

Is COVID-19 a Sign of the End?

By Clinton Wahlen

In several places the gospels record Jesus' Olivet discourse in which He describes events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the signs that will precede His coming (Matt 24; Mark 13; Luke 21; cf. Matt 17:20–37). Political and religious turmoil, earthquakes, and famines appear in the first part of the discourse—troubles that culminate with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (Matt 24:4–8; Mark 13:5–8; Luke 21:8–11). Among the troubles mentioned by Jesus, one stands out in light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic: pestilences. “And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences” (Luke 21:11).¹ The Greek word translated “pestilences” (*loimoi*) refers to “a widespread contagious disease.”² Interestingly, this warning of Jesus is the only clear reference to pestilences in the entire New Testament.³ A similar mention in Matthew 24:7 does not appear in the earliest manuscripts,⁴ but is parallel to this passage in Luke and is classed there among “the beginning of sorrows” (Matt 24:8). Jesus, in fact, clearly indicates that “the end will not come immediately” (Luke 21:9; cf. Matt 24:8). Therefore, the specific reference to pestilences would seem to refer not to the end-time, but to the period leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and, in fact, Josephus describes a “pestilential destruction” in connection with that event.⁵ Nevertheless, before excluding pestilences from among the troubles or “sorrows” that might characterize the time just prior to the second coming of Christ, it will be helpful to look at some additional biblical references.

Generally in Scripture, pestilences are seen as one of the ways by which God brings judgment. Often it is brought upon His people for their disobedience and/or failure to render Him the worship He is due as Creator and Deliverer (Exod 5:3; Lev 26:25; Deut 32:24; 1 Chr 21:14). At other times it is a judgment on various nations for their rebellious attitude toward God (Exod 9:1–7). Such divine judgments could lead to widespread death (Exod 9:15; Ps 91:7; cf. Ps 91:3) and even total annihilation (Num 14:12). Significantly, pestilences as a divine judgment in the Old Testament appear most frequently in connection with the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon.⁶ Such warnings are given in order to draw God's people to think more seriously about their situation and turn back to God in heartfelt

repentance (see esp. 2 Chr 7:13–14).

Jesus specifically mentions only a few things that immediately precede His second advent. The most important of these is the gospel being given as a witness “to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matt 24:14; cf. Rev 14:6; 18:1). In Luke, several additional indicators are given and are specifically referred to as “signs” (*sēmeia*), linking them with the disciples' question at the beginning (Luke 21:7).⁷ There will be signs in the heavens (in the sun, moon, and stars; cf. Isa 13:9–10; Rev 6:12–14) as well as “on the earth” (Luke 21:25). The latter signs fall into three specific categories:

1. “distress of nations, with perplexity,” which could be applicable to the world wars of the twentieth century;
2. “the sea and the waves roaring,” possibly referring to sea-based natural disasters that are growing in intensity (tsunamis, typhoons, and hurricanes); and
3. “men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth” (Luke 21:25–26),⁸ which fittingly describes the rise of terrorism and other global worries.

Pandemics

Certainly the COVID-19 pandemic has instilled fear in the hearts of many all over the world and, while not specifically highlighted by Jesus, it may certainly be considered as among the kind of troubles described as preceding the end. Looking back in history, three pandemics were actually, based on the number of deaths, much worse than the current one:

1. the Plague of Justinian in AD 541–542, which hastened the demise of what remained of the Roman Empire (between thirty and fifty million dead);
2. the Spanish flu of 1918–1920 (30 million dead);
3. the Black Death of 1347–1352, which killed by far the most in recorded history (between seventy-five and two hundred million dead).⁹

Arguably, though, very few events in history have led to such immediate worldwide consequences as has the COVID-19 pandemic. Who could have imagined it even possible that virtually all travel and economic activity on a

global scale would come to a sudden halt? Even the world wars of the twentieth century, despite the huge loss of life, were more gradual in their global impact and could not be said to have affected the daily routine of practically everyone on the planet as drastically as this pandemic has.

Could God be allowing such events to get our attention? In light of current events, the following statement seems prescient:

The present is a time of overwhelming interest to all living. Rulers and statesmen, men who occupy positions of trust and authority, thinking men and women of all classes, have their attention fixed upon the events taking place about us. They are watching the strained, restless relations that exist among the nations. They observe the intensity that is taking possession of every earthly element, and they realize that something great and decisive is about to take place—that the world is on the verge of a stupendous crisis.

Angels are now restraining the winds of strife, until the world shall be warned of its coming doom; but a storm is gathering, ready to burst upon the earth, and when God shall bid His angels loose the winds, there will be such a scene of strife as no pen can picture. . . .

