In our allegory, we shall consider the placement of the signs, the size of the signs, the message of the signs and the response to the signs.

I. THE PLACEMENT OF THE SIGNS

End-Time Rd was opened with the first coming of Christ, and it concludes with the second coming of Christ. The signposts to The End are not all placed at the beginning of the road. Neither are they all grouped together at the conclusion of the road. They are found at the beginning, and at the end, and at every stage in between. The Old Testament Prophets predicted many of the signs on End-Time Rd. They predicted signs at the beginning and at the end of it. However, from the distance at which they prophesied, they did not distinguish the beginning of End-Time Rd from the conclusion of it. Because of the distance of time, they often merged events associated with the first coming of Christ with events associated with the second coming of Christ. So did the Jews of Christ's day. They overlooked the predicted 'Suffering Servant' of Christ's first coming, and became obsessed with the predicted 'Conquering King' of the second coming. They could not accept that before the Conquering King, there had to be a Suffering Servant. John the Baptist prophesied that when the Messiah came he would gather the wheat into his barn and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. When put in prison John kept hearing reports of Christ's gracious ministry, of the armfuls of wheat being gathered into His barn. But he was hearing no reports of judgment, nothing of the unquenchable fire. So he sent his disciples to ask Christ, if He was the one that John looked for and predicted, or should he look for another who would both save and judge, who would both gather and burn. In his reply, Christ highlights how his gracious saving ministry was predicted in the prophets. By implication he was saying. Yes, I am the gatherer of the wheat and the burner of the chaff. However, this stage of my ministry is about gathering the wheat. The time for burning the chaff will come in the future. What John thought was to be fulfilled in one stage, Christ clarifies as two phases separated by a period of time.

This deliberate merging of events at the beginning of End-Time Rd and at its conclusion, this deliberate merging of events at the first and at the second coming of Christ, also occurs in Matthew 24. There the Lord Jesus is looking down End-Time Rd. He highlights signs that appear at the beginning of that road, along that road, and at The End of that road. And, though nearer the events than the Old Testament Prophets, and than John the Baptist, he too does not neatly distinguish between the different signs that appear at different times. He sees the whole of history in one sweeping prophecy. In summary, then, the 'signs of the times' appear all along End-time Rd. We should expect them at the beginning, at the end, and all the way along.

II. THE SIZE OF THE SIGNS

In Matthew 24, when the Lord described the signs at the beginning of End-Time Rd, he described events which were associated with His first coming. Specifically he referred to the persecution of the early church by the Jews, and also the consequent destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD. However, he then uses these events to describe worse persecutions and punishments ahead, ultimately climaxing in a final persecution and final divine punishment of the persecutors. In other words, Jerusalem's opposition to the Gospel and its subsequent destruction are a type of the ongoing experience of the Church in all ages, and of the ultimate climactic events at the very end. As someone has said, he paints a picture of the church's experience in all ages, and at the end, using the palette of his own place and his own times.

We might say that there are three significant phases of fulfilment; commencement, continuation, and consummation. In other words, predictions made by Old Testament prophets, by Christ and His apostles commenced fulfilment in events associated with the first coming of Christ, they continue to be fulfilled in events associated with Church History from the New Testament age right up to the present, and they will have consummate or climactic fulfilment in events associated with the second coming of Christ.

Let me illustrate. Think of an empty cup. I predict that it will be filled with water. Some water is poured in, up to the third of a litre mark. Is it filled with water? Yes and no. Water is filling it, but it is not yet filled full. More is poured in, this time up to two thirds. Is it filled with water? Again, yes and no. Water is filling it but it is not yet filled full. More water is poured in until it reaches the top. Water is not only filling it, it is now filled full. Most Biblical prophecy is like this. A prediction is made. Events take place which fulfil the prophecy, but it is not filled full. The prophecy is filled fuller and fuller until it is not only filled full but fulfilled.

So the Bible's predictions about the end times are fulfilled in phases, in three phases to be precise. There is filling, further filling, then a filling full - a final fulfilment. Or to use the "Three C's", there is commencement, continuation, and consummation.

Let us return to our End-Time Rd. allegory. We have seen that the signs are placed right along the road, from beginning to end. However, the signs increase in size and significance the further along End-time Rd. that we travel. The same words and symbols are on them at the beginning and at The End. However, as time passes, the signs become larger and larger, and at the same time both more alarming and more comforting, as we shall see. However, we must now consider what exactly appears on the signs. What is written on them? What is their message?

