

THE ONLY SIGN GIVEN

by

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Introduction.

Religious and secular institutions are failing. Times are getting worse, not better. And, Christians are starting to ask where it's all going, when it's going to get better, and whether they'll be here when it does.

The Bible has the answers about the very end-times. But, they're not easy to understand. And, many Christians are never exposed to them. Worse than that, many Christians are exposed to pseudo-Christian myths that are mis-interpretations of the Bible. The Bible warns that such poor teaching will happen in the very end-times [2 Tim. 4:3-4].

What the Bible shows is that God will bring judgment upon the Earth that will shatter civilization as we know it. It will start with atmospheric events that will be economically devastating. A repressive government reaction will then take away what freedoms still exist among Earth's peoples. Christians will be martyred. Jesus called this the time of Great Tribulation. Times will be worse than ever before in human history. Jesus said that except those days be shortened by God, no one would survive [Mat. 24:21-22].

There is a myth that has gained wide acceptance in Christian circles. It is that Christianity will be removed from Earth prior to the bad times. This is known as the Pre-Tribulation Rapture doctrine. It is also called "Darbyism," after its popularization in 1830s England. I have dealt with this in a separate writing, and won't repeat it, here. Suffice it to say that the truth of the later timing of the so-called Rapture can be easily shown, using only three Bible verses. There is no easier 'out' for Great Tribulation Christians than there was for Jesus. That's why He instructs His followers to pick up their crosses.

The point of the present writing is that most present-day Christians are not equipped to biblically interpret what is happening to them and to the world, and what they should do about it. The goal of this paper is to give Christians enough insight into the Bible that they may understand where the world is heading and why, and how to estimate how far along the path we are, toward the catastrophic events of [Rev. 11]. We will also look at something that a Christian can spiritually do, to prepare for the Great Tribulation.

Approaching the Day of the Lord.

Jesus named it the Great Tribulation [Mat. 24:21]. Seven Old Testament prophets called it the Day of the Lord. It is a great and terrible day [Joel 2:11]. It is not to be desired, even by the Church [Amos 5:18]. It is the day of vengeance of the Lord of Hosts [Jer. 46:10]. And, who is that? It is God's Redeemer, who is First and Last [Isa. 44:6]. And that is Jesus [Rev. 22:13]. The judgment starts with the Church [1 Peter 4:17].

Why must there be a Day of the Lord? Can't God just take the Christians to Heaven and let unbelievers go to Hell when they die? Why does there have to be judgment in the flesh, of both Christians and unbelievers on Earth? The answer is that it is because of the Church. What the corporate Church does affects individual Christians, here on Earth. There must be judgment of the Church on Earth, because of its corporate disobedience. And, when the Church brings judgment upon itself, all the people suffer, even the ones who are individually obedient. They are caught up in the general judgment. It's always been that way, as is recorded in the Bible.

The Bible is a great history book. It records how God has dealt with His disobedient people, several times before. The New Testament says that the ancient Israelites formed God's first "Church." Both Paul and Stephen called it that. One of the results of its disobedience was to split. Because of idolatry, God sent one part of the split into captivity. He allowed the second part a few more years to repent, but then sent them into captivity. But, then, he allowed a remnant of the remnant Israelite people to come back and restart the old Church.

This pattern of disobedience, captivity, and restart repeated with the Christian version of the Church. The pattern became a cycle. We are now well down the path of the final repetition of the cycle. The next restart will be the last one. It is when Jesus physically returns. But, this time, the earthly judgment preceding His return will be horrific. For more details, see Appendix-1, below.

Where Are We, on the Path to Judgment?

When the ancient Israelite Church failed the final time, there were warning signs. But, its leadership was blind to the signs. Jesus berated them, saying that although they could forecast the weather, they could not judge the signs of the times [Mat. 16:3]. Jesus was saying that their judgment was bad. Saint Paul articulated the principle that the Church that has poor internal judgment shall be judged [1 Cor. 11:31].

