

Luke 21:25-38
The Return of Christ

When Jesus came to earth the first time, on the outskirts of a remote village at the eastern end of the Roman empire, very few people noticed. Certainly His parents were deeply moved. Perhaps a villager or two offered to help the young couple or provided some kind of assistance. Eventually some shepherds arrived, and a few months later some travelers from far away to the East came to see the child. Within a year the king would learn of His birth, and as a consequence order the murder of any young boy less than two years old.

But even that tragic event was known only by the people living in the region. The remainder of the Roman empire heard little or nothing of it. And outside of the empire, those living at the time had absolutely no knowledge that the Son of God, the Savior, had been born. Those in the Kushan empire of central Asia, the Satavahana empire of India, the great Han empire of China, the kingdom of Axum in east Africa, or the Celtic and Germanic peoples of northern Europe knew nothing of the arrival of this Son of Man. And, of course, the Bantu peoples of sub-Saharan Africa or the aboriginal peoples of the Americas were completely unaware of the Incarnation of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

But this will not be the case when Jesus comes the second time. As John described, “He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him” (Revelation 1:7). In the years immediately preceding His return, great natural disasters, plagues, and famines will increase in both frequency and violence. Believers in Christ will be raptured prior to the period described in the Bible as the Tribulation. The persecution of those who come to faith during the ensuing seven years will be intense and relentless. Jerusalem will be surrounded by great armies, and the Antichrist will establish the Abomination of Desolation in the temple. Then, finally, the time will come for God’s plan to be fulfilled, and everyone will know.

The Signs

As Jesus finished His discourse, talking to His followers on the Mount of Olives, He described the events preceding His second coming. “There will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth dismay among nations, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves” (v. 25). The account recorded by Matthew gives us more detail regarding those signs, “but immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Matthew 24:29).

Imagine it if you can. The sun becomes dark; not the shadowy darkness of an eclipse, but the idea is that the sun is blacked out completely. Naturally, the moon cannot reflect the sun’s light and is dark as well. Even more must be occurring since the “sea and the waves” are affected. Does the moon (which controls the tides) move out of its orbit? And it is out of this blackness that Jesus will appear. He will physically appear. We are promised that His return will be like His departure,

“⁹And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. ¹⁰And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. ¹¹They also said, ‘men of Galilee,

why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:9-11).

Paul added, “⁷Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8). And Peter wrote, “but the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10).

There is no reason not to take these descriptions literally, at least to some extent. After all, if God can create, then He can destroy. Jesus’ description of the reaction of those living inform us as to the intensity of the reality, “men fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world” (v. 26). Dismay, perplexity, and fainting are descriptive words. The first means severe emotional distress in the Greek. Perplexity is the same root word that would be used to describe the confusion of the women staring into the empty tomb. Fainting means to “breathe out” or “stop breathing.” That is, people will literally be scared to death. The book of Revelation adds, “and in those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death flees from them” (Revelation 9:6). The second coming will be real and tangible.

When these unmistakable events happen, “then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (v. 27). The ‘they’ can only mean all mankind. No one could miss these signs. No one will be unaware. No one will not know that Jesus has returned. Consider this most vivid description found in Revelation.

“¹¹And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. ¹²His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. ¹³He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. ¹⁵From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the winepress of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. ¹⁶And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, ‘KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS’” (Revelation 19:11-16).

This second coming will fulfill the prophecy of Daniel regarding the Son of Man,

“¹³I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
¹⁴And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language
Might serve Him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14).

Scripture claims Jesus will come “with power and great glory” (v. 27). The description in Revelation, though full of perplexing imagery, had at least one element that would have been recognizable to the saints of the early Church. The white horse was an incontestable symbol of power and glory. When permitted a triumph by the Roman emperor, victorious generals always rode into Rome on a white horse, leading their armies (and their victims) behind them. No inhabitant of the Roman world would have missed such an analogy. Jesus was returning as a conqueror. He was returning victorious.

It is also worth noting the importance of the cloud. This, too, had always been an indisputable sign of God's presence. A few examples from the history of Israel will suffice.

When the Israelites made their way from Egypt, “the Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night” (Exodus 13:21).

When the tabernacle was built, “³⁴then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. ³⁵Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34-35).

When the temple was dedicated by Solomon, “¹⁰it happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of the Lord, ¹¹so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord” (1 Kings 8:10-11).

No doubt the disciples were filled with wonder as they heard these words of Jesus. Yet, ever compassionate, Jesus did not want them to be afraid. So, He reassured them that “when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (v. 28). This was a dose of confidence. When the worst came, the saints of God were to look up to God for redemption, salvation, and deliverance. As desperate as these times would be for those outside the faith, for believers these signs meant the time of suffering was at an end.

Try to envisage the joy. The Old Testament saints and believers raptured prior to the Tribulation will return with Christ. Those who have been saved during the Tribulation will look up to see