

CAN YOU READ "THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES"?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

These are the most amazing days to be alive on this earth if you are a student of the word of God. You cannot watch CNN or read our local papers or national magazines without trying to "read the signs of the times," to be obedient to that admonishment by our Lord. For example, if the most recent peace plan between the Jews and the Arabs is accepted, will that be the beginning of Israel's security as prophesied in Ezekiel 38:14? And does the present political, economical, and social weakness of Russia cause us to wonder about the prophecy of Ezekiel 38:15, which tells us that the great strong army of the north will invade this secure Israel in the last days? And shouldn't the the final steps of the formation of the European Common Market next year whet our spiritual appetite to go back and read Daniel 7 and Revelation 17? And then as we read and hear about all the wars and rumors of wars in the Eastern Bloc as well as the recent famines in Africa and earthquakes in the Philippines, shouldn't we be looking at the words of Christ concerning the end times as recorded in Matthew 24-25 in order to understand the spiritual nature of these political, economical, and social events? The answer to all these questions is a resounding "yes!" For as we turn to Luke 12:49-59, we will see that our Lord Jesus warned his disciples and anyone who was willing to heed him that there was great wisdom in reading the signs of the times, for how you interpret the signs of the times will determine your eternal destiny.

Let's pause and look at the context. The closer our Lord got to the cross of Calvary, the more time he took to prepare his disciples not only for that tragic week but also for the ministry that they would be involved in after his resurrection and ascension. With the cross just a few months away, he gave them five warnings in the midst of a large crowd that had gathered: (1) He warned them to beware of hypocrisy (Luke 12:1-12). (2) He warned the rich to beware of greed and the poor to beware of anxiety (12:13-34). (3) He warned them against being unprepared for the Son of Man's second coming (12:35-48). And (4) and (5) now he is about to warn them that a personal relationship with him as Messiah will cause family division (12:49-53), and that unless they are able to read the signs of the times they are heading for political and spiritual destruction (12:54-59).

Are you able to read the signs of the times? One of the signs of the times is that if you establish a personal relationship with the Prince of Peace, it will cause family divisions.

I. The signs of division

Luke 12:49-53

"I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished! Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two, and two against three. They will be divided, father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against mother; mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

After warning his disciples, Judas, the Pharisees, and the crowds about the possibility of being unprepared for his second coming, our Lord reminded his disciples that while he offered salvation in his first coming, it would be judgment in his second coming.

"I have come to cast fire upon the earth: and how I wish it were already kindled!" In the Old and New Testaments fire is mentioned hundreds of times in all kinds of contexts. It was the symbol of the Lord's presence and the instrument of his power as seen in the burning bush and the giving of the Law on Mount

Sinai. Fire was a symbol of cleansing and purification and an indication of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3).

Some scholars think that this verse in Luke is a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, based on the conversation John the Baptist had with some Jews who had asked him if he were the Christ (Luke 3:16). He answered them, "...As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." The fire would be the work of the Holy Spirit within the hearts of the new believers, purifying them, cleansing them, and consuming sin so that they would be delivered from its penalty and power. However, Luke 3:16 is followed by verse 17: "And His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." John proclaimed that the Messiah who would come after him was mightier in both salvation and judgment. If they received the Christ, he would give them the gift of the person and power of the Holy Spirit so they could live their lives in a way that was pleasing to God, to his honor and glory, and to their joy and peace. If they rejected the Christ, they would be judged like the chaff on a wheat floor, which he would burn up with unquenchable fire, a symbol of hell.

In Luke 12 our Lord was looking beyond the cross and his ascension, and he could see his church continuing his ministry of offering to humanity the plan of redemption until the time was ripe for his visible second coming, in which he would reign on earth as the final Judge and fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 66:15-16: "For behold, the LORD will come in fire and His chariots like the whirlwind, to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For the LORD will execute judgment by fire and by His sword on all flesh, and those slain by the LORD will be many."

Right after he mentioned the fire of judgment, our Lord went on to talk about his death. A few days after he was baptized by John in order to identify with sinners, the prophet was walking along with some of his disciples, saw the Messiah, and said to them, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29.) The sins of the world were going to be dealt with when the Lord willingly allowed himself to be put to death on the cross of Calvary. The shadow of the cross was just months away in the context of the passage we're studying. Soon our Lord would be "placed in" (the literal meaning of baptism) or "identified with" man and his sin. For all the sins of the world would be placed on him at Calvary so that the justice of God would be satisfied. When the Lord rained down his wrath because of all the rebellion and sin of mankind, Jesus would be the one who would receive it.