A moment of respite has been graciously given us of God. Every power lent us of heaven is to be used in doing the work assigned us by the Lord for those who are perishing in ignorance. The warning message is to be sounded in all parts of the world. . . . A great work is to be done, and this work has been entrusted to those who know the truth for this time.¹⁰

Signs of the End

Considering that pestilences were frequently connected in Scripture with Babylon's attacks on God's people and that end-time Babylon is rapidly gaining strength as predicted in Revelation 17,¹¹ it is certainly possible that the COVID-19 crisis constitutes one of the "sorrows" referred to in Matthew 24 as a sign of the end. God uses such signs just before the coming of Jesus to arouse His church and signal that their redemption is near (Luke 21:28).¹² While this pandemic will in all likelihood pass, other earth-shaking events—some even more momentous—are ahead of us. In the midst of it all, we are called to be God's messengers to people with nowhere else to turn, symbolized by the angel giving the final "loud cry" (Rev 18:1–4; cf. Isa 60:1–3).

As we near the end, the winds of strife that have been held back (see Rev 7:1, 3) will ultimately be released. The "seven last plagues" (Rev 15:1; 21:9)—which these troubles are not—will have an even bigger global impact (see Rev 16) but, by then, everyone will have sealed their eternal destiny and no one will choose to repent (Rev 16:9, 11). Unlike those who have no hope (cf. Eph 2:12; 1 Thess 4:13), Seventh-day Adventists have a special privilege to be the beacons of light and hope to a lost world. God has revealed all that

is necessary for His people to know. It is left for us to study these things and keep in mind Jesus' words to His disciples just before His ascension: "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power" (Acts 1:8). He has not given any time prophecies that tell exactly when the coming of Christ will be, but only when it is "near."¹³ Jesus said, "Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near" (Luke 21:28). The prophecy of Jesus given on the Mount of Olives has never seemed more timely.



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¹ All biblical quotations are from the NKJV.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988–1989), §23.158.

³ The only other New Testament use of the word is of Paul, who is accused before Felix of being a "pest" or "plague" by Tertullus, a Jewish orator (Acts 24:5). Pestilence is not explicitly mentioned in the book of Revelation, despite the numerous troubles described there, though the reference to "death" (*thanatos*), together with being killed by sword, hunger, and beasts of the earth (Rev 6:8), seems to imply the Old Testament complex of judgments that include pestilences (cf. n. 6 below).

⁴ The Greek word for pestilence (*loimos*) is omitted from most of the earliest codices (ⲛ B D E*) and some other ancient witnesses, while it is present in the majority of manuscripts, ancient versions, and quotations of the New Testament by early church fathers. Although this variant is typically explained as a scribal harmonization from Luke 21, Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994), 51, admits that "the words *καὶ λοιμοὶ* may have been omitted because of the similarity of ending." In addition to the possible confusion of endings, the word for "famine" in Greek (*limoi*) is very similar to the word for "pestilence" (*loimoi*), differing by just one letter. Misspellings could have contributed to some confusion also in view of the misspelling of the word "famine" as *leimoi* in the codices Vaticanus (B) and Bezae (D). Two fragmentary extant papyri contain Matthew 24 but, unfortunately, verse 7 was not preserved (P⁷⁰, P⁸⁵).

⁵ Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.421. The Greek phrase is *loimōdē phthoran*, employing the lexically related adjective.

⁶ See Jer 14:12; 21:6–9; 24:10; 27:8, 13; 28:8; 29:17–18; 32:24, 36; 34:17; 38:2; Ezek 5:12, 17; 6:11–12; 7:15; 12:16; 14:12–20; 33:27.

⁷ Heavenly signs (less specifically described) are also mentioned in connection with the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:11), and Josephus records that there were such signs in the sky prior to that event (*War* 6.288–315).

⁸ In Matthew, the only event specifically called a *sign* in response to the disciples' question (Matt 24:3) is the second coming itself: "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven" (Matt 24:30).

⁹ Michael S. Rosenwald, "History's Deadliest Pandemics, from Ancient Rome to Modern America," *Washington Post*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/local/retropolis/coronavirus-deadliest-pandemics/> (accessed April 30, 2020).

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Maranatha* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976), 266.

¹¹ Babylon's present existence is indicated by the second angel's reference to it (Rev 14:8). This power, defined in Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1957), 830, as "all religious bodies and movements that have fallen away from the truth," is the polar opposite of the pure woman in Revelation 12, which represents God's true church. See Hans K. LaRondelle, "The Biblical Concept of Armageddon," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28, no. 1 (March 1985): 22–23. The similarity of the beast on which the harlot rides to the beast of Revelation 13 (Rev 17:3; cf. 13:1), one of whose heads was wounded to death and then healed (Rev 13:3), suggests a temporary interruption in the influence of the sea beast's false system of worship, but also the eventual expansion of its earthly power to a point of near-total global domination (Rev 17:5; 18:3)—the sole exception being God's remnant people "who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev 14:12).

¹² Leon Morris, *Luke: Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 317–318: “When the perplexing signs begin to occur Jesus’ followers must not be downcast.

Their deliverance is near.”

¹³ See Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1992), 34–39.