There are many signs of the times that may now be recognized, to estimate how far we are down the path to God's earthly judgment. The overt signs are failure of institutions, first Christian, and then secular. As Christian influence wanes, Christian values in the formerly Christianized society disappear. Jesus articulated the underlying sign that would signal this. It is the failure of Christian love [Mat. 24:12].

The Greek Bible word for Christian love is "*agape*." It used to be translated into the English "*charity*." And charity in Protestant nations was at first the duty of the Church. But, in recent years the word has disappeared from the English Bible and the practice has been taken over by secular agencies. Even the government has gotten into the act, with welfare. As a result, Christian influence in society has decreased. This is perhaps the first sign of the times to be observed.

Institutional failure is like a line of dominoes falling. First, the Church. Then the family. Finance and government follow. And, the institutional failure of the Church occurs because of the fact that it has been institutionalized by its leadership. God didn't design it that way, either in the Israelite or the Christian version. God designed an organic Church, a living Church, not an institution. And, so, the failure of the institutions is the pattern that is in the Bible. We can judge how far we are down the path by properly interpreting the institutional signs of the times. And, we interpret them by comparing them to what is seen in the Bible.

The Ultimate Sign.

There's an old saying about Christians who are too spiritual to be any earthly good. We have seen such in recent years. We have seen Christians flitting here and there, looking for miraculous signs. It was the same in Jesus' time, with disciples following Jesus, to see Him work miracles. But, the miracles He worked were always in the context of getting people saved, of strengthening faith. And, when Jesus spoke to disciples about real spirituality, many turned back [John 6:66].

As for the Israelite Church leadership, when they asked Jesus for a miraculous sign, he told them to go back to the Bible. The only sign they were going to get was the sign of the prophet, Jonah. He then explained that the sign of Jonah symbolized Jesus' forthcoming death and resurrection [Mat. 12:38-40].

The Book of Revelation shows that the sign of Jonah shall still be operative in our very end-times. During the Great Tribulation, two Christian witnesses shall do the greater miracles that Jesus prophesied [John 14:12]. And, the two witnesses shall be martyred. Three and one-half days later, they shall be resurrected in public view. It shall again be the sign of Jonah. (These two witnesses may not be just two individuals, but two parts of the Church's remnant of the remnant. See Appendix-2, below, for details.)

What Can the Christian Do, in the Very End-Times?

The answer is Jesus. That may sound trite to some, but it is true, nevertheless. The answer is Jesus and the personal relationship the Christian has with Him. And, it's all about love.

The original Apostles had nothing going for them but Jesus, and their personal relationship with Him. And, that was after His death and resurrection. When miracles were needed to enable their ministry, miracles happened [Acts 5:17-20]. Paul said that his ministry depended on him being able to see Jesus, on the cross [1 Cor. 2:2]. And, Peter knew that it was his love for Jesus that gave him his ministry in the Church [John 21:15-17].

What the Christian can do in the very end-times is love Jesus, as Peter did. That kind of love is rewarded by both Jesus and The Father [John 16:27]. Although Christian *agape* love may grow cold, this kind of rewarding love won't. It is the other kind of love in the Bible. It is *phileo* love, also known as family love, or brotherly love. Both the Father and Jesus reward the Christian who loves Jesus as an elder brother. Such a personal relationship with Jesus is what is needed when times are tough. See Appendix-3 for details.

Conclusion.

Today, we are seeing clear signs of failure of secular and religious institutions, worldwide. This does not mean that Christianity, itself, is totally failing. But, many of its institutional forms are. The Bible shows us that there has existed a clear historical and prophetic pattern by which these failures may be interpreted as signs of the times. Some Christians search for miraculous signs, to counter their increasing anxiety over what is happening in the world. But, Jesus has shown that to an evil and adulterous generation, there shall be only one sign given, that of death and resurrection. Jonah

gave it first. Jesus gave it second. The Two Witnesses shall give it the third time, and that shall be very late in what Jesus labeled The Great Tribulation.

The time of the Trumpets shall be the time of the ministry of the Two Witnesses, who may well be two elements of the sevenfold Christian Church of the very end-times. On Earth, they will do things greater than Jesus, during His earthly ministry. However, it will be Jesus, in heaven, performing those things, as Executor of His own Will. In order to understand the signs of the times, Christians need to understand the terms of that Will.

