

“The World Is Coming To An End!”

Stories of the Great Panic of 1524 and Others

On May 21, 2011, the world almost stopped – well, not really. However, that was the day the world was supposed to stop according to a famous American Christian preacher. Of course, May 21 came and went, and so did the millions of dollars his supporters had donated to advertise the end of the world.

“There is nothing new under the sun,” *Shlomo HaMelech* tells us (*Koheles* 1:9), and the recent panic among the preacher’s followers was no exception. Such fears have arisen a number of times in world history. For instance, in 1524 millions of people were so convinced that the world was about to succumb to a deluge that many even built boats and arks to outlast the global flooding. The Great Panic of 1524 is only one of many such strange panics that teach us a lot about human psychology and how gullible people really are.



Dov Levy

On May 21, 2011, thousands of people around the globe awaited the end of the world. They had spent the last months preparing for the fateful day, including relinquishing all of their worldly goods. What use were their possessions when the world was coming to an end?

In case you missed it, the world did *not* come to an end on May 21, 2011.

The source of the rumor was 89-year-old Harold Camping, who had previously prophesied about the world ending on May 21, 1988, and September 7, 1994. Although those predictions failed to materialize, he nevertheless succeeded in convincing countless believers that this third prediction was for real. He swore that he had corrected the faulty calculations and was on target this time.

Camping began his career as the owner of a construction company, not a preacher. Nevertheless, his charisma helped him gain popularity among church members. In 1958, he co-founded a radio station and began preaching religion over the air waves. His programming eventually came to be broadcast on more than 140 stations in the US as well as in places as far away as Nigeria, and his network is reportedly worth more than \$120 million, proving that, if nothing else, Doomsday is good business!

The last two times the world was supposed to come to an end, Camping had used his radio station to give advanced warning to the masses. Not long after the second time the world didn't end, he began preaching about the May 21, 2011 apocalypse, citing "proofs" from the Christian Bible and other sources. First would come earthquakes across the globe the likes of which the world had never seen, followed by the destruction of the world... at 6 PM New York time, from which only a select few would be saved.

His prediction was widely reported and prompted responses from atheists, Christians and everyone in between,

including a lot of sarcastic people in the street. "My husband just informed me that Judgment Day is this Saturday," one lady said. "So, great, another thing I have to fit into my schedule!"

"I really don't have time for the world to end this weekend," said another. "Plus, the weather is supposed to be good."

And another: "With all the 5/21/11 end of the world talk, why am I on a diet??? Ok, if we make it to 5/22 I'm back on the diet."

Camping's followers, on the other hand, took it very seriously. For months before the May 21 deadline, they liquidated their homes and assets and sent in money for the \$100 million campaign to warn the world that the end was at hand. One retired transportation



The world is ending! It's a fact!



Harold Camping at the opening of his first radio station in 1958.

worker donated his entire \$140,000 life savings to help the cause! Notices about the impending event were displayed on cars, trucks and billboards across America.

When the fateful (or, as it turned out, not-so-fateful) day finally arrived, thousands of reporters from around the world converged on Camping's home in Alameda, California, to record the moment. The windows and curtains of the home remained closed. Skeptics worried that any natural phenomenon that occurred on May 21 could be interpreted by Camping's followers as proof of the veracity of his claim and many breathed a sigh of relief when not a single unusual natural occurrence marked that maddeningly typical day.

Indeed, 6 PM came and went and the world continued to turn on its axis.

The following day Camping appeared before reporters to share his astonishment at the fact that his prediction had failed to materialize. He claimed to be genuinely shocked and asked reporters to grant one more day of peace to recalculate what had happened. On May 22, he told reporters that although his predictions had not come true yet in the physical sense, they had occurred on a spiritual plane, and the physical destruction of the universe was rescheduled to commence on October 21, 2011.

Since Camping maintained that his prediction remained true, he announced that he would not refund any of the money he had been sent for his campaign. Nevertheless, the strain (or his conscience) apparently got to him and on June 9 he suffered a stroke. He has since been moved to a skilled-nursing facility where he is undergoing therapy and rehabilitation.

Hopefully, he will be fully recovered for the end of the world in October....

False Prophecies in History

Harold Camping was far from the first to predict the coming of the end. In fact, false

predictions of the apocalypse are nearly as old as the world itself. And the wave of fear that greeted Camping's polemics was child's play compared to what has occurred on past occasions, in times when people were more vulnerable to fall sway to dreamers and lunatics alike who declared themselves prophets.

For instance, the media reported in the 1970s the discovery of an ancient Assyrian stone carving that described how the citizens of Assyria were overcome by a frenzy of fear. "Our Earth is degenerate in these later days. There are signs that the world is speedily coming to an end. Bribery and corruption are common; children no longer obey their parents; every man wants to write a book and the end of the world is evidently approaching."



Warning ads were displayed around the world.



Demonstrators taunt Camping's followers.