

Signs of the times

We believe the Bible gives signs of the imminent return of Jesus Christ.



According to the "State of the World Atlas", during 1994 there were 32 major armed-conflicts around the world. A recent editorial in Time magazine reported there are now more than double this number and most of them are ethnic wars. There are now more conflicts occurring around the world than in any other time in history.

Ethnic conflicts that had been repressed by the heavy-handed Soviet government suddenly erupted when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Many experts consider this as a major threat to world peace and security. These former Soviet Republics hold large stockpiles of nuclear and conventional weapons which they can now use in their own ethnic battles or sell to other countries to raise badly needed capital.

One general even stated: "We are convinced that the continuing existence of nuclear weapons in the armories of nuclear powers, and the ever present threat of acquisition of these weapons by others represent a clear and present danger to the very existence of humanity".

In Matthew chapter 24, Jesus was asked by His disciples what would be the sign of His coming and the end of the world. For nearly two thousand years people have awaited the Second Advent of Jesus Christ and now, with the new millennium rapidly approaching, the same questions are being asked with a greater sense of urgency.

While no man knows the day or hour of the Lord's return, Paul writes: "But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness that that day should overtake you as a thief." (1 Thessalonians 5:1-4).

In this context, the Greek word for "travail" is *odin* and refers to the anguish and dire calamities preceding the coming of the Messiah being like the pain of childbirth or birthpangs. As with labour pains, the signs relating to the return of Jesus Christ will increase in frequency and intensity.

This article will briefly consider some of these signs.

"And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: ... For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom:"
(Matthew 24:6,7).

In this verse, the Greek word for "nation" is *ethnos* and is the origin of the English word "ethnic". The word translated "kingdom" describes a realm of political and military influence or country. Jesus' statement therefore, describes an increase in both ethnic (civil wars) and international wars.

"...and there shall be famines..."
(Matthew 24:7).

According to the World Food and Agricultural Organisation, 60 million people currently die of starvation every year. 40,000 children die of starvation each day.

The two major factors influencing the ability of the world's food production to be sufficient to avoid famines are population growth (that is, demand) and climatic conditions (that is, supply).

The Bureau of Census World Population Profile conducted in 1996 concluded the world's population doubled between 1960 and 1995 and will increase from its present level to about 8 billion people over the next quarter century.

The El Niño effect is described as, "the most powerful force driving global weather patterns." Earlier this year north-eastern Australia, South Africa, Ethiopia, India and Indonesia suffered severe droughts. Hurricanes, floods, tsunamis and mudslides struck many countries. The Greenhouse effect and global warming is also taking its toll with this year being the hottest ever recorded.

Consequently, grain harvests are not keeping up with world population growth. There is a wheat crisis developing throughout the world. Where once over 2 billion bushels were held in reserve there are now less than 300 million.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) say that the world's agricultural output must expand 75% to keep up with demand through the year 2025.

In reality, the grain harvest since 1990 has increased less than 3%. FAO predict that the world is heading for such a food crisis that by the turn of the century as many as 300 million people a year may be dying of starvation. This represents an increase of 400% on current figures.

"...and pestilences..."
(Matthew 24:7).

The Greek word here for "pestilences" is *laimos* and indicates a "plague" or "disease."

The medical world now possesses more information about infectious diseases than in any other time in history. With the introduction of immunisations and better drugs, it was thought that many infectious diseases, particularly in the industrialized world, were under control. As a result, scientists confidently predicted the demise of infectious diseases.

This has not been the case. Infectious diseases have not only refused to go away but the latest data shows they have increased in the United States by 58% since 1980, and it is far worse throughout the rest of the world.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), infectious diseases remain the leading cause of death worldwide.

In the United States alone, each year, approximately 25% of visits to physicians are attributable to infectious diseases, with direct and indirect costs estimated at more than US\$120 billion.

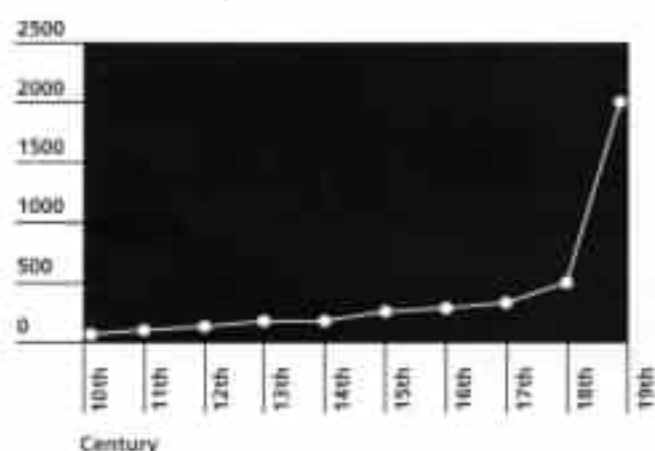
Cholera, tuberculosis, malaria, diphtheria and bubonic plague were once considered to be under control in many parts of the world. Following an absence of nearly a century, levels of infection have all increased dramatically in the past five years, infecting more than 280 million people.

New strains of bacteria resistant to common antibiotics represent the most serious threat to the global medical community for the near future. "The problem is getting out of hand and the implications are devastating," said a spokesman for WHO. "It is costing billions each year to keep drug-resistant strains under control and one is seeing resistance in all manner of diseases. For some there is no effective treatment."

For the second consecutive year, AIDS was the leading cause of death among Americans 25 to 44 years old, according to the Centres for Disease Control. In Paris, AIDS accounted for 40% of all deaths of males between the ages of 25 and 40.