Now he shared with them his struggle with that knowledge: "I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!" This coming event caused the perfect and sinless "Lamb of God" to become distressed and overwhelmed with anguish. His anguish would come to a climax when he entered the garden of Gethsemane, fell before his Father in prayer, and said, "'Father if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Thine be done.' Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him. And being in agony He was praying very fervently, and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground." (Luke 22:42-44.) He was not looking forward to the cross. He was anguished about the rejection by his Father, about being killed this way. It was at the price of his own will that we who have placed our faith in him now have the joy of salvation and will never have to meet him as the Judge. What a difference!

Then Jesus began to warn them about division. "Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division [or a sword; see Matthew 10:34]." Now, it is quite true that according to the prophet Isaiah (9:6), our Lord came to this world to offer mankind the opportunity to make peace with God by placing our faith in the Prince of Peace, resulting in the peace of God within our hearts and minds. Yet when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to be dedicated at the temple they met Simeon, who prophesied by the Holy Spirit concerning him, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed." (Luke 2:34.) The Lord Jesus did come to bring peace to the hearts and minds of all those who placed their faith in him as their personal Lord and Savior, but for those who rejected his offer of spiritual peace there would be judgment. And then he called on all his followers to become peacemakers (Matt 5:9) and to preach the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15), but he also understood that division would be the effect of his coming, even though it was not the purpose of his coming.

Those who rejected him among the family and friends of those who accepted him as Lord and Savior would be the cause of great division. On an earlier occasion our Lord said to his disciples, "Everyone...who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's enemies will be the members of his household." (Matt 10:32-36.)

This same idea was recorded in Micah 7 some 700 years earlier, when the prophet came to the realization that if a man wanted to be godly in a godless society he would experience rejection even from his own family members. "A man's enemies are the men of his own household. But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me." (Micah 7:6-7.) There are divisions that are just built in because there is a clash between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. The apostle John recorded for us that not even our Lord's brothers believed that he was the Messiah (John 7:5).

But Jesus, who had known rejection and loss from his family, encouraged his disciples when they reminded him that they had left all to follow him:

"Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30.)

Later Jesus would warn his disciples: "...you will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, and you will be hated by all on account of My name." (Luke 21:16-17.) And finally, Jesus told his disciples in the upper room just before he was led to the cross, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33.)

When my dyed-in-the-wool Catholic grandmother finally made her peace with God by inviting Jesus Christ into her heart at the age of 70, one of the first questions she asked me was, "Do I have to leave my family and my church?" I said "Not at all, but if you're true to the gospel and bold to proclaim it, I think in time they will leave you."

Last month I talked to a man who was divorced but had recently made his peace with God and accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He wanted to know what kind of relationship he should have with his ex-wife who had not remarried. I encouraged him to pray that the Lord would open her heart and give him an opportunity, and then go back to her if he could and share with her his new faith in Jesus; if she was open to hear more, then there might be a time in the future when she would accept Jesus as her Lord and Savior. At that time they could consider renewing their marriage vows as Christians and begin a new life together in peace with God and with each other, because of the Prince of Peace, who was willing to forgive their sins and become their new Lord. He prayed and had a dinner with his ex-wife and told her of his new life in Christ and then shared with her our Lord's offer of redemption. Later he came back and told me that she listened quietly and then kindly but firmly rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ and encouraged him to begin his new life without her.

One of the spiritual realities of becoming a Christian is the fact that many family members as well as good friends and neighbors will reject our new faith in Christ. One of the reasons they will reject us is that for the first time in that relationship they will experience a clash between the new nature and the old nature, between the old worldly value system of the kingdom of darkness and the new value system of the kingdom of God.

Many of the family members will soon discover that the believer is so committed to follow the Lord Jesus as their new Lord and Savior that it appears as if they hate their family! Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." (Luke 14:26.) For example, if you were the non-Christian parents of a college student in his third year at Stanford University, and you had invested many thousands of

dollars to provide a good education, and had just made plans to get him a summer job at your company so that when he graduated he would have an open door for a career, how would you feel if you got word that your son was making plans instead to follow the leading of Jesus to spend the summer without pay on the island of Timor, off the coast of northern Australia? Trust me, that would result in division in your family! It would look like hate, rejection, and the loss of your child.

