

What next?

R. Stanley, 20 April 2020

What next? Are we marching towards the end of the world? Would things get better or worse? These and many such questions bombard our minds during these months of chaos caused by Coronavirus. I dare to write this article under this title because I have an old Bible in my hand!

I belong to the minority which believes that the Bible is the Word of God. It's a volume of 66 books, 1189 chapters, and over 30,000 verses. Over 8000 of these verses contain predictive prophecy. This means, approximately 25% of the Bible foretells future events. That's why the Bible is also called the "Word of *Prophecy*" (2 Pet 1:19-21) or the "*Prophetic Scriptures*" (Rom 16:26).

We come across so many references to **plagues** in the Bible. The first one was what God sent to King Pharaoh and his family when he took Abraham's wife because of her beauty (Gen 12:14-17). Then we read about the ten plagues God sent upon Egypt when King Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not release the Hebrew people from bondage (Ex 7-12; Josh 24:5). God struck the people of Israel with a very great plague when they were not satisfied with His miraculous provision in the desert but turned in their hearts to Egypt (Num 11:33; Acts 7:39). There were plagues in the times of kings and prophets. King Solomon refers to plagues in his prayer of dedication of the temple (2 Chr 6:28). The famous 91st Psalm promises protection from any plague for the one who trusts in the Lord God as his refuge and fortress (vv1,2,10). Finally the Book of Revelation speaks of so many plagues to be sent on earth as expressions of God's wrath (Rev 6:17; 16:1; 19:15).

The Biblical history presents **plagues** as an expression of God's fierce displeasure (Lev 26:25; Num 25:8,9; Dt 28:15,20-22; Jer 29:18,19; 34:17; Ezek 5:11,12). The prophets announced plagues as God's judgment. They were withdrawn in answer to repentance and prayer (Ex 8:12,13; Num 16:46-48; 2 Sam 24:25; Psa 106:28-31). Plagues are powerful attention-getters! C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), a Christian thinker, writes, "God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world!"

When the disciples asked Jesus, "What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?", one of the signs He listed was "**pestilences**" along with wars and famines (Mt 24:3,7). So many plagues erupted beginning with AD 165. Here are some of them: Antonine Plague of AD 165-180 in which 50,00,000 people died; Justinian Plague, AD 541-542, 10,00,00,000; Japanese Smallpox, AD 735-737, 10,00,000; Black Death, AD 1331-1352, 20,00,00,000; Cholera,

AD 1846-1860, 10,000; Russian Flu, 1889-1894, 10,00,000; Spanish Flu, AD 1918, 10,00,00,000; Ebola, AD 2014-2016, 11,000; and so on. These figures gathered from various sources may not be accurate, but the devastation is appalling. Now we have Coronavirus (COVID-19) which is sweeping the nations. The figures are already alarming. Will this be the last pandemic? I wish it is, but very unlikely! The worst is yet to be, perhaps!

Christians in each of the above periods of various plagues would have thought that they had come to the end of the world. But the words of Jesus are clear when He was predicting famines, wars and pestilences: Mt 24:6,8, “The **end** is not yet... All these are the **beginning** of sorrows!” Are we not then living in the last days? These are definitely the last days, but we must understand when the “last days” began. It’s Jesus who inaugurated the last days by His first coming: Heb 1:1,2, “God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these **last days** spoken to us by His Son.” Read also Galatians 4:4,5 and 1 Peter 1:20,21. When the Holy Spirit descended on the early disciples, Apostle Peter pointed out that it was “**last days,**” quoting Prophet Joel (Acts 2:17,18; Joel 2:28,29). If those were the “last days” according to Peter, we are living at the end of the last days. Yes, the Gospel era is the last days. This is the age of Grace. These are the days of opportunity for unbelievers to believe the Gospel; and the days of responsibility for believers to proclaim the Gospel. The climax of the last days will be the “Day of the Lord” or simply “The Day” or the “Day of God” (1 Thess 5:2; 1 Cor 3:13-15; Rom 13:11,12; 2 Pet 3:11-13). This is also referred to as the “Day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:8; 5:5; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 1:10; 2:16). According to the Old Testament usage, the “Day of the Lord” refers to the final judgment (Joel 2:1-11; 3:14-21; Mal 4:5). According to Apostle John, we are in the “last hour” (1 Jn 2:18). Prophet Leonard Ravenhill (1907-1994) writes that we are living in the “last minutes!”

The question of the disciples to Jesus had three parts (Mt 24:3): (1) “When will these things be?” (2) “What will be the sign of Your coming?” (3) “What will be the sign of the end of the age?” We, who are living after over twenty centuries since these questions were asked, combine all the three questions as one, “**What next?**” The answer of Jesus to the disciples is pretty long. It is given in two long chapters with totally about 100 verses (Mt 24 & 25). Dear friends, do take time to read through these two all-important chapters a couple of times to understand what Jesus wants us to know about the endtime. Various interpretations have been given by Bible scholars and commentators some of which are diametrically opposite to each other. I for one who would like to get the spirit of the passages instead of dwelling on the disputes and differences over the details. Jesus has not neatly tabulated His answer to these three

questions in serial order. There are certainly some mixing-up and overlapping. It was not a presentation in a lecture hall but a conversational answer on a mountain (24:1).

■ The first sentence of Jesus in His 100-verse long answer is, “Take heed that no one **deceives** you” (Mt 24:4). So many things would happen, some of which are understandable and others ununderstandable. But the most important thing is that we must escape DECEPTION. Jesus predicted that there would be “many” false Christs and “many” false prophets (vv5,11). They would show “great” signs and wonders (v24). And “many” would be deceived (vv5,11). This would include “even the elect” (v24). Words cannot be stronger and warnings severer.

Doctrinal deception has been there in Christendom in every generation, but it has reached heights in our times. This endtime apostasy was predicted pointedly by the Apostles. Paul wrote, “Now the Spirit explicitly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and *doctrines of demons*” (1 Tim 4:1). “The time will come when they will not endure *sound doctrine*, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Tim 4:3,4). Read 2 Peter 2 & 3 for Peter’s warnings, and 1 John 2:18-27; 2 John 7-11 for John’s warnings. The only way to safeguard ourselves from the endtime doctrinal deception is to stick to the **Scriptures**. While bothered by so many voices from so-called prophets disturbing our equilibrium, we have Apostle Peter here to whom Jesus gave the keys of the Kingdom and upon whose rocky foundation of revelation Jesus builds His Church: “We also have the prophetic **Word** made *more sure*, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the Day dawns and the Morning Star rises in your hearts... prophecy of **Scripture**” (2 Pet 1:19-21).

Deception starts where and when personal meditation of the **Bible** and pulpit Bible teaching are not placed first among spiritual activities. For example, we have so many 6-hour, 8-hour or even 24-hour prayer programmes. Wonderful, but do we have such lengthy sessions for solid Bible study and Bible teaching? This is a dangerous imbalance. During the days of revival, rebuilding and reformation, under the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah, the reading and exposition of God’s Book were for six hours, and confession and worship for the next six hours (Neh 9:3). We have all-night prayers, but the early Church had all-night Bible-study (Acts 20:7-11). The four secrets of the exceptional strength and the exponential growth of the early Church are listed in Acts 2:42: “Teaching, Fellowship, Breadbreaking, Prayers.” Do you notice which

comes first? **“Teaching!”** Those who sat under an year-long Bible teaching were the ones first called Christians (11:26). Dear Christian friends, do not attend too many meetings. In your hectic weekly schedule, just one Sunday morning service would do. Spend Sunday afternoons for Bible study, if possible with Study Bibles. Cut short watching Christian TV programmes. Too much of unscriptural stuff! In your private devotional hour(s) also, divide the time equally between Bible meditation and prayer. Let “your” words be few in God’s presence; hear more and speak less (Eccl 5:1,2). Take this as an endtime exhortation for your own safety. Prayerless study will be dry; studyless prayer is dangerous.

Several Preachers or Prophets will come to you claiming that God has revealed to them new **mysteries**. Shut the door on their faces even if they appear angelic (Gal 1:8). There is no mystery that has not already been revealed to the Apostles and recorded in the Scriptures. (1) The *“Mystery of the Church”* is that both the Jews and non Jews would be baptised into one Body, the Church (Eph 3:1-6,9). (2) The *“Mystery of Second Coming”* is about how our mortal bodies would put on immortality at the Return of Christ (1 Cor 15:51-54). (3) The *“Mystery of Iniquity”* is about the full development of Satanic plan that’s already at work (2 Thess 2:7-10). (4) The *“Mystery of Israel”* is about their final restoration (Rom 11:25-27). (5) The *“Mysteries of the Kingdom”* are outlined in the seven Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13. They cover the period of time between Christ’s first Advent and the second Advent. (6) The *“Mystery of the Faith”* refers to the Church age doctrine taught by the Apostles in the New Testament especially by Paul who had abundance of revelations (1 Tim 3:9; 2 Cor 12:1,7). (7) The *“Mystery of Godliness”* is about the life of Christ, from birth to ascension, that must be manifest in and through His Church (1 Tim 3:14-16). We don’t need anything more than these. Stop where the Bible stops. Be silent where the Bible is silent. Don’t even *think* beyond “what is written” (1 Cor 4:6). Secret things belong to God, not to us (Dt 29:29). Do not add anything, alter anything, or avoid anything (Rev 22:18,19). The “Amen” of the Book of Revelation ends Biblical revelations which only we are obliged to believe (Rev 22:21). Stay within the Biblical boundary; otherwise the Old Serpent will bite you (Eccl 10:8b). Even the created heavens and earth will pass away, but not the Word of God. This is a statement in the answer of Jesus to His disciples (Mt 24:35). See also 2 Peter 3:10.

The chief purpose of **prophetic gift** today is to interpret the Bible relevantly and present it forthrightly to men for “edification, exhortation and comfort” (1 Cor 14:3; Acts 15:32). If God reveals to any of His servants specifically a forthcoming catastrophe, he must communicate it to the national and global and Church leaders accordingly, and publicize the prediction through public media for readiness and preparedness to handle the crisis (Gen 41:25-40; Jer 19:1-3; Jonah 3; Acts 11:27-30; Mt 10:27). Otherwise God’s revelation to that person is wasted.

■ While dwelling on the question, “What next?”, we cannot ignore the role of **Israel** in God’s prophetic calendar. Romans 9, 10 & 11 are the Chapters in the New Testament which deal with the future of Israel. Read it leisurely. Here in a nutshell is what we Christians are supposed to know about Israel. The Israelites, His own people, rejected Jesus and crucified Him (Jn 1:11; Acts 2:22,23). The Apostles turned to the non-Jews when the Jews rejected the Gospel (Acts 13:46,47). The Jews have religious zeal but not according to God’s revelation (Rom 10:1-3). Nevertheless there were always “some” Jews who believed (Acts 2:36,37; 13:43,45). The same is the case today (Rom 11:4,5). The Bible speaks of all Israel turning to Christ at the national level (11:25-27). This is to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant (vv28-36). This is God’s wisdom that cannot be fathomed (v33). This return of Jews to Jerusalem has already started; but the return to Jesus at the national level is yet to happen. Our responsibility is to pray for Israel like Moses (Ex 32:32), like Jesus (Lk 19:41), and like Paul (Rom 9:1-3). The peace of Jerusalem should be one of our prayer points (Psa 122:6-8). But beloved, don’t be overoccupied with the matters of Israel. God’s main focus today is not Israel but the Church. Overenthusiasm in pilgrimage to Israel, putting up Christian buildings in Jerusalem, and such activities can sidetrack us from God’s chief purpose on earth.

■ In His answer to the disciples concerning endtimes, Jesus dwelt at length on **Tribulation** and His **Return** (Mt 24:15-44). This passage has 30 verses! The number of prophecies in the Bible about Christ’s First Coming is a little over 100, whereas there are about 300 prophecies about His Second Coming. Christians differ widely in their understanding of the the chronology (order) as well as the character (nature) of the the events connected with the Second Advent like Tribulation, Millennium, Judgment, etc. There are sincere and faithful Bible Teachers strongly differing in their positions regarding the sequence of these events. There are Bible texts which can be interpreted to suit each of these positions. This has divided Christians like no other doctrine! I believe that the certainty of Christ’s Return is more important than the chronology or the character of various events connected with it. Christ is coming “surely” and “quickly” (Rev 22:20). We have no control whatsoever over the order as well as the nature of these endtime (eschatological) events. That’s God’s prerogative. What’s required of us is that we **prepare** ourselves today for tomorrow. Here are some specific areas of preparation —

(a) “Without **holiness**, no one can see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). The earth will be destroyed by fire when “the Lord will come as a thief in the night” (2 Pet 3:10). After foretelling this global holocaust, Apostle Peter challenges us, “Since all these things will be destroyed, what manner of persons you must be in **holy** conduct and godliness!” (v11). When we meet the Lord, we shall be changed into His very likeness. Everyone who has this hope in Him must **purify** himself, just as He is pure (1 Jn 3:2,3).

(b) While listing out the signs of His coming and the end of the age, Jesus foretold, “Because lawlessness will abound, the **love** of many will grow cold” (Mt 24:12). Apostle Paul added “In the last days perilous times will come: for men will be...**unloving**, unforgiving...” (2 Tim 3:1-5). Apostle James has admonished us, “Do not grumble against one another, Brothers, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door” (Js 5:9). The question, whether or not there would be a Rapture, has ruptured the relationship among believers! Sad!

(c) Jesus predicted that love of **money** and love of **pleasure** would characterize the endtime: Lk 17:26-30, “As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the day of the Son of Man: They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them. Likewise as it was also in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire... and destroyed them all. Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed.” What an exact picture of our world of today! Night life, Parties, Bars, Restaurants, Malls, Skyscrapers, Fashion Industries, and so on. Overenjoyment of even legitimate pleasures should be out because “the time is short” (1 Cor 7:29-31). The Prosperity Message is the Gospel according to Lucifer which counteracts the teaching of Christ and the Apostles. We are warned against hoarding of wealth in the last days (Js 5:3).

(d) Jesus emphasized faithfulness in **stewardship** in His Olivet Discourse. He illustrated it by the Parable of the Servants (Mt 24:45-51), and the Parable of Talents (25:14-30). Whether it is secular work or spiritual ministry, God expects us to be hardworking and faithful. Laziness and sluggishness should be out from those who look forward to Christ’s coming. Because of Paul’s repeated emphasis on the Return of Christ in his First Letter to the Thessalonian Church (1:9,10; 2:19; 3:12,13; 4:13-17; 5:23), some believers became careless and casual in their work. He rebuked them sharply in his Second Letter, saying, “If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (3:6-12). In the Parable of Talents, everyone was given at least one talent. If we don’t pour ourselves into whatever task God has assigned to us, we are “wicked and lazy,” fit only for hell (Mt 25:14-30).

(e) There’s no one without **suffering** in this world. The present crisis created by Coronavirus has shown no partiality between the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, the civilized and the primitive. It has not differentiated between advanced nations or backward countries either. According to Apostle Paul, “The whole creation groans and labours with birthpangs together until now” (Rom 8:22). Even the Spirit-filled believers are not an exception (v23). God is our Father, and we as His children can go to Him anytime for help in

any suffering. But we must remember that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the future glory (v18). Jesus is preparing a place for us in His Father's house where there are many mansions. He will soon come back to take us home to the Heavenly Abode (Jn 14:1-3). Let's therefore cheer up!