So, the bottom line for us is this. The Bible lays out the conditions of the end of our era and the path by which we shall get there. The exact timing is unknown. But, that may be estimated by interpreting the signs of the times. I hope I'm not here when the atmospheric events of the first four Trumpets of Revelation initiate the three and one-half year Great Tribulation. But, whoever is here shall have the Christian duty to proclaim the day of the vengeance of our God, and to say that "*The clock is running.*"

Meanwhile, to counter the decrease in *agape* love, both in and out of the Church, we can make sure that we have *phileo* love for Jesus, the Father, and the Brethren. This *phileo* love shall be well rewarded and shall strengthen the Church that remains during the Great Tribulation.

APPENDIX-1: HISTORIC CHURCH FAILURE.

God didn't invent the institutional church, He invented the Church that became an institution. God's first Church was the ancient Israelite people [Acts 7:38], [1 Cor. 10:6]. He gave them a lot of structure for that Church. He gave them prophets and judges and priests. But they departed from His prescribed structure and substituted kings for the judges. And, the priests and kings turned God's Church into an institution. And, the institution didn't listen to the prophets. From there on, it was downhill.

Israel, the first institutionalized Church, split. The northern part became apostate and was sent by God into captivity by an unbelieving nation. The southern part (Judah) lingered, but also backslid and was later taken captive. So, God's institutionalized first Church failed. And, with the failure of institutionalized Judah, all of the people's other secular institutions also failed. Ancient Israel ceased to exist, as its people had known it.

But, God gave His people a second chance. He allowed a remnant of the remnant Judah to come out of captivity and restart the ancient Church. However, again it became institutionalized, failed a second time, and was taken captive by Rome. So, God sent His only begotten Son to restart the Church a third time, on an entirely new basis. Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for it.

Jesus started His Christian Church by calling disciples to follow after Him and to learn by hands-on experience how the new Church was to operate. When His first disciples were trained, Jesus made them apostles for the purpose of carrying His message as far as they could. Jesus did not start an institution, but an organism, a living Church. God, through Jesus, did not create a physical priesthood nor kings. And, for a couple of hundred years, this new Church prospered, by following Jesus' teachings.

But, in the Third Century, this new Church created a physical priesthood, against God's explicit instructions [Heb. 8:4]. Then, in the Fourth Century, the Church and the Government became intertwined. Following those errors, the priests and bishops institutionalized Jesus' Church. From there on, the path of the Church was down-hill. So, God followed His previous pattern, set with the decline of the ancient Israelite Church, in order that Jesus' Church should not totally disappear. He prolonged the descent of the institutional Church, so that Christianity should be spread, even though the earthly agent might be imperfect.

In the 1500s, many Christians thought that the institutionalized Church had failed, so they split away, becoming the Protestant Church. It kept the priesthood, but denied the Pope and much of his institutional ritual and paraphernalia. This was called the Reformation. But, the Protestant Church, too, followed the pattern to institutionalization.

The second part of the split, the Protestant Church we see today, is on its way to institutional failure, just as with the ancient Hebrew Church. The Book of Revelation shows us that when this version of the institutionalized Church fails, all the secular institutions shall also fail, along with it. The Protestant Church presently consists of a group of splinter denominations. It pretty well fits Jesus' prophecy of the Temple, reduced to a pile of stones [Mat. 24:2]. Only a remnant of a remnant will remain active, to fulfill God's purposes for the very end-times. What we see is the Church repeating the same sequence of events that happened with the ancient Hebrew Church. We see the Christian Church, trapped in a historic cycle that has lasted thousands of years.

The gradual failure of the religious and secular institutions is to be understood by the Christian as signs of the times. For, again, the only sign that will be given to the secular world is the sign of the prophet, Jonah [Mat. 16:1-4]. And, again, as with Jesus, this sign will be manifested in the earthly Body of Christ.

