

FROM THE MINISTRY OF



THRU the BIBLE

RIGHT ON TIME

EXPECTING JESUS,
THEN AND NOW

DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

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EXPECTING JESUS, THEN AND NOW

God blazed a trail down through history in such a definite way through the Old Testament prophecies pointing to the birth of Christ, that when Jesus Christ finally did come, the people should have known who He was. God made it clear that this One who was coming would be born of a woman; that is, God would take upon Himself human flesh and be born into the human family. God also made it clear that He would follow a *certain* family line leading to the Messiah. In Genesis you find that line almost immediately, from Adam to Abraham, then down through the centuries to David, the young son of Jesse who was tending his father's sheep when God appointed him His king over Israel. God promised David that from his line would come the Messiah, the Deliverer, the one who would restore to this earth that which Adam lost. Then He made it very definite that the Messiah couldn't be just anyone in the line of David. It had to be one who was virgin born.

God established, not the date, but the time in which the Messiah would come as well as the place where He would be born. May I say, you can't add much more than that. There were enough points of identification that people should have recognized Him when He came.

So, why didn't they? God's people had the Scriptures and were in the same place people are in today; that is, a state of unbelief. Did you know the majority of churches reject the Second Coming of Christ? They have absolutely turned aside from the clear teaching of Scripture, so if He did make His appearance and were to come in a manner like He came before, do you think the world would accept Him? Of course it wouldn't. They are not looking for Him to come again at all. Peter wrote:

... Scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." –2 Peter 3:3, 4

The world just doesn't believe in Christ's return. By and large, the church is also in a state of unbelief relative to the Second Coming of Christ.

This was also the position of the Jews before Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. They had the Old Testament, but they just didn't believe it. I am amazed at their unbelief, considering they knew the Scriptures as well as they did. According to Matthew's record, the scribes of Israel knew the place where Jesus was to be born, but you could never have convinced them that in that miserable stable, probably only a cave, lay a little newborn boy who was to be the Savior of the world! And after a time, when the wise men came, the scribes were not even interested in going with them to see what had really happened down there in Bethlehem. They didn't believe. That's the reason they didn't go. If they thought their Messiah could actually have been born down in Bethlehem, they would have gone immediately. But they absolutely didn't believe it.

My friend, let me repeat: In our day, the world has almost totally rejected the concept that the Lord Jesus is coming again. They, too, don't believe.

We're going to see something now that is very strange. I'm going to lift out of the book of Daniel one verse in the "Seventy Weeks" section to show you something:

And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary –Daniel 9:26

Here we're told, in no uncertain terms, that after 62 weeks the Messiah is to be cut off—meaning, to suffer the death penalty. According to a little book titled *The Coming Prince*, by Sir Robert Anderson, which I consider to be one of the finest books on the seventy weeks of Daniel, 62 weeks or 434 years brings us to the triumphal entry into Jerusalem by Jesus the Messiah. I don't want to go into all the ramifications of the mathematics in this, but briefly, Anderson says that from the first of the month Nisan (451 B.C.) to the tenth of Nisan (April 6, 32 A.D.) is 173,880 days. He divides them according to the Jewish year of 360 days, arriving at 483 years (69 sevens). Jesus rode into Jerusalem, offering Himself for the first time publicly and officially as the Messiah—on the very day that Daniel said He would come.

Now the Jews knew that the Lord could never present Himself as the Messiah until He was at least 30 years of age. So even though they knew Daniel's prophecy concerning the times, I'm not saying they should have been down at Bethlehem waiting outside of the inn for news of His birth. However, they should have known He would be born in that general period of time—not a thousand years later, nor a hundred years earlier. They knew Messiah's birth would fit into God's program in that particular time slot. When the wise men appeared out of the East, they certainly alerted old Herod, and it should also have alerted these scribes. They should have said, "Yes, our Scriptures not only tell where He is to be born, but they also give us some conception of

when He is to be born!” They should have been interested enough to at least go check it out and see about this baby who was born in Bethlehem. But as far as the record is concerned, those knowledgeable, complacent religious rulers did not take one step toward Bethlehem. They did not believe it at all!