III. THE MESSAGE OF THE SIGNS

There are three major kinds of signpost on End-Time Rd. There are signs showing the grace of God, signs showing opposition to God, and signs showing the judgment of God.

1. Signs showing the grace of God

a. The proclamation of the Gospel to all nations (Isa.52:10; Mat.24:14)

The Gospel is a witness to all the nations in two ways. It is a witness which calls for a decision, and a witness to deserved judgment if the testimony is rejected. This prophecy does not mean that a time will come when every single person in the world will have heard the Gospel. However it does indicate an unprecedented spread of the Gospel outwith its predominantly

Jewish confines before Christ's first coming. This prophecy commenced fulfilment at the time of Christ. It continues to be fulfilled today. 70 years ago the Bible had been translated into 300 languages but today about 1400. It will receive climactic fulfilment in the future "then shall the end be."

b. The salvation of the fullness of Israel (Zech.12:10; Rom.11:19ff; 2 Cor.3:15-16)

This prophecy commenced fulfilment at Christ's first coming, especially at Pentecost. It is ongoing as a remnant of Israel are continuing to be saved. In the Religion section of Time magazine in June 1972 under the heading "Jews for Jesus" the following was reported: UCLA Campus Rabbi Shlomo Cunin estimates that young Jews are converting to Christianity at a rate of 6,000 to 7,000 a year. California Jewish Christian Evangelist Abe Schneider says he has noted more converts in the past nine months than in the previous 23 years combined. The Church looks forward to a climactic fulfilment when "all Israel shall be saved".

2. Signs indicating opposition to God

a. Tribulation (Jer.30:7; Matt.24:21)

This prophecy commenced fulfilment with Christ's first coming. It is continuing to be fulfilled in the present. It will receive consummate and climactic fulfilment at the end.

b. Apostasy (Matt.24:10-12)

This commenced fulfilment in the great Jewish Apostasy associated with Christ's first coming. This continues to be fulfilled in the professing Church of Christ. When in many European countries today, countries which have known the Gospel for centuries, people stay away from church in droves, surely this is apostasy. When many so-called Christian leaders, both in Europe and America, deny cardinal teachings of the Bible like the bodily resurrection of Christ and still claim to be Christian theologians, surely this is apostasy. When preachers proclaim myths instead of facts, existentialist philosophy instead of Christian theology, humanism instead of the truth of the Gospel, surely this is apostasy. This will climax in THE great and final apostasy (2 Thess.2:3), when mankind will have so deteriorated that it will resemble carrion ready for the vultures (Matt.24:28).

c. Antichrist (Dan.7:25; 2 Thess.2:3-4)

This commenced fulfilment in events associated with the first coming of Christ. The Roman Emperor Titus and his legions entered Jerusalem and its Temple with banners containing images of the emperor for worship. Secular and ecclesiastical antichrists continue to be revealed throughout the ages (1 Jn.2:18). But these are only precursors and anticipations of THE climactic Antichrist. The antichristian principle at work in the days of Paul and John will reach its highest power towards the end of the world, being concentrated in a single individual, the embodiment of all wickedness. The Antichrist will arise out of the apostasy and intensify the apostasy (2 Thess.2:3, 9-10).

3. Signs indicating the judgment of God (Isa.24:19-20; Matt.24:6-8)

This commenced fulfilment with the first coming of Christ, and fulfilment continues in the present. There have been 300 wars in the last 300 years in Europe alone. Between 1900 and 1950 there were 33 major earthquakes (almost as many as the number in the preceding 850 years). Between 1950 and 1991 there were 93 major earthquakes, almost triple the number of the previous half century. The WHO estimates that 1/3 of the world is well-fed, 1/3 is under-fed, and 1/3 is starving. The World Bank reported in September 1996 that more than 800 million people go hungry every day. Some 40,000 hunger-related deaths occur each day. 25 million died in World War II. Another 25 million have perished