APPENDIX-2: THE ULTIMATE SIGN

The Sign of Jonah.

So many things we see going on in the Church today are following the pattern of the failures seen in the Bible. The leaders of the old failed Israelite Church tried to entrap Jesus and asked Him to show them miraculous signs. He had previously done many miracles for those who would populate His new Church. But, to the leaders of the old Church, Jesus simply said,

"... An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah." [Mat. 12:39]

Jesus next explained to them that Jonah had set a pattern for the restarting of God's Church on an entirely new principle. In [Mat. 12:40] Jesus showed the old Church leaders the part of Jonah's ministry that now applied to Jesus' time. It was that Jonah had spent three days and nights in the whale's belly, before being released to complete his ministry. Jesus was going to spend three days and nights in the heart of the Earth before being released to complete His ministry.

Today is still Jesus' time. [Mat. 12:39] still applies. The sign of the prophet, Jonah, shall be given yet again.

The Two Witnesses of Revelation.

We see that events of Old Testament times foreshadowed events of Jesus' time. That is, there were patterns set in the Old Testament that were repeated in Jesus' time. This is also true of the very end times, as recorded in the Bible. That is, some of the Old Testament patterns were to repeat in the time of Jesus' first ministry and again in the times of His second ministry. And, what is that second ministry of Jesus?

In Jesus' first ministry, He performed essentially as the Sacrificial Lamb. That is, His blood would be shed as a sacrifice for sins [John 1:29], [1 Pet. 1:19]. When He first started that ministry, he read its description from the Bible in His home synagogue [Luke 4:18-19]. He was reading out of [Isa. 61:1-2]. He read six elements of His forthcoming ministry. But, He skipped the verse in Isaiah about proclaiming the Day of Vengeance of our God, which is also known as the Day of the Lord. Apparently that ministry is reserved for Jesus in the very end-times.

When Jesus was talking about Jonah, He said an interesting thing. Referring to Himself, he said that one had now come who was greater than Jonah. Later, at the Last Supper, He also said that His believers should do greater works than Himself, after He had gone to Heaven. In [John 14:12-14] He said that it would be Him actually doing those works that were asked in His Name. So, an interesting question is whether Jesus shall be physically doing His end-times ministry on Earth, or whether His Believers shall be doing it, in their role as Body of Christ. That is, will the greater end-times works be done by the corporate Jesus, the Body of Christ?

There is another prophetic entity, active in the very end-times, who also fit the Jonah pattern. These are the so-called "Two Witnesses" of the Book of Revelation. They minister for three and one-half years, are then killed, and are resurrected three and a half days later. And, these Two Witnesses do greater things than did Jesus. Could these two witnesses be the Body of Christ, or some very end-times remnant of a remnant of the Body of Christ? Or, are the Two Witnesses just two individuals?

Olive Trees and Lampstands.

The Two Witnesses are characterized as two olive trees and two candlesticks (*luxnia*), standing before the God of the Earth [Rev. 11:4]. Olive trees and lampstands (*luxnia*) are also seen in [Zec. 4:11], which is a "mirror image," so to speak, of [Rev. 11:4]. In [Zec. 4:14], that which is characterized by olive trees are "... *the two anointed ones that stand by the Lord of the whole earth.*" Olive trees, of course, feed oil to the lampstands, to give light. In [Rev. 1:20] we see that candlesticks (lampstands) are identified as being the individual elements of the seven-fold Church of the very end-times. The fact that the Two Witnesses are characterized as being both olive trees and lampstands implies that they are two elements of the seven-fold Church that can illuminate the period of the very end-times. Their specific identities remain a mystery at the present time.

APPENDIX-3: TWO KINDS OF LOVE

The Failure of Agape Love.

This failure of the institutionalized Christian Church is in the Bible, in both Old- and New-Testament. That is, what's going on today has been previously prophesied and recorded. And, many details have been given. One of these details is the failure of love. That's the English word for it, in the King James and other translations. The Greek is *agape*. That is one of two different kinds of "love," in the New Testament. There are two different Greek words used, but the English is "love" for both Greek words. *Agape* is what we now call dutiful love, sometimes expressed as tough love. The other is *phileo*, which is family love, like of a mother for a daughter, or father for son, or brother for brother. *Agape* is the love with which we are instructed to love God and one another.