There was, however, among the common people of Israel a note of expectancy. This passage from D. S. Gregory’s wonderful little book, *The Key to the Gospels or Why Four Gospels?* has always been very interesting to me:

That there was a like expectancy throughout the heathen world, of some deliverer or ruler to come forth from Judaea, is equally clear. It was thus that the magi came, at the right hour, inquiring at Jerusalem after the new-born King of the Jews. Suetonius relates that “an ancient and definite expectation” had spread throughout the East, that a ruler of the world would, about that time, arise in Judaea. Tacitus, the Roman historian, makes a similar statement. Schlegel mentions that the Buddhist missionaries traveling to China met Chinese sages going to seek the Messiah about 33 A.D.

Notice there had spread throughout the heathen world in that day an air of expectancy. They couldn’t always pin it down—they didn’t have the Scriptures—but there was an expectancy. The Roman Empire at that time was at its lowest ebb as far as morals are concerned. Lawlessness abounded, and throughout the pagan, heathen world there seemed to be no hope. Slavery had bound men’s souls, but in spite of all that, there was an expectancy that there was coming to this earth a Deliverer!

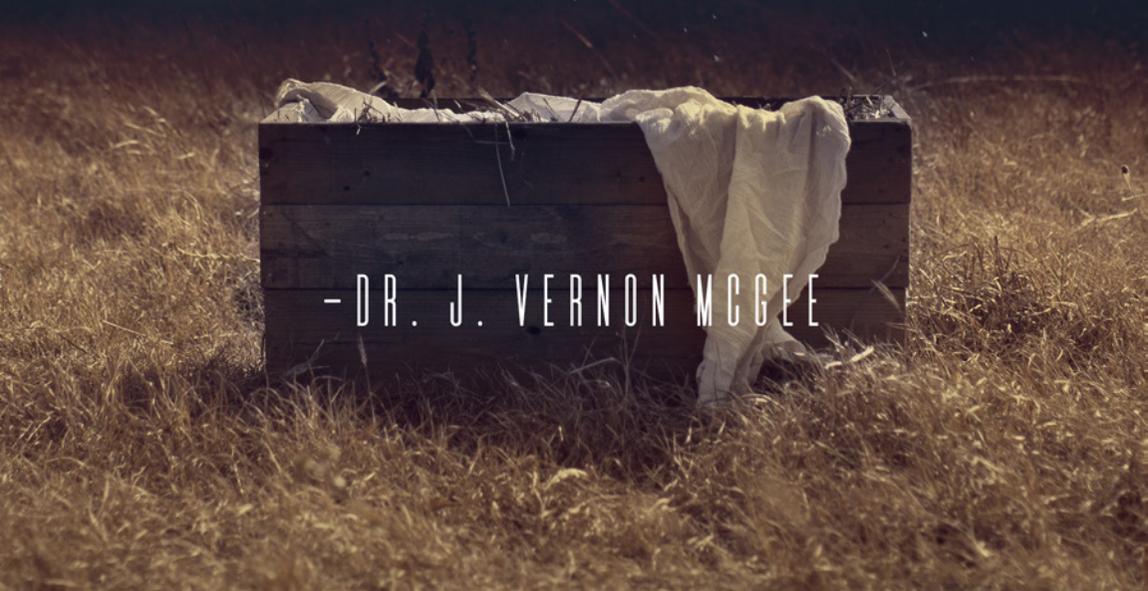
In Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, it was written:

“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts. –Malachi 3:1



*God arranged
it all.*

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And then John the Baptist made the memorable announcement that he was the forerunner:

Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" He said: "I am 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the LORD," as the prophet said." ... Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God!"—John 1:22, 23; 35, 36

In other words, John was saying, *"I'm preparing a highway for the Messiah. This is the one who is to be the Savior of the world, the one who is to be the Ruler of this earth."* So, you see that among the religious hierarchy there should have been more of a concern.