Another spiritual reality of becoming a Christian is that our unbelieving family and friends are not able to analyze these times because they are void of the Spirit of God. One of the joys of having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the hunger to be able to read the signs of the times, and if you are able to do that, you know that this present season is given as a sign of coming judgment, even amidst opportunities to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. So there is an intensity, a passion about our life, a clarity about our walk, a drumbeat to be faithful within our spirits, because we are going somewhere. We are going toward eternity. For those of us who have invited Jesus into our life as Lord and Savior, we're going to be with our Savior. Those who reject Jesus Christ on this earth are going to eternal judgment. That's why you want to have a passion for the word and a passion for the Lord! And you want to have a clarity about your position in this world and a knowledge that you are salt and light. You have a gospel of reconciliation, but in the middle of all that there will be division even among the family. You'll be greatly misunderstood. Count on it.

II. The signs of judgment

Luke 12:54-59

And He was also saying to the multitudes, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'A shower is coming,' and so it turns out. And when you see a south wind blowing, you say, 'It will be a hot day,' and it turns out that way. You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time? And why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right? For while you are going with your opponent to appear before the magistrate, on your way there make an effort to settle with him, in order that he may not drag you before the judge, and the judge turn you over to the constable, and the constable throw you into prison. I say to you, you shall not get out of there until you have paid the very last cent."

You can see the love and mercy of our Lord Jesus toward the nation of Israel as he again drove home the warning of his second coming and judgment. In view of the impending judgment it would be eternally wise to seek reconciliation with the Messiah in order to escape his judgment when he came as Judge.

I'm amazed at the energy, time and money that our modern society has spent to bring us our international, national, and local daily weather reports. Now that we have been able to put weather satellites into orbit, the whole world turns to CNN for all their daily and hourly weather reports. Now, as these Jews didn't have CNN, they looked to the heavens each day, season after season, and they became experts at predicting the signs of the weather. If a cloud arose in the west coming in off the Mediterranean Sea on any given day, you could pretty well expect rain, or if a south wind began to blow you could expect a hot day. It really wasn't very hard to predict the weather for the following day; all you had to do was look for certain signs that remained consistent over a long period of time.

You see, the people could get involved in physical weather, but they couldn't see beyond that. They didn't understand that God was giving them physical weather to teach them about great spiritual principles. They didn't understand that Jesus was saying that the cloud coming off the Mediterranean was a picture of what he was doing with the nation. The clouds of rain were God's physical symbol of a spiritual reality: clouds of grace and mercy in which he offered his people salvation in his Son at this time. But Jesus wanted them to know that it would not always be so, for sometime soon there would be a hot wind. The hot south winds were a sign of coming judgment for the nation of Israel. In this case the winds of judgment had already begun gently blowing, and they would reach their strongest in only thirty years as the nation began its rebellion against Rome. Jerusalem would be totally annihilated by 70 AD. Every stone would be knocked down. On another occasion some Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and asked him to show them a sign from heaven. "But

He answered..., 'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red." And in the morning, "There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening." Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?'" (Matthew 16:1-3.)

They were blind to spiritual signs. So Jesus was saying, "You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time?" Now, since you understand all the earthly signs so well, how come you missed what's going on right in front of you? You are pretending you don't see the moral and spiritual signs of your coming Messiah all around you. I came and did signs and miracles among you-the lame walk, the blind see, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, and the demons flee-and yet you want more proof of my person. I came and redeemed men and women from Satan's power and his kingdom of darkness and delivered them into the kingdom of light, and you missed it.

"The prophet Daniel spoke of me and my times when the angel Gabriel told him: 'Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place. So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks...then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing...' [Daniel 9:24-26.]" Here was Jesus the Messiah of Israel standing right in front of the nation of Israel, having done many signs and wonders. How in the world did Israel miss the prophecy of Daniel? He was warning them that if they rejected him now, they would leave themselves open to the coming of the antichrist as recorded in Daniel 9:26-27. These days are Messianic days, days of grace and mercy, of love and redemption, of hope and peace, of light and joy: Read the signs!

"And why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right?" Our Lord, the Jewish Messiah, would tell the nation in the parable to follow that they were standing before their Messiah, and if they rejected him he would become their final Judge. So they would be very wise to initiate on their own, rather than depend on their teachers and other spiritual leaders, the search to analyze this present spiritual time, and to conclude that they must come to terms with the Jesus as Messiah and Savior, or else the judgment would be pronounced. He was not just another prophet they could kill as they had all the rest. They studied the Old Testament, as we can, and they could see that he was the final passover lamb mentioned in Exodus who would take away the sin of world, the smitten rock of Numbers, the prophet to come in Deuteronomy, the sheep led to slaughter in Isaiah, the Savior in Obadiah, the anointed one in Habakkuk, the branch of righteousness in Jeremiah, the stone in Daniel, the resurrection and the life in Jonah, not to mention the Christ of God as revealed to Peter by the Father in the New Testament. How many signs do you need?