The AIDS virus has now mutated producing strains which are more readily transmitted. If these new strains continue to spread at their current rate WHO projects there will be some 110 million adults and 10 million children infected by the year 2000. In the World Health Organisation's own words: "AIDS is spiralling out of control."

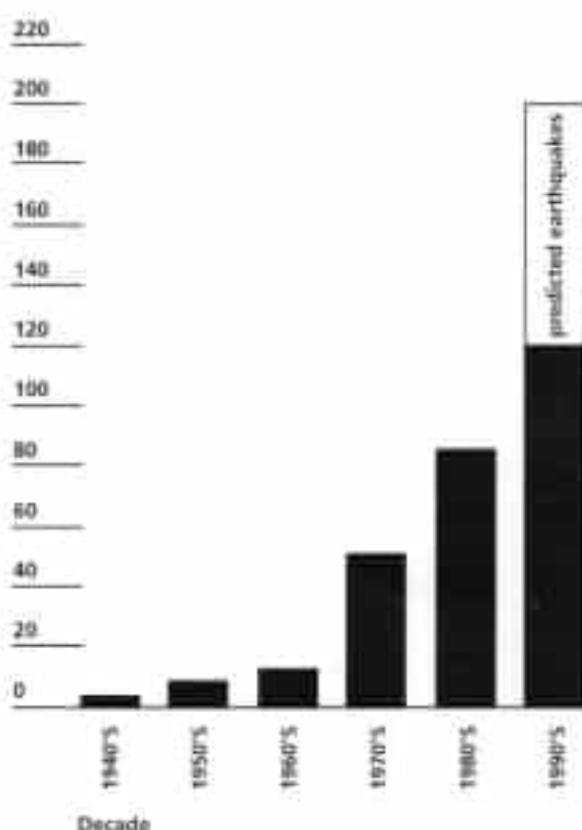
Number of earthquakes



"...and earthquakes, in divers places..."
(Matthew 24:7).

The top graph illustrates total recorded seismic energy since the 10th century. As can be seen the number of earthquakes through to the 16th century remains relatively stable. From the 17th to 19th centuries, the line dramatically shoots up into an almost vertical climb with a greater number of earthquakes in the 19th century than in all preceding centuries combined.

Number of earthquakes over 6.0



The bottom graph comes from the Los Angeles Herald Examiner's figures and shows the number of earthquakes 6.0 or greater on the Richter scale since the 1940's. The trend indicates that the completion of this decade will see more than double the number of earthquakes greater than 6.0 on the Richter scale than the 1980's.

Jesus spoke about "earthquakes, in divers places". The word "divers" indicates these earthquakes would occur in a variety of places and this is exactly what is happening around the globe.

"...and knowledge shall be increased."
(Daniel 12:4).

There is no doubt we are living in "The Information Age." In our generation, knowledge has increased at a rate never imagined by our forefathers. Eighty percent of all the scientists who have ever lived are alive and working today. The United States' Library of Congress requires more than 300 kilometres of new bookshelves every year just to accommodate all the new publications.

The total accumulated knowledge of mankind is doubling every two years. This means, that of all of the current accumulated knowledge of man, half of it came from the time of the Garden of Eden to just two years ago, and the other half since then.

Our age is a time of unprecedented invention, space exploration, medical advancement, international travel and, above all, the development and use of the microchip.

Today's personal computers are far more powerful than the "super computers" that put man on the moon. The essential trend is the speed of computer microprocessors that are now doubling every 18 months and soon that is going to be down to every 9 months or less.

In the area of telecommunications, networks are now utilising fibre optic cables. The term "cable" is misleading, as one of these "cables" is approximately the width of a human hair. Fibre optics has already passed a threshold where they are able to transmit one trillion bits of data through one of these hair-like cables in one second. Theoretically however, there is almost no limit to the capacity of this medium.

To put this increase in the volume of data transmission into perspective, imagine filling a swimming pool with water either using an ordinary garden hose or placing the pool under Niagara Falls. This represents the enormous difference between the capacity of current computer modems and fibre optics.

As another illustration, you could send the information from 300 years worth of daily New York Times newspapers, that is, every picture and every letter of text, through a fibre optic cable in one second.

Driving the need for these developments in information processing is the rapid expansion and demand for accessing the Internet. A few years ago, this was only used by the US Military, major corporations and universities to connect their mainframe computers together. Now millions of people all over the world are "surfing the net". Trends indicate that by the year 2005, more than 1 billion people all over the world will be "on-line".

The ability to purchase goods and services from anywhere in the world at the click of a button and have them delivered to your house is changing the very nature of society.

In a recent development, Japanese researchers implanted a computer chip in the head of a cockroach and were able to control the roach's motion. They said they could use the roach to get to earthquake victims and then transmit back information via a micro-miniature camera.

Researchers are also implanting computer chips in humans as well. If this sounds like science fiction, consider that only a few years ago the concept of cloning was considered impossible. However, the world has since witnessed the cloning of several animals.

In New Zealand, researchers are trying to recreate a bird that has been extinct for 400 years. They are injecting DNA from bones of the extinct Moa bird into ostrich eggs - shades of Jurassic Park!

Many other aspects could have been considered - the breakdown in the whole moral fibre of society (2 Timothy 3:1-5), the rise of many false religions (Matthew 24:11), Jerusalem and the Middle East to be the focus of world politics (Zechariah 12:2,3).

Jesus began to conclude His remarks on the signs of the times by saying: "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come." (Matthew 24: 14).

Peter, when he spoke of the signs of the times (Acts 2) was asked for a clear direction on what one should do to be saved. He said, "...Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call. And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation."

This is the only way of escape from the destruction that is to come.