



My Bible School Lessons

Exploring the Word of God

Lesson #6: "Signs of the End"



God's Final Generation

In Matthew 24, the disciples of Jesus had come to Him with the question, "What shall be the sign of thy coming, and the end of the world?" Today, this question is often in the minds of those who love the Lord Jesus and are looking and longing for His return. In the Savior's conversation with His disciples upon Mt. Olivet, after describing a long period of trial for the church, He predicted certain events that would just precede His second coming. "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken." Matthew 24:29.

The tribulation period here refers to that long period of Papal persecution that dominated the Middle Ages until the end of the 18th century. Immediately after this period of persecution, certain signs would take place. The first sign noted would be the darkening of the sun and the moon turning red. The next would be the stars falling from heaven, or as many believe, a "falling star" shower. The events described below are viewed, by many careful Bible students, to be the fulfillment of Christ's prediction.

There are many prophecies of the Bible, both in the Old and New Testament, that tell about the signs that are to take place in the last days--during that stretch of time between the persecution of the Middle Ages and the second coming of Jesus.

Revelation 6:9-11 describes the great persecution of the Middle Ages. After this persecution, John was shown these signs that Jesus talked about in Matthew. He says: "I looked . . . and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind." Rev. 6:12, 13. After these signs John continues to describe the second coming of Jesus: Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place." vs. 14.

Lesson 6: Signs of the End

You will notice that John lists the same signs, in the same order,, as Jesus did in Matthew 24, except that he includes one more--an earthquake. In fact, this was to be the first sign, even before the darkening of the sun.

The Bible is a real book dealing with real events. While some prophecies have been fulfilled, others have yet to be or are still being fulfilled. Many people believe these predictions of the earthquake, the dark day, and the falling of the stars, which were to take place right after the persecution of the Middle Ages, have already taken place, thus signaling the nearness of Jesus' second coming. Jesus wants us to know and understand the day and age in which we live. He wants us to be prepared for the second coming of Jesus.

The Lisbon Earthquake

November 1, 1755

Hardly had the embers of the last of the martyrs cooled before the first of these signs was fulfilled. As the age of persecution was drawing to a close, on November 1, 1755, there occurred the most terrible earthquake that had ever been known up to that time. It has since been called the "Lisbon Earthquake."

The earthquake "almost destroyed" Lisbon, Portugal (*Grolier Universal Encyclopedia*, [New York, 1965] Volume 12, page 6) but was felt as far away as Great Britain, Sweden, and Greenland to the North, America to the West, much of Africa to the South, and most of Europe to the East. It was felt over an area of at least 4,000,000 square miles. (The 48 continental states have 2,968,000 square miles.)

Much of Northern Africa was destroyed, with one village "of about eight or ten thousand persons, together with all their cattle.... swallowed up. Soon after, the earth closed again over them" (A.R. Spofford and Charles Gibbon, *The Library Of Choice Literature*, Vol. VIII, pp. 162, 163). In Lisbon itself, of the 150,000 inhabitants "90,000 persons (60% of the population) are supposed to have been lost on that fatal day" (Robert Sears, *Wonders of the World*, p. 50).

Today people are used to hearing about earthquakes. The Bible predicts that there would be an increase of earthquakes toward the end of time. But this was not so during the Middle Ages. The earth seemed to be stable. Thus when the Lisbon earthquake came, right on time with Bible prophecy, it shook the world, becoming the first Awakening sign that the end was near.

The intensity of the earthquake should not be over looked. Even in our day, an earthquake centered in western Europe, which would also shake Scandinavia, Africa, and America, would be considered a cataclysmic event.

The Dark Day

May 19, 1780

On May 19, 1780, occurred the second of these prophetic signs, a most singular event in New England, known as the "Dark Day." An eyewitness living in Massachusetts describes the event as follows: "In the morning the sun rose clear, but was soon overcast. The clouds became lowery, and from them, black and ominous, as they soon appeared, lightning flashed, thunder rolled, and a little rain fell. Toward nine o'clock, the clouds became thinner, and assumed a brassy or coppery appearance, and earth, rocks, trees, buildings, water, and persons were changed by this strange, unearthly light. A few minutes later, a heavy black cloud spread over the entire sky except a narrow rim at the horizon, and it was as dark as it usually is at nine o'clock on a summer evening...."

