

The Signs of the Times:

Part 1—Assessing the Signs

By PAUL J. SCHARF

If you work in a retail environment, you've already seen them—maybe as early as July, but certainly in August. Yes, you've seen the signs!

I am referring, of course, to the *signs of Christmas*.¹ They're all around you by now.

It started with the arrival of lots of new merchandise—more than you knew what to do with. And soon that gave way to ... even more! By now, it feels like there's nowhere left in the warehouse to put even one more box. Maybe you've even started building Santa's house. The ol' gent is sure to be arriving soon. How else could we expect him to have time to travel to every store in the United States?

No—at this point in the year, when it's just beginning to feel like fall, you've already seen so much of Christmas that, truth be told, you're secretly getting kind of tired of it. But, hang in there, a respite is coming—and those signs are here too. Before the final, overwhelming push toward Christmas, our culture pauses to celebrate another favorite religious holiday: Halloween.

After that, it's a straight line through the snow—led by reindeer—directly toward Christmas! And you're watching the signs unfolding now—right before your eyes.

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In Matthew 16:1-3, Jesus chided first-century religious leaders who displayed great interest in their physical environment—while at the same time failing to observe the obvious in terms of spiritual conditions, which entailed prophetic implications for the world:

Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, "When it is evening you say, '*It will be fair weather, for the sky is red*'; and in the morning, '*It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening*.' Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot *discern* the signs of the times."

To what was Jesus referring with this concept of "the signs of the times"? Notice that they stand in contrast to the request for "a sign from heaven" (v. 1)—presumably another *sign miracle*, of which He had performed scores, showing Himself to be the Messiah and King of Israel (John 20:30; see also Isa. 35:5-6; Heb. 6:5).

Jesus, however, preferred to point these men toward "the sign of the prophet Jonah" (v. 4)—in other words, the application of Biblical truth to the phenomena of their "wicked and adulterous generation" (v. 4).

So, what are “the signs of the times”? It would seem to flow from this text that they are temporal events which, when interpreted properly in light of Holy Scripture, provide a foretaste of future prophetic fulfillment. They are not, in themselves, the fulfillment. Rather, they are like light from future prophetic events that glimmers down to our time.

Dr. Ron Rhodes offers this simple definition: “A ‘sign of the times’ is an event of prophetic significance that points to the end times.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This definition keys us into something very important: Biblical prophecy must guide us in measuring whether or not a particular issue is relevant as a *sign of the times*. Thus, we are not reading current events into Bible prophecy (the error of so-called *newspaper exegesis*), but, rather, we are evaluating these events in light of prophetic truth.

Should we really spend our time looking for “the signs of the times”? The church has no specific command to do so—yet neither did “the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Jesus, however, admonished them for their neglect. Why would His directive not continue to apply, especially as His second coming draws so much closer?

We will build on this theme further in the next two installments. I want to conclude now by offering two criteria that may help us to realize when a particular issue genuinely qualifies as a *sign of the times*.

The first is that a certain belief or action is truly unique in history. Numerous examples might be given of such concepts advancing currently. These are notions so outlandish and radical that, if they were even considered before just a few years ago, it was only on the fringes of polite society. Yet, so quickly they have become mainstream—even mandatory for those who wish to function at the highest levels of our putrefying culture.

The second is that such impulses are floated, not simply by one or two outliers in our own limited experience (or even in some rogue nation), but by numerous respected leaders from around the world, who intend them for global consumption.

When we watch a trend that fits both of these descriptions, we should pause and ask ourselves if we are witnessing the launch of a *sign* that prefigures the end-time conditions that Jesus predicted for the world.

We’ll pick this subject up right there next time.

Paul J. Scharf (M.A., M.Div., Faith Baptist Theological Seminary) is a church ministries representative for The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, based in Columbus, WI, and serving in the Midwest. For more information on his ministry, visit sermonaudio.com/pscharf or foi.org/scharf, or email pscharf@foi.org.

ⁱ This classic illustration, which I have modified and will develop over the course of the three installments in this series, has been widely used, and is credited to “the ‘dean’ of Bible prophecy scholars and teachers,” Dr. John Walvoord (John F. Walvoord with Mark Hitchcock, *Armageddon, Oil and Terror* [Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007], p. vii. See the discussion on p. 200 of this book for background to the illustration.). Regarding the illustration specifically, see Ron Rhodes, *End-Times Super Trends* (Eugene, OR; Harvest House Publishers, 2017), p.10; and Thomas Ice, “Signs of the Times;” Pre-Trib Research Center; n.d.; <https://www.pre-trib.org/pretribfiles/pdfs/Ice-SignsoftheTimes.pdf>; p. 2; Internet; accessed 6 October 2022. I have not found a particular source where Walvoord himself put this illustration in print.

ⁱⁱ Rhodes, p. 8.