In the parable he gave them, the Lord warned the crowd that at the moment they were his opponents, and he was going to bring them before the magistrate on the charge that they had rejected him as their Messiah. If they were wise they would make an effort to settle with him before they got to the Judge, because the Lord knew he would win his case in court and they would be found guilty of rejecting so much evidence of his messiahship. If they were found guilty, they would all be placed in prison (hell) forever, because they would never be able to pay off their debt of sin. Reconcile with the Judge before the judgment, for once the judgment comes it will be too late to seek reconciliation.

In the spring of 1954, I was stationed at James Connelly Air Force Base in Waco, Texas. One day the chaplain came to see me and told me that he had received word that my father was on his death bed in Abington, Pennsylvania. I was given an emergency leave and arrived at the hospital two days later. And there was my father, formerly a proud, arrogant, angry, and alcoholic man, lying almost in a fetal position under an oxygen tent in a state of semiconsciousness. The oxygen that was pouring into the tent was giving him one more day of life on this earth. This was the man who had walked out on my mother and us three children some nine years earlier, resulting in great emotional damage for our family during those years with some effects remaining in the three children even to this day. You can imagine the range of emotions I felt, from bitter anger to pure mercy. Even as I tell the story, some of that is welling up. I thought for one moment, "Let him die! What do I care? He abandoned me, I'll abandon him." And on the other side, a voice said, "No, no, no! Don't do that. He's still breathing. There's still hope!"

I went and got a Baptist pastor I knew and asked him to come and minister to my dying father. I wasn't even a

Christian then. I knew the difference between between right and wrong, and life and death. The pastor arrived, saw my father, and started to read John 3:16 to him: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." There was nothing else, just the words and the sound of the oxygen pouring into the tent. Then the pastor put his hand inside the tent, underneath the plastic. He said, "Ted, you're going into eternity, and you're going to meet Jesus either as your Judge or as your Savior. You have a choice now. And I'd like you to invite Jesus into your heart even at this moment in your life and allow him to be your Lord. And he will save you as he did the thief on the cross. I know you can't speak, but you hear me, and if you want Jesus Christ to be your Lord and Savior, just squeeze my hand." We waited about a minute, or maybe it was an eternity, and then I watched my father's hand squeeze my friend's hand. That evening he died.

The grace of God is so precious, and the showers of blessing are so refreshing, that the God of the universe was willing to save this life. My sinful father in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, passed into eternity without fear of living in an eternal hell, for he had made the effort to settle with the magistrate before he was dragged before the judge. And one day I'll get the joy of seeing my father in eternity and saying to him, "Pop, you're here! You're really here!" And he'll say, "Yes, son, and thanks a lot. I know you struggled, but thank you for being faithful to something you didn't even understand at the time." And every time I see my father's picture on the wall of our home, I always say, "Hey, Pop-see you soon!"

Can you read the signs of the times? If you do invite the Prince of Peace to become your Lord and Savior, you must realize that in time your new faith and commitment to Jesus Christ will divide some members of your immediate family as well as your friends and neighbors. Peter reminded the new Christians in Asia, "For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. And in all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign you; but they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead." (1 Peter 4:3-5.)

Politically the signs of the times are awesome. The hunger for one world government, one world leader, one language, one credit card; the dispute each day between the nation of Israel and the Arab League; the speed with which the revived Roman Empire is being formed by the nations of Europe, called the Common Market; the fall of communism; and the political alliances made to carry off Desert Storm all cause chills to run down the backs of Bible students. For we know that at this time we are living under the rain clouds of grace, but the south winds of judgment are coming.

On a spiritual level our risen Lord continues to offer his clouds of grace and mercy and his showers of blessings by surrounding humanity with all kinds of signs that would direct our thoughts toward him. All we have to do is look at the creation of the universe, or the creation of our own lives, as well as our hunger for someone or something to worship outside of ourselves. Our own consciences are given as a sign that there is some moral Being outside of ourselves seeking to bring us in line with his spiritual nature. Then there is the witness of his Spirit in and through his people seeking to reveal to all the world the risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to offer him as their Redeemer and Lord. We're his greatest sign, that oiled lamp, the light of the world so that men and women might see Jesus Christ in us. We are always giving them one more sign, because God is gracious, because if they don't interpret the sign, then "...it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment..." (Hebrews 9:27.)

So the Lord is saying, "Settle your case with Jesus before you come to court, for you will judged and found wanting if you reject God's Son as your Redeemer and Lord, and you will be placed in hell with no hope of ever getting out. Settle your case now!"

Catalog No. 4155
Luke 12:49-59
40th Message
Ron Ritchie
July 28, 1991

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.