

## He is Risen. It is finished. Now what?

“Troubled times are often a sign of the end times.”

A hundred years ago there was a prediction that there would be a big earthquake in Italy. It didn't happen, but there was one in Spain. Well, it was close.

Christian bookstores feature books galore about the soon coming end times. Joel Rosenberg writes about political events in the Middle East and biblical prophecy. He does not give precise dates but has said that a sure sign that we are in the end times is the restoration of the people of Israel in 1948.

We are bombarded by the idea that the end is near. A recent (2020) survey by Lifeway Research reports that over half of evangelical pastors believe that the Second Coming of Christ will happen in their lifetime. About 60% of evangelical pastors preach once a month on end-time prophecies. Without committing to a time table, 89% believe that communicating the urgency of Christ's return is important.

Back in 1969, Hal Lindsey (evangelical pastor) in his book, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (the best non-fiction selling book of the 1970's), predicted the end was coming in 1988, but then he put that off another few years. But even then it didn't happen.

The Jehovah's Witnesses said first 1914, then 1918. The Seventh Day Adventists said 1844. There is the popular *Left Behind* series of books, which sold millions of copies and predicted that there are those who will be “left behind,” because there will be the taking up (the rapture) of those who are elect before the tribulation.

The largest seminary in this country (Dallas, Texas) makes everything turns around whether you are pre-mil or post mil, pre trib, or post trib. All these calculations are the center what they teach.

We do live in difficult times, but there have been difficult times before. We look back in history. In 544-545, under Emperor Justinian, a pandemic hit the eastern end of the Mediterranean, and at least 40% and probably 60% of the people in the eastern Mediterranean died.

Genghis Kahn in the first half of the thirteenth century killed 40 million people in Central Europe and Asia.

There was the Black Death (1348-1358). At least 40% (perhaps 50%) of the people in Europe were wiped out.

In 1618-1648, in the Thirty Years War, again at least 40% of the people died. Just think of that! Of what that would be among us. And even if we had plagues, earthquakes, tornados, or whatever. Perhaps biological or nuclear war might kill 40% or more of the world's population today.

There are big troubles all the time. And we ask ourselves: What does that mean? There was a huge, surprising change in the world, different from previous changes, beginning in 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and then in 1991, the fall of the Russian Empire, but also the collapse of a certain kind of (deconstructionist) thinking, as well as the whole spread of the internet, cell phones, and the recent rebirth of Islam.

What do we do? How do we understand all this? People say: Here, I've got this clue from Scripture. What do we say to that?

First of all, in five different places in the New Testament (Matt 24:43, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 2 Peter 3:10, Rev. 3:3, 16:15), the end will come like a thief in the night. What do we know about the thief in the night? One does not know when. In Mark 13:32 (and its Matthean parallel, also Acts 1:17) it says of the end: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels, nor the Son, but only the Father."

And when it comes to "the rapture" and those who are pushing it, they are not able to deal with the fact that for the past 1800 years nobody ever found something about a rapture in the New Testament.

Hal Lindsey wrote a book about the rapture, but it was a total failure. If the rapture is so self-evident in Scripture, how come no one noted it until about 200 years ago?

As far as "the antichrist" is concerned, people who focus on that overlook the fact that 1 John 2:18 speaks of the "many antichrists who have come."

What do we say to all of this? Why do people get caught up in this? There are several reasons. This kind of thinking, called apocalyptic thinking, is found in many religions. It is a certain temptation, a certain way people get caught because, first of all, they want to be on the inside of things, to know what is happening. And second, then they can act accordingly.

As Yogi Berra said: It's hard to make predictions, especially about the future. Or, as someone else said: "When the end comes, I want to be in Cincinnati because everything happens late there."

We chuckle. We think: We don't want to be like those crazy end-of-the-world types. Let's not be morbid about things. Let's hope for a quick and easy death, and in the meantime we can just go about doing whatever we want. That is a temptation of the Evil One. A basic temptation.

We think: We don't have to worry about apocalyptic thinking. We can go on our own way because we are living much longer than people used to live. In 1900 the average age of a person's life in this country was 43, and now someone born today has an average life expectancy of 40 years more, in their 80's.

What many people do is think: I'll take care of that later when I get old. In the meantime let's not bother with this religious business. I'll take care of it later.

That, of course, is a fatal mistake. What about later? When is that? In the ancient world, not in the religious world, but in the world of classical thinking, there was a proverb: "Remember your death."

We can put that in another kind of terminology and say: What about forever?

We have the idea that we don't have anything to worry about what comes next, when, as a matter of fact, the real question always is: What about forever?

What is the Lutheran understanding of all of these questions? It is a temptation of the Evil One to sneer and mock and brush these things away. It is also a temptation of the Evil One to get involved in these things so they take us away from the focus on the cross and resurrection. Lutherans are neither premillennialists nor post-millennialists, but we are "pro-mill." If there is one, we're for it. In the meantime we focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ, the cross and resurrection.

Because anytime we focus either on one side or the other, we start to diverge from the truth of the gospel. All it takes is being off a fraction of a fraction, and after a while, you are off the road. There is only one question: What about forever? And the answer is: In the cross and resurrection.

Forever has been fixed. John 10:27-29:

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”

Whatever comes, the future is taken care of in him, and we rejoice, and we come together to celebrate that. Amen