I believe, frankly, that at His coming again this "blessed hope"—that is, the confidence in Jesus' return—will practically have died out, as far as the church is concerned. Remember that our Lord made this statement:

"... Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith [meaning the whole body of revealed truth] on the earth?"
—Luke 18:8

In the Greek language, a question can be so worded that it demands a negative answer. And in this question, "When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" the answer has to be no, He will not find the faith on the earth.

Today apostasy is increasing by leaps and bounds. Frankly, I'm amazed at what I've seen in my lifetime. From the beginning of my ministry, I've preached that the apostasy is coming, but candidly, I never thought I'd live to see it. I certainly never thought I'd see a movement in seminaries announcing that God is dead. I am told that in Europe there is not a seminary nor a reputable theologian that believes in the inspiration of the Scriptures. And did you know that in this country you probably can count on the fingers of one hand the seminaries that are

teaching the inspiration of the Scriptures? Christendom is today almost in total apostasy with a repudiation of all these precious truths of Scripture. I think we are moving into that orbit which could bring the Lord back to this earth to take out His church at any time. Oh, there will be a few believers—there were a few looking for Him at His first coming. There was Anna, Simeon, the wise men, the shepherds, and probably a few more. Likewise, there will be very few believers when Christ takes His church out, I'm convinced of that.

We have before us now another remarkable prophecy. This is probably one of the most familiar of Christmas prophecies.

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.”—Micah 5:2

Frankly, I used to be disturbed by the phrase, “among the thousands of Judah.” That’s a whole lot of places, and Judah is not the biggest place in the world. But if you were to fly over that land by plane, you would see what it means. A town in that day is more accurately what we today call a crossroads. I remember when I was a boy going down to the crossroads. There’d be just a couple of stores there. I’ve lived in many little towns, and every five miles or so you’d have that kind of situation. Even today in Israel you find one small community after another. In fact, you can be on one hill and look right over to another little place, then you turn around and see another and another—just settlements, probably not more than 20 people who live in each one. In Judah there were thousands of places where He could have been born, but Bethlehem was chosen.

The remarkable thing about Micah’s prophecy is not that Bethlehem was chosen as the place for His birth. After all, that was David’s town, the place where he had been born and raised.

If any place were picked for Messiah's birth, you would expect it to be Bethlehem since He was to be in the line of David. The remarkable thing is that our Lord was actually born there.

How could He be born in Bethlehem? Look at the situation. To begin with, when Micah (who was contemporary with Isaiah) wrote this prophecy, it was around 700 B.C. Seven hundred years before Jesus came, Micah said, "*If you want to know where to look for Him, don't look in Jerusalem or Hebron or up at Nazareth. He won't be born there. He's going to be born in Bethlehem.*"

During the intervening years, Nebuchadnezzar had come, invaded Israel, destroyed Jerusalem, and carried away the royal family into captivity. They never did return as a royal house. In view of that fact, the prophet Isaiah was very careful when he wrote this prophecy concerning Christ's first coming:

There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. –Isaiah 11:1

Why "from the stem of Jesse," David's father, since the royal line began with David himself? Because when Christ came 700 years after Isaiah, the royal line was back to the level of the peasant, like Jesse who was a farmer. Mary was only a peasant girl from Nazareth, and Joseph was a carpenter. The royal family was back among the peasants when the Lord Jesus came. The Messiah is a Rod and Branch out of Jesse, if you please.

Now those 70 years of captivity in Babylon go by. The royal family is well scattered. And when they finally return to their land, they don't go back to the hometown—they are not permitted to do that. The Samaritans are in their land now. (The Jewish people had the same problem they're having today—they couldn't get their land back like it was before.) So one segment of the royal family, of which both Joseph and Mary were descendants, went up north to Nazareth instead of to Bethlehem, which is south of Jerusalem.