since then in various wars around the globe. The cases of infectious diseases have skyrocketed throughout the nineties . These ongoing, intensifying signs are evidences of divine judgment. They are continual reminders that the Judge is standing at the doors (James 5:9). These signs of divine judgment characterise the entire period between Christ's first and second coming. The signs reveal the continuing historic battle between the Kingdom of God and the powers of evil. Wheat and tares grow together until the final harvest. They foreshadow and anticipate the final and climactic judgment. Then Christ will come personally (Acts 1:11), physically (Acts 1:11; 3:20,21), visibly (Rev.1:7), suddenly, surprisingly and unexpectedly (Matt.24:37-44; 25:1-12), gloriously and triumphantly (Heb.9:28). He will come not in his body of humiliation but in a glorified body and in royal apparel (Heb.9:28). The clouds of heaven will be His chariot (1 Thess.4:16), the angels his bodyguard (2 Thess.1:7), the archangels his heralds (1 Thess.4:16), and the saints of God His glorious retinue (1 Thess.3:13). He will come as King of kings and Lord of lords, triumphant over all the forces of evil, having put all His enemies under his feet.

Before concluding with your response to the signs let us briefly re-cap. The signs are placed all along End-Time Rd. However, they grow in size, frequency and significance as the world travels along End-Time Rd. As time passes there is an increase and intensification of signs indicating the grace of God, opposition to God, and the judgment of God. There is a growing crescendo as history moves to its climax and consummation. The Gospel spreads more and more, the Jews are converted more and more, apostasy grows more and more, Antichrist strengthens more and more, judgments appear more and more. And then cometh the end.

IV. THE RESPONSE TO THE SIGNS

How should we then respond to these signs. Let us return to our four drivers.

1. Mr Ignorance

Most people are like Mr Ignorance. They don't know they are on End-Time Rd. He thinks that the road he is ignorantly travelling will just go on and on. However, just as history had a beginning, so it will also have an end. The history of the world and of the human race will finally reach its God-appointed climax and consummation. It is not an indefinite and endless process, but a real history moving on to a divinely appointed end. Mr Ignorance reads his newspaper and sees the signs of the times, but he hasn't clue what they mean or what action he should take. He is in great danger.

2. Mr Distracted

Many people, even some Christians, are like Mr Distracted. He knows that there are dangers ahead. He knows The End is nigh. He knows that there are signs to warn him of this. He is not ignorant, but he is fatally distracted. The busyness of life, the cares of this life, and the pleasures of this life distract him when he most need to pay attention to the passing warning signs. He too is driving towards great danger unwarned, unprepared, and unready.

3. Mr Paranoid

Some resemble Mr Paranoid. There are some in Mr Paranoid's family who are very worldly. They are paranoid about the end of the world for worldly reasons. They worry about ecology and the environment, about viruses and infections. They have a sense of

impending doom and this motivates political activism and environmentalism. However, today we are concerned with Mr Paranoid, who is a Bible-believing Christian. He knows he is on End-Time Rd. He knows that there are warning signs and his eyes are peeled for the slightest hint of an End-Time signpost. However, he is in a state of paralysing, nervous anxiety. Whenever a war occurs, or a Pope is elected, or Israel is attacked, or an earthquake makes the earth to shudder, everything in his life comes to an abrupt halt for, surely, the end is nigh. He consults books on prophecy and works out a timetable of events and tells his friends that the end of the world is imminent. However they have heard it all before, and while he panics and his life stutters to another temporary halt, they drive on for they know that "he that endures to the end shall be saved." None of the signs allow us to date the return of Christ exactly. They simply tell us that we are living between first and second comings of Christ, that we are in the end-times. Christ condemned attempts to timetable and date the exact time of his return (Mk.13:32; Mat.24:36). The signs indicate the certainty of the second coming but do not divulge its precise date.

4. Mr Endurance

Finally, we come to Mr Endurance. He is watchful and prayerful. He sees and understands the signs. He notices the increasing spread of the Gospel, the increasing opposition to the Gospel, and the increasing signs of God's judgment. He slows down and considers these signs, especially noting their multiplication, magnification, and intensification. They have a sobering and sanctifying impact upon him (Rom.13:11ff). He becomes more serious-minded. He drives more carefully. He speaks to other drivers along the way. He tells Mr Ignorance where he is going and what the signs mean. He warns Mr Distracted to pay attention to what God is saying to him. He calms Mr Paranoid with Gospel hope and peace. As he drives on he repeats again and again. "He that endures to the end shall be saved."

CONCLUSION

The End is Nigh. The question is: "Will it be a dead end or a living end?" "Will it be the end of the road for you or the beginning of another journey?" "Will your end be off the cliff and down into the bottomless pit, or into the arms of Christ and up into heavenly glory?" Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved.