

The Signs of Christ's Soon Return

The Scriptures not only reveal the manner and object of Christ's coming, they also describe the signs that tell of the nearness of this climactic event. The first signs announcing the Second Advent took place more than 1700 years after Christ's ascension, and others have followed, contributing to the evidence that His return is very near.

Signs in the Natural World. Christ predicted that there would "be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars" (Luke 21:25), specifying that "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars of heaven will fall, and the powers in heaven will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory" (Mark 13:24-26). In addition, John saw that a great earthquake would precede the signs in the heavens (Rev. 6:12). All of these signs would mark the end of the 1260 years of persecution.

1. The witness of the earth. In fulfillment of this prophecy "the largest known earthquake;¹ occurred on November 1, 1755. Known as the Lisbon earthquake, its effects were observed in Europe, Africa, and America, covering an area of about four million square miles. Its destruction centered on Lisbon, Portugal, where, in a matter of minutes, it leveled public and residential buildings, causing scores of thousands of deaths.²

While the earthquake's physical effects were large, its impact on the thought of the time was just as significant. Many living then recognized it as a prophetic sign of the end³ and began to give serious consideration to the judgment of God and the last days. The Lisbon earthquake gave an impetus to the study of prophecy.

2. The witness of the sun and moon. Twenty-five years later the next sign mentioned in prophecy took place—the darkening of the sun and moon. Christ had pointed out the time of the fulfillment of this sign, noting that it was to follow the great tribulation—the 1260 years of papal persecution spoken of elsewhere in Scripture (Matt. 24:29—see chapter 13 of this book). But Christ said that the tribulation that was to precede these signs would be shortened (Matt. 24:21, 22). Through the influence of the Reformation and the movements that grew out of it, the papal persecution was indeed shortened, so that by the middle of the eighteenth century it had almost wholly ceased.

In fulfillment of this prophecy on May 19, 1780, an extraordinary darkness descended upon the northeastern part of the North American continent.⁴

Recalling this event, Timothy Dwight, president of Yale University, said, "The 19th of May, 1780, was a remarkable day. Candles were lighted in many houses; the birds were silent and disappeared, and the fowls retired to roost.... A very general opinion prevailed, that the day of judgment was at hand."⁵

¹ G. I. Eiby, *Earthquakes* (New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1980), p. 164

² See, e.g., Sir Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology* (Philadelphia: James Kay, Jun. & Brother; 1837), vol. 1, pp. 416-419; "Lisbon," *Encyclopedia Americana*, ed. Francis Lieber (Philadelphia, PA: Carey and Lea, 1831), p. 10; W. H. Hobbs, *Earthquakes*, (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1907), p. 143; Thomas Hunter, *An Historical Account of Earthquakes Extracted from the Most Authentic Historians* (Liverpool: R. Williamson, 1756), pp.54-90;cf. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 304, 305. Early reports mentioned 100,000 dead. Modern encyclopedias may give 60,000.

³ See John Biddolf, *A Peom on the Earthquake at Lisbon* (London: W. Owen, 1755), p. 9 quoted in *Source Book*, p. 358; Froom, *Prophetic Faith on Our Fathers*, vol.2, pp. 674-677. On February 6, 1756, the Anglican Church held a day of fasting and humiliation in memory of this earthquake (*ibid*). See also T. D. Kendrick, *The Lisbon Earthquake* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1955), pp. 72-164.

⁴ Cf. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 306-308.

⁵ Timothy Dwight, quoted in *Connecticut Historical Collections*, comp. John W. Barber, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Durrie & Peck and J. W. Barber, 1836), p. 403; cited in *Source Book*, p. 316.

Samuel Williams of Harvard reported that the darkness "approached with the clouds from the southwest 'between the hours of 10:00 and 11:00 A.M., and continued until the middle of the next night,' varying in degree and duration in different localities. In some places 'persons could not see to read common print in the open air:'"⁶ In Samuel Tenny's opinion "the darkness of *the following evening* was probably as gross as ever has been observed since the Almighty fiat gave birth to light.... If every luminous body in the universe had been shrouded in impenetrable shades, or struck out of existence, the darkness could not have been more complete."⁷

At 9:00 that night a full moon rose, but the darkness persisted until after midnight. When the moon became visible, it had the appearance of blood.

John the Revelator had prophesied the extraordinary events of that day.

After the earthquake, he wrote, the sun would become "black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon... like blood" (Rev. 6:12).

3. *The witness of the stars.* Both Christ and John had also spoken about a falling of the stars that would indicate that Christ's coming was near (Rev. 6:13; cf. Matt. 24:29). The great meteoric shower of November 13, 1833—the most extensive display of falling stars on record—fulfilled this prophecy. It was estimated that a single observer could see an average of 60,000 meteors per hour.⁸ It was seen from Canada to Mexico and from the mid-Atlantic to the Pacific,⁹ many Christians recognizing in it the fulfillment of the Bible prophecy.¹⁰

An eyewitness said that "there was scarcely a space in the firmament which was not filled at every instant with these falling stars, nor on it, could you in general perceive any particular difference, in appearance; still at times they would shower down in groups—calling to mind the 'fig tree, casting her untimely figs when shaken by a mighty wind.'"¹¹

Christ gave these signs to alert Christians to the nearness of His coming so that they might rejoice in their expectation and be fully prepared for it. "Now when these things begin to happen," He said, "look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near:" He added, "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. When they are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you, likewise, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near" (Luke 21:28-31).

This unique witness of earth, sun, moon, and stars, which came in the precise sequence and at the time Christ had predicted, directed the attention of many toward the prophecies of the Second Advent.

⁶ Samuel Williams, "An Account of a Very Uncommon Darkness in the State of New England, May 19, 1780," in *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences: to the End of the Year 1783* (Boston, Ma: Admas and Nourse, 1785, vol. 1, pp. 234, 235. Cf. *Source Book*, p. 315

⁷ Letter of Samuel Tenny, Exeter, (NH), Dec. 1785, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society for the Year 1792* (Boston, MA: Belknap and Hall, 1792), vol. 1 p. 97.

⁸ Peter M. Millman, "The Falling in the Stars," *The Telescope*, 7 (May-June, 1940, p. 60). See also Froom, *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, vol. 4, p. 295.

⁹ Dennison Olmsted, *Letters on Astronomy*, 1840 ed., pp. 348,349, in *Source Book*, pp. 410, 411.

¹⁰ Froom, *Prophetic Faith of Our Father's*, vol. 4, pp. 297-300; cf. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 333, 334.

¹¹ Phenomena as observed at Bowling Green, Missouri, reported in the *Salt River Journal*, Nov. 20, 1780 as quoted in *American Journal of Science and Arts*, ed., Benjamin Silliman, 25 (1834): p. 382.