Lesson 6: Signs of the End

"Fear, anxiety, and awe gradually filled the minds of the people. Women stood at the door, looking out upon the dark landscape; men returned from their labor in the fields; the carpenter left his tools, the blacksmith his forge, the tradesman his counter. Schools were dismissed, and tremblingly the children fled homeward. Travelers put up at the nearest farmhouse. 'What is coming?' queried every lip and heart. It seemed as if a hurricane was about to dash across the land, or as if it was the day of the consummation of all things.

"Candles were used; and hearth fires shone as brightly as on a moonless evening in autumn.... Fowls retired to their roosts and went to sleep, cattle gathered at the pasture bars and lowed, frogs peeped, birds sang their evening songs, and bats flew about. But the human knew that night had not come....

"Dr. Nathanael Whittaker, pastor of the Tabernacle church in Salem, held religious services in the meeting-house, and preached a sermon in which he maintained that the darkness was supernatural. Congregations came together in many other places. The texts for the extemporaneous sermons were invariably those that seemed to indicate that the darkness was consonant with Scriptural prophecy. . . . the darkness was most dense shortly after eleven o'clock *a.m.*"--*The Essex Antiquarian*, April 1899, vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 53, 54.

The intense darkness of the day was succeeded, an hour or two before evening, by a partially clear sky, and the sun appeared, though it was still obscured by the black, heavy mist. "After sundown, the clouds came again overhead, and it grew dark very fast." "Nor was the darkness of the night less uncommon and terrifying than that of the day; notwithstanding there was almost a full moon, no object was discernible but by the help of some artificial light, which, when seen from the neighboring houses and other places at a distance, appeared through a kind of Egyptian darkness which seemed almost impervious to the rays."--Isaiah Thomas, *Massachusetts Spy; or, American Oracle of Liberty*, vol. 10, No. 472 (May 25, 1780). Said an eyewitness of the scene: "I could not help conceiving at the time, that if every luminous body in the universe had been shrouded in impenetrable shades, or struck out of existence, the darkness could not have been more complete."--Letter by Dr. Samuel Tenney, of Exeter, New Hampshire, December, 1785 (in *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections*, 1792, 1st series, vol. 1, p. 97). Though at nine o'clock that night the moon rose to the full, "it had not the least effect to dispel the deathlike shadows." After midnight the darkness disappeared, and the moon, when first visible, had the appearance of blood. May 19, 1780, stands in history as "The Dark Day."

WHITTIER'S DARK DAY

American Poet Laureate, John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892), though born many years later, describes the event which was still current in society's memory:

"Twas on a May-day of the far old year
Seventeen hundred eighty, that there fell
Over the bloom and sweet life of the Spring,
Over the fresh earth and the heaven of noon,
A horror of great darkness, like the night
In day of which the Norland sagas tell,--
The Twilight of the Gods. The low-hung sky
Was black with ominous clouds, save where its rim
Was fringed with a dull glow, like that which climbs
The crater's sides from the red hell below.

Birds ceased to sing, and all the barnyard fowls

Lesson 6: Signs of the End

Roosted; the cattle at the pasture bars
Lowed, and looked homeward; bats on leathern wings
Flitted abroad; the sounds of labor died;
Men prayed, and women wept; all ears grew sharp
To hear the doom-blast of the trumpet shatter
The black sky, that the dreadful face of Christ
Might look from the rent clouds, not as he looked
A Loving guest at Bethany, but stern
As Justice and inexorable law."

Thus it was, then and now, that many considered this event as the fulfillment of first of the celestial signs announcing the coming of the closing days of earth's History. Up through the 19th century and into the early twentieth century, the "Dark Day" was even listed in Webster's Dictionary as, May 19, 1780.

Though it no longer appears in most history books, careful historians are knowledgeable about this singular event which shook the new world and caused many to turn again to the Bible and prepare their lives for the events of the future,

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was such a historian and he used this event of history to good advantage in his political speeches of 1960 when running against Richard Nixon. In a public address on September 20, 1960, as reported the next day in the New York Times, he stated: "In 1780 in Hartford, Connecticut, the skies at noon turned one day from blue to gray, and by mid afternoon the city had darkened over so densely that in that religious age men fell on their knees and begged a final blessing before the end came." He then went on to draw a parallel to this day of moral and political darkness.