So here is the royal family living in Nazareth. They are peasants—no longer do they attempt any claim to the throne—and the time has come for Messiah to be born.

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law. –Galatians 4:4

But wait a minute. Mary is up yonder in Nazareth! That is where the angel appeared to her. Did the angel tell Mary, “You’ve got to get down to Bethlehem”? No, he didn’t say anything about it. Yet Micah had said He was to be born in Bethlehem. If you had been there, perhaps you would have said to Mary, “If you don’t get down to Bethlehem soon, you’re going to make Micah look like a false prophet.” If you had spoken to Mary like that, she probably would have told you, “I have no notion of going to Bethlehem at all.”

But you see, God was moving. Way over yonder in Rome, I can see Caesar Augustus walking with his military advisers and his political economists at his ranch in southern Italy. To these fellows he says, “We have to raise more money!” They were carrying on a war over in what is now called Europe, and he needed funds. One of the economists says, “The only thing to do is tax the people. That’s the way you raise money.” You know, there’s nothing new under the sun. The advice of the smart government economists today is “tax the people,” and that’s what they did back in Caesar Augustus’ day. So they plan their strategy. They say to him, “Now, Caesar Augustus, you must sign a bill that the whole Roman Empire is to be taxed in order to raise money for your military expeditions.” They bring him the tax bill, he signs it, and it goes into law. Throughout the Roman Empire go the riders and the couriers and the ships, carrying the word that every man must go to his own city to be enrolled because he’s going to be taxed. It’s the same old story, isn’t it? The people have got to be taxed.

Both Mary and Joseph happen to belong to the family of David. They both will have to go down to Bethlehem to be enrolled. But something had happened. The angel had appeared to Mary and told her she was to have a child, and at this time Mary’s

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pregnancy is near term. Joseph knows it will be a dangerous trip for both Mary and the child. But they don't have a choice, and so they go to Bethlehem.

Had you been over in Rome, knowing what you know today, you might have looked over the shoulder of Caesar Augustus as he was signing the bill into law and said to him, "Did you know you are nothing in the world but a puppet in the hands of Almighty God? When you sign that tax bill, you will move a woman down to Bethlehem in order that a prophecy given by God 700 years ago might be fulfilled!" Old Caesar Augustus would have turned around and laughed at you, saying, "You must be a religious fanatic to believe a thing like that! I'm no puppet in the hands of God. I need money, and I'm signing this bill so our coffers will be filled." Yes, but in doing so he fulfilled the prophecy.

Then we see Mary and Joseph making their way down to Bethlehem. And, friend, it was a hard trip in that day. It wasn't like taking a jet across the country. It meant lurching back and forth all the way on a little donkey. And that terrain from Nazareth to Bethlehem is rugged—uphill, downhill, and through the valley they go. They reach Bethlehem just in time. There's no room for them in the inn, but there's a stable available, probably only a cave. Frankly, if there had been space for them in the inn, they would not have had a private room like our motels provide today. The inns had one big public room, and Joseph would have had to pay for a little space to put down their own pallet. Jesus would have been born before a leering, crude crowd, had there been room in the inn. But God arranged it all. Clean straw is better than an unclean crowd any day.

So back in a private stable, this wonderful baby is born. And the prophecy is fulfilled that "...you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2). May I say to you again, the fact that the prophecy pinpointed

Bethlehem as the place for His birth is not remarkable. The fact that He actually was born there is remarkable. Under the existing circumstances of that day, it never would have happened. But God was overriding and overruling every move.

This has a tremendous lesson for us today. As I look about the city in which I live, it does seem that God is very much in the shadows, and no doubt this is true about your town also. If you go to our nation's capital, it doesn't look like He is making many decisions there. And if you go to the United Nations, it doesn't look as if God is very busy there, either. But I believe if you and I could see what the powers of heaven are doing right now, we would absolutely be startled. We would be amazed and thrilled to know what God is doing in this world, how He is moving the machinery of this earth to accomplish His purposes.

