

Dear Friend,

I have heard many people; following the tsunami in the Indian Ocean on Dec. 26, 2004 state that the end of the world must be near. According to the popular way of thinking of the return of Christ, whenever there is an apparently large increase in “natural” or man-made disasters then we must be very close to the return of Christ. With the news filled with the violence and suffering caused by the war in Iraq, the tsunami, the mudslides in California, etc. many speculate that Jesus is coming back very soon. There is something about this response that is very biblical and another part that is very unbiblical.

First, it is true that whenever we see natural or man-made disasters we are to think about the return of Jesus. Jesus himself taught this in the “Olivet Discourse” as recorded in Matthew 24. He says in vv. 4-8, “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nations will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.” Jesus said that the time from his death/resurrection/ascension in about 30 A.D. until he returns again is going to be marked by the sorts of things that we have recently witnessed. These are birth pains, the necessary preparation for birth, which is his personal, visible return.

When we see the terrible and destructive power unleashed by both war and tsunami, we should think of the infinitely greater power and terror of the wrath of the Lamb. When we witness those terrifying videos of that wall of water rushing ashore and swallowing everything and everyone we should think of that great and terrifying day that is described in Revelation 6:16-17, “They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?’” We who are not the victims of these great disasters must immediately upon hearing of them, cry out to the Lord in repentance and cling to Christ. Because the answer to the question, “who can stand?” is—only those who have been declared perfectly righteous by God through their faith in the finished work of Christ. Only those who trust in Christ will survive that final day of wrath.

However there is a very unbiblical motive and thought that often stands behind this speculation that the return of Christ is going to happen real soon because of these disasters. There is a kind of speculation about what current events mean regarding the return of Christ that shares more in common with astrology and fortune telling than with biblical hope. The fact is that, as Peter says in 1 Peter 4:7, “The end of all things is near...” The NT teaches us that the return of Christ has been “near” for two thousand years. The most important thing that had to happen to prepare the world for that final day of the Lord was the living, dying and rising of Jesus Christ. Once he ascended to God’s right hand to wait for that day when he will put his enemies under his feet, his coming again has always been near. D.A. Carson explains this idea of “near” with a helpful illustration. He says that since the ascension of Jesus the world has been like a man walking along the edge of a cliff that goes on for miles and miles. The man is always “near” the edge of the cliff and it would not take very much to push him over the edge, yet he can proceed along the edge for a long ways. Thus, we have been near to the return of Christ for 2000 years and we

continue to be near to his return. God himself and no one else knows or can predict when he will push the world off the cliff. We are not to waste our time arguing about or speculating about when that day might come. We are to always live as if it could be today.

The beaches of the Indian Ocean were full of people going about their daily lives. Some were working, some were vacationing, some were shopping in seaside markets, some were building sandcastles, and then, in a moment, they were gone. That is exactly how it will be when the Son of Man returns and so we must be ready, always. As Jesus says in Luke 17:26-37 which I quote in part, "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also it will be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.... Remember Lots wife! Whoever tries to keep his life, will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it." It is my prayer that as we witness these disasters of "biblical proportions" that we will turn more urgently from sin and cling more tightly to Christ in preparation for that final, great day.

Waiting in hope with you,