The Greatest Star Shower Ever

November 13, 1833

William Miller, like Abraham Lincoln, was a self-taught Early American scholar. Eventually he turned his attention to the Bible and through years of study began to piece together the meaning of prophecy.

He discerned correctly the meaning of the 1260 day and 70 week prophecies and many others. He also saw, correctly, that the 2300 day prophecy extended until about the year 1843 or 1844, but he did not understand exactly what was going to take place when this prophecy was fulfilled.

He knew the judgment was to begin then, but somehow, as with most Bible scholars of his age, he mistakenly thought the only judgment of Bible prophecy was that associated with Jesus' second coming. Thus he thought that Jesus must be coming about that year.

Though a farmer, he felt convicted to preach the message. He argued with the Lord that he did not want to preach. He was 52 years old. He had once been an agnostic and had made fun of the Bible before his conversion. But the conviction remained that he must share this knowledge. Finally, reluctantly, he agreed to go if the Lord gave Him a direct call. Within half an hour, totally unexpected, he had his call, and he went forth to preach. The power of the Holy Spirit seemed to attend his labors. Thousands were converted. It is estimated that in just a few years, without radio or television, and at a time when America was not as heavily populated as it is now, nearly 100,000 accepted the message he felt convicted to give. None could refute his arguments.

Just two years after William Miller began to preach, the greatest star shower of history occurred--an event he had found predicted by Bible prophecy.

Lesson 6: Signs of the End

R.M. Devens described it in his book entitled, *American Progress, or The Great Events of the Greatest Century*: "The whole firmament, over all the United States... [was] for hours, in fiery commotion! No celestial phenomenon has ever occurred in this country ... which was viewed with such intense admiration by one class in the community, or with so much dread and alarm by another." "Never did rain fall much thicker than the meteors fell toward the earth; east, west, north, south, it was the same. In a word, the whole heavens seemed in motion ... from 2 o'clock until broad daylight" (chapter 28, pars. 1-5)

"It seemed as if the whole starry heavens had congregated at one point near the zenith, and were simultaneously shooting forth, with the velocity of lightning, to every part of the horizon and yet they are not exhausted--thousands swiftly followed in the tracks of thousands, as if created for the occasion. (F. Reed, *The Christian Advocate and Journal*, December 13, 1833).

Let's try to imagine what it would have been like for a young girl, whose family believed in the message given by William Miller, as she awoke to the spectacle.

Rebecca awoke, her second story bedroom filled with light. She jumped out of bed to see what was happening to cause the light. Grownups were awake and mulling around outside, looking up into the sky. Some were praying. But she hardly saw the people. The sky! It was filled with falling stars, millions of them, so that the whole heavens were light, as if it were the grandest grand finale of a 4th of July fireworks display ever displayed.

Fear gripped her heart. What does it mean? Is the end of the world coming? With panic in her muscles, she raced downstairs calling for mother and father. If anyone else were still asleep, they weren't any more.

"What's happening!" Rebecca called. "The sky is falling in!" But Rebecca's parents were calm. Mother was praying and Father had his Bible open looking out the window. Believing in the messages William Miller had been preaching, they knew the prophecies. Calmly Rebecca's father showed her from Joel, Matthew, and Revelation the prediction of the very event they were watching.

How awesome, Rebecca thought, to witness the very fulfillment of prophecy right before your eyes. Surely Jesus is coming soon ... And there, Rebecca, like thousands of others, rededicated her life to the Lord. She determined that come what may, she would be ready for Jesus to come.

Are these events fulfillments of Bible prophecy? In this scientific age, we tend to look askance at the simple faith of those of a previous age. We must ask ourselves, however, while we have studied the laws of science, have we likewise studied about the author of those laws and have we studied His book? Could those of a previous age, who were more diligent students of the Word, possibly be more in tune with its meaning? Could they have been right in their understanding of these heavenly phenomena? One thing is certain, it did accomplish God's will in turning thousands toward a closer walk with Jesus and to a determination to be ready for the second coming and eternal life. Oh that those events might have the same effect for us!

"In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." John 14:2, 3. This is truly a wonderful promise given to us by Jesus. Surely in this, God's final generation, we should all be looking and preparing for Jesus' second coming.