It ought to be a great comfort to the child of God to realize that God is still on the throne. Remember that the psalmist says, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise You; with the remainder of wrath You shall gird Yourself" (Psalm 76:10). The wrath that won't praise Him—this is interesting—He will put around Himself like a belt. Even the wrath of man has to praise God today. It's a great comfort to go through this world knowing that God is still on the throne, and we can trust Him.

Now I do not want to be irreverent, but frankly, if I were God I would move in on this thing and let the world know who I am. But the interesting thing is, God can afford to wait. You see, He has an eternity ahead of Him.

I remember when Hitler set his sights on Great Britain, and in time it seemed that Great Britain would fall to him. It even appeared that he had won. It looked very dark right then. We would hear Hitler's speeches on the radio, and he sounded like a madman—and I think he was. I remember going to a Presbyterian meeting in Weatherford, Texas, when a retired preacher rose to his feet and with all the feeling he could muster said, "God will stop Hitler when He gets ready! He can go only so far!" And the man put so much vehemence in it that three fellows sitting there

had to catch him to keep him from falling. God did stop Hitler. God also stopped Mussolini, with all his ranting. May I say to you, God today is moving in the affairs of the world.

Caesar Augustus, one of the greatest of the Caesars, actually was not born a Caesar but was the adopted son of the great Julius Caesar. His name was Octavius, and Augustus was his title. The word “augustus” carries with it a religious connotation. It actually means “one whom you worship.” So it was that Caesar Augustus signed the tax bill, a man who declared that he himself was God. But history has demonstrated that he wasn’t anything in the world but a little puppet in the hands of Almighty God, accomplishing His purpose in bringing the Messiah into the world. I repeat, God today is moving in the affairs of this world.

All of the prophets spoke of both the first and second comings of Christ. There is no exception to this. Peter says they saw the sufferings and the glory that should follow, yet they never made the distinction between the two.

Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. –1 Peter 1:10, 11

The prophets desired to look into these things because it looked very strange to see a Messiah who was going to die on a cross (and Isaiah spoke of that) and at the same time was going to rule on the earth. How could He do both?

Well, in Isaiah 61 we find a prophecy that shows His first coming and His second coming. And the Lord Jesus Christ gives us the interpretation of this passage, as we shall see. Now will you note carefully this important prophecy:

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and

the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.” –Isaiah 61:1-3

This is a remarkable prophecy, but it is also strange. Here is one who says He is going to bind up the brokenhearted, He is going to preach good tidings, and then it says He is going to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. But immediately He adds “and the day of vengeance of our God.” How can you have both of those? How can He bring liberty and blessing to the earth while at the same time the vengeance of God is being wrought? How can both of those be true?

The Lord Jesus Himself gave us the interpretation. To me, it’s one of the most remarkable interpretations of Scripture we have, and it took place the last time the Lord Jesus spoke in His own hometown of Nazareth:

So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written [Isaiah 61:1-3]: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.” Then He closed the book.... –Luke 4:16-20

He closed the book at that point. And I say, “Wait a minute. What do You mean by closing the book there? You didn’t even finish the sentence!” Jesus was reading, of course, from the Hebrew text which has instead of a period the word “and”—certainly implying there is more to follow. But that connecting “and” is already almost 2000 years long.

Then He [Jesus] closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." –Luke 4:20, 21

This is startling, friend. Note what He is saying to these folk here in His hometown where He had been brought up. He read the prophet's words from Isaiah 61 and applied them to Himself! And He said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me." In other words, "I am called to do this thing. I have come to bring deliverance. I am the Messiah."

"You mean You are the one?" they're thinking, and they turn to each other asking, "Isn't this Joseph's son? What is He talking like this for?" He said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." It was fulfilled right up to that little word "and."

