

Signs and Wonders: What You Need to Know About Solar Eclipses

Pope Urban VIII had counter-magic performed and cardinals jailed amid predictions that solar eclipses in 1628 and 1630 spelled doom for his papacy, and he later issued a papal bull prohibiting Catholics from practicing astrology.

A 1652 solar eclipse that blotted out the sun in Scotland and Ireland was widely interpreted as the beginning of God's wrath, a sign of the imminence of the Day of Judgment.

And months before a solar eclipse passed over London for the first time in nearly 600 years in 1715 it was heralded as "The Black Day or a Prospect of Doomsday."

Throughout history, eclipses have been viewed as bad omens or harbingers of doom, according to John Dvorak, a trained lunar scientist and author of "Mask of the Sun: The Science, History and Forgotten Lore of Eclipses." But they also have been understood as powerful manifestations of God's greatness.

Today, many people of faith look forward to the total eclipse of 2017 with the same fascination as their religious forebears. Some see it as a sign warning of God's judgment on America; others, as cause to wonder at the glory of God in creation.

For about two minutes on Monday (Aug. 21), the Great American Eclipse will darken skies across the U.S. as the moon passes between the sun and Earth, casting its shadow on the planet.

Weather permitting, millions of Americans will be able to see at least a partial solar eclipse, and those in a 70-mile-wide path across 14 states, a total solar eclipse, according to

NASA. It's the first time a total solar eclipse has crossed the entire continent in nearly 100 years.

"A total solar eclipse happens about every 18 months, but usually because most of the planet is covered either by ocean or by desert or by tundra, there are not very many people there to actually see it," Dvorak said.

Because of America's roads and transportation, many people will be able to see Monday's solar eclipse, he said, and "that's part of the importance of this one."

But people always have ascribed spiritual importance to eclipses, and signs in the sky are part of the narrative of Christianity, Dvorak said. The star of Bethlehem appeared at the birth of Jesus, and the sun's light failed at his death, according to the Gospels.

In the weeks leading up to the solar eclipse, YouTube videos and blog posts have appeared online sharing different Christian interpretations of the event. Some ministries with names like "End Time Headlines" have quoted biblical passages that suggest the sun going dark could be a sign of the apocalypse or warn of a coming judgment of America.

Anne Graham Lotz, an evangelist like her father Billy Graham, said she doesn't expect Jesus' return or anything other than an eclipse to happen Monday, but she wouldn't rule it out. After all, Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew no one knows the day or hour he will return.

"I don't dismiss that at all. I believe we're living at the end of human history," she said.

Lotz published a blog post prompted by the upcoming event that warned of God's judgment and likened eclipse viewing parties to the biblical account of a drunken feast hosted by the king as the fall of Babylon neared. The eclipse isn't the only reason she believes judgment should be expected in the U.S.

for what she considers its “grievous national sins” – including legalized abortion and same-sex marriage – or because “God has been removed from our culture,” she said.

But, she continued, “It’s another opportunity to try to get people’s attention and tell them it’s not just party time. It’s interesting, but this is time to take seriously their relationship with God.”

“If it is a warning from God, then I think we need to take that seriously and heed it.”

Perhaps the predominant view shared by Christians is the one held by the Rev. James Kurzynski, a priest of the Roman Catholic Diocese of La Crosse, Wis., and blogger for the Vatican Observatory’s website. Kurzynski told RNS, “The term ‘fake news’ is very in vogue and overused these days. The end times stuff is kind of like ‘fake religion.’”

“It’s just the kind of stuff that’s spun in a way to try to get Christians scared when there’s nothing to fear.”

To the priest, it’s amazing to think the Earth, moon and sun are the right size and at the right distances to allow the moon to completely block out the sun, causing a solar eclipse.

From Wisconsin, he’ll be able to see about 80 percent of the totality of the eclipse. He’s planning a viewing party for his parish, setting up telescopes outside the church and explaining what the Bible has to say about eclipses.

“If you’re trying to find spiritual significance of this from Scripture, really look at how these events were used as a call to return to God’s mercy and return to God’s love,” he said.

It’s not just Christians who will turn their eyes to the skies on Monday.

Judaism generally views natural phenomena as expressions of God’s greatness, according to Rabbi Menachem Posner, a scholar

with the Judaism website . There are specific blessings for rainbows, even for earthquakes, Posner said, but not for eclipses.

The Talmud views both solar and lunar eclipses as “kind of a negative time,” according to Posner, so they’re understood as an occasion for introspection, rather than celebration. But he said he hasn’t gotten the same sense from Jews that something bad is about to happen as he has heard from many Christians, even though some Christians point to the solar eclipse’s occurrence weeks after Tisha B’Av – a Jewish day of mourning and fasting – or the four “blood moons” (lunar eclipses) on Jewish holidays in 2014 and 2015.

“Although there is a notion of there being messages perhaps from the heavenly bodies and all that, people do not at all see it as dictating our future or dictating what is going to happen to us,” he said.

“We believe very strongly that God gave humankind free choice, and he put a lot of the determination of what’s going to happen into our own hands, so you will not see widespread panic or, ‘Repent before this,’ or, ‘Repent before that.’ That’s really not the Jewish approach.”

Instead, Chabad centers along the path of totality – like the one in Carbondale, Ill., just north of the point where the eclipse will be visible for the longest duration – are gearing up to host eclipse chasers for the weekend. They’ll be inviting travelers to Shabbat meals, preparing lectures and offering opportunities to put on tefillin while people are gathered for viewing parties.

Donna Woodwell, managing editor of Astrology Hub, is planning to lead workshops on eclipse astrology and timing rituals by the sky Monday at a solar eclipse celebration at Oak Spirit Sanctuary, which describes itself as “a church of Shamanic Wicca and nature sanctuary” in the path of totality in

Boonville, Mo.

At Oak Spirit, eclipse chasers will call to the sky goddess Nuit and take part in other rituals honoring the eclipse, according to its website. In the meantime, Astrology Hub is hosting a 14-day global eclipse meditation series online.

Like others, Woodwell encouraged introspection, rather than fear, noting the sight of the moon's shadow reaching from the cosmos to Earth awakens the soul "in a very powerful way, and some people are overwhelmed because they aren't used to knowing they have one."

There's also something powerful in shared experiences, she said. About 200 million people live within a day's drive of the path of totality and may be looking to the heavens when the solar eclipse happens Monday.

"It changes us. ... Where that leads us is profound. Even if you don't believe in astrology, it's a turning point because it has to be," she said. {eoa}

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