Agape, which is currently translated in the English Bible as "love," was previously translated as "charity." Since the beginning of the Protestant Church, charity was a function of Christianity, rather than the secular world. In recent years, many secular charities have arisen, and Christianity has yielded to them what was once the chief domain for demonstrating *agape* love.

In [Mat. 24:12], Jesus explained that in the very end-times (Day of the Lord) the *agape* love of many would grow cold, because of iniquity (lawlessness). Now, *agape* love is a distinguishing mark of the Christian [John 13:35]. So, if it grows cold, that means that not many are going to be seen as Christian. I think that we are now observing this sign of the times.

I happen to believe that it is Christian *agape* love that was the foundation of western (Christian) civilization. And, I believe that it is *agape* love that distinguishes western civilization from all others. As *agape* love fails, so does civilization as we have known it.

The Rewards of Phileo Love.

If the failure of *agape* love accompanies the failure of Christianity's and western civilization's institutions, what can we do about it? First, we can recognize that the decrease in *agape* love itself marks the failure of institutional Christianity. And, the propagation of that Church failure into the surrounding western civilization surely follows, due to decreasing Christian influence. I believe that decreasing *agape* love and increasing iniquity are two sides of the same coin, even in countries that were one hundred years ago highly Christianized. And, I believe that there is no escaping the corporate consequences of [Mat. 24:12].

But, does this mean that individual love shall be extinguished within all Christianity? The answer is "No," because there is the second Greek form of love, being *phileo*. It is an individual, personal thing that understanding Christians can do, independent of the institution. And, that is to manifest *phileo* love with Christian brothers and sisters and with God, the Father, and Jesus, the Son. If we do this, two things will result. First, God will reward us, here and now. Second, this manifestation of *phileo* love will strengthen the Church, itself.

I make these statements because of two other teachings of Jesus. The first is

“For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God.” [John 16:27]

This says that if we love Jesus with the *phileo* kind of love, the Father will love us with that kind. That is, the Father will love us as sons and daughters.

The second of Jesus’ teachings is the passage in [John 21:15-17]:

[15] So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. [16] He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. [17] He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. [John 21:15-17]

This set of verses in English shows Jesus, after His resurrection, asking Peter three times if he loves Him. It shows Peter answering three times in the affirmative. And, following each answer, Jesus instructs Peter to feed His sheep.

But, in the Greek, there is substantially more to this interaction than appears in English.

Jesus’ first question is if Peter loves (*agape*) Him more than the rest of the apostles. Peter answers that he loves (*phileo*) Him. Jesus tells Peter to feed (*bosko*) his lambs (*arnion*), or baby sheep. This kind of feeding is like forking hay over the fence. It’s just feeding, nothing else. In the Bible, feeding symbolizes training in the things of God.

Next, Jesus simply asks if Peter loves (*agape*) Him, without comparing to the apostles. Peter affirms his (*phileo*) love for Him. This time, Jesus upgrades his previous instruction, telling Peter to feed (*poimano*) his adult sheep (*probaton*). *Poimano* means shepherd, one who leads and protects the flock, doing everything for them. This Greek word is translated in [Eph.4:11] as “*pastor*.”

Finally, Jesus asks Peter if he does love (*phileo*) Him. Peter says he does. Then, Jesus issues His final instruction to Peter, to feed (*bosko*) His adult sheep (*probaton*). Jesus is reminding Peter that in shepherding the whole flock, to not neglect their simple feeding.

What this interchange shows is that Peter’s *phileo* love for Jesus was rewarded with an increase in responsibility, over what was assigned for *agape* love.

Putting the [John 16] and [John 21] verses together shows that both God, the Father, and Jesus, the Son, reward a Christian’s *phileo* love of Jesus. And, this *phileo* love is the family kind, of Jesus as elder brother. And, the reward is such as to strengthen the Church, in the area of its leadership.