Why didn't He keep reading? Well, the reason He didn't keep reading beyond this point is obvious if you look back at Isaiah 61, where the sentence continues, "And the day of vengeance of our God..." That day of vengeance had not come. But it will come when Jesus returns the second time to the earth to put down unrighteousness. Do you see where He stopped? Isaiah had put both comings of Jesus together, and he didn't even divide them with a period. He just bunched them together. Now Jesus Himself came along, and He said in effect, "I stopped right there because up to this point it has been fulfilled." That which follows has had to wait; it is to be fulfilled when He comes the second time to this earth. Let me read again from Isaiah 61:

"To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified." –Isaiah 61:2, 3

Now one or two questions may arise in your mind. One is that it says after “the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn.” Who are those who are mourning in that day when He comes? They are those who are His own. They’re being severely persecuted here on earth. It’s the Great Tribulation Period, and they’re having a very rough time. It’s the day of vengeance of our God upon His enemies, and He’s now come to comfort those who mourn.

Wait a minute, that’s not all. He came the first time to fulfill the first part of this prophecy. No time period is given for His return. Approximately 2000 years have gone by, and He’s not back yet. But He is coming, and the rest of this is yet to be fulfilled.

Does that tell you anything? It tells me that the latter part of this prophecy is also going to be literally fulfilled when He comes the second time. All of this that we’ve looked at—Daniel’s prophecy of the Seventy Weeks foretelling the time slot of His first coming, Micah’s prophecy that He’d be born in Bethlehem—these prophecies were literally fulfilled at His first coming. Therefore, everything that relates to His second coming, as I interpret it, will be fulfilled literally: The Lord Jesus will come to this earth in person, and He will establish His kingdom on this earth. Let me ask, Christian friend, if these prophecies having to do with His first coming were fulfilled literally when He came the first time, doesn’t that tell you that those prophecies which have to do with His second coming to this earth are also to be fulfilled literally? I do not see how you could interpret Scripture logically in any other way.

Now, these messages were given by God to the prophets with no distinction made between Christ’s first and His second advent. As Peter says, they desired to look into them—they saw Messiah’s sufferings right along with the glory that was to follow.

I don’t know of a better illustration than this: Just north of Pasadena, California, where I live is a range of mountains. On a clear day you can see Mount Wilson and Mount Waterman. Those two peaks look like they are together. From Pasadena, you can’t see that there is a wide valley between them, but it’s there.

Likewise, from where Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Micah, and all of the prophets stood hundreds of years before Jesus came, they saw two “mountain peaks.” They saw the mountain peak of His first coming and the mountain peak of His second coming, and the two looked as if they were right together. But when our Lord got here, He gave us the key of interpretation. He read the prophecy to us, pulled it apart, and He said, *“This part is fulfilled today, right before you.”*

The other part is yet to be fulfilled, and there’s a big valley between. It has already been about 2000 years, and I don’t know how much longer it will be. But may I say, I believe we have come into that orbit where we can expect God to do something. If revival does not come, I’m confident we can expect a direct action from Almighty God.

In the day when He came to the stable in Bethlehem, there was an aura of expectancy among some people that there was coming a messiah, a deliverer. But the Roman world, the civilized world of that day, was absolutely dead spiritually. The interesting thing is that the religious world, right there in Jerusalem, was as dead as the secular world—they were not looking for Him. Even in Bethlehem, the little town named by the prophet Micah as the birthplace of Messiah, did not expect Him at all.

We see that same situation about us at the present hour. Very few folk—even Christians—are looking for Him. One of these days He will break through the blue. He said He would return at a time when “you do not know” (Mark 13:35).

Oh, my friend, let’s remember that He is going to come again, and let’s be on the alert. Paul wrote to the Romans, “...it is high time to awake out of sleep” (Romans 13:11). Let’s be alert, for He is coming. This is the hour for God’s people to be spiritually awake and aware of the fact that He may come at any moment. In view of His imminent return, it ought to draw us closer to Him personally. I’m convinced that if we could get our affections fixed on Him, center our focus upon the person of Jesus Christ, it

would revolutionize our own personal lives. And I think it would revolutionize the church today. We need to see that happen in the difficult days that lie ahead of us.

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a park-like setting.

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