(f) Christ gave the **Great Commission** in the first century to preach the Gospel to every man and every woman (Mt 28:18-20). The early disciples did their best to evangelize their generation. Down through the centuries, Missionaries have gone all over the world carrying the Gospel and planted Churches in every nation. We are at the final phase of world evangelisation. The harvest is still plenty. The labourers are not sufficient. "Now is the accepted time! Now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor 6:2). Christ is delaying His return just in order that everyone may be given sufficient time to repent of his sins and believe on Him for eternal salvation (2 Pet 3:9). Let's pray more, give more, sacrifice more and labour more to reach the unreached and the unchurched of our generation. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus assuredly said, "This Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in all the world... and then the **end** will come" (Mt 24:14).

(g) The only Prophet whom Jesus referred to in His Olivet Discourse, that too by designation, was Daniel (Mt 24:15; Mk 13:14; Lk 21:20). Bible scholars encourage us to study the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation together. According to Daniel, one of the chief signs of the endtime is the **knowledge explosion**: Dan 12:4b, "Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase." God is not against knowledge. As the Omniscient God, He is the source of all knowledge and wisdom (Js 1:5). But any knowledge that excludes Him is perverted (Prov 1:7). There is an indirect reference to the fall of Lucifer in God's message to the Prince of Tyre: Ezek 28:17, "Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor; I cast you to the ground." God told him that he was even "wiser than Daniel!" (vv3-5). Thank God for science and technology. But when man begins to worship them, the Creator God's anger is stirred, and He will make him realize his nothingness. This is what the Coronavirus has taught us! Prophet Jeremiah warns us of three things we must not boast of: "Wisdom, Strength, Riches" (Jer 9:23,24). The first one is wisdom! We are getting close to "that day" when the proud looks and haughtiness of men shall be humbled and bowed down so "the Lord alone be exalted" (Isa 2:11,17). What are super-powers before the Supra-power?

(h) The Parable of the Ten Virgins finds ample space in Jesus' answer to the question, "What next?" (Mt 25:1-13). Various interpretations have been given to this Parable, and each has its merit. My simple understanding is based on

the moral Jesus taught through the Parable: “Watch therefore: for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is Coming” (v13). Not just five but all the ten virgins slumbered and slept while the Bridegroom was delayed (v5). This is more or less the condition of all the **Churches**. Some are slumbering, some are sleeping, and some are snoring! I understand the “midnight cry” to the virgins as the final Revival (vv6,7). To the first of the seven Churches in the Book of Revelation, Jesus introduced Himself as the One walking in the midst of the seven Churches (Rev 2:1). When we come to the seventh Church, He is standing outside knocking for an entrance (3:20). Here’s a picture of the backsliding of the Church from the first century to the present time. But the good news is that Christ has not given up on any of the Churches, under whatever denominational label they may function. The wake-up call is to every Church including the spiritual Ephesian Church: “Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light” (Eph 5:14). I believe that, before the Return of Christ, God will send us **“Another Revival”** with an unprecedented outpouring of the Spirit resulting in an unusual ingathering of souls (Acts 2:16-21). Say, Amen!

(i) Jesus ends His long answer with the subject of **charity** (Mt 25:31-46). He calls Himself as the “King” on the Throne (vv31,34,40). He divides the people as sheep and goats. The sheep are those who fed the hungry, quenched the thirsty, accomodated the homeless, clothed the clotheless, visited the sick and the imprisoned. The goats are those who did none of these things though they saw all these poor and needy people. The sheep inherit eternal life, but the goats rush to hell. Without commenting on this passage, I want to close this write-up asking myself, “Am I a sheep or a goat?”

(This article is available in Tamil also.)

Read my 20-page pamphlet, “*Are you Ready to Meet your God?*”, which prescribes 10-fold preparation for the Second Coming of Christ. This is available on www.StanleyOnBible.com, as an attachment to the Online Letter 112 of 15 January 2020, freely downloadable. It’s published in 11 Indian languages and 4 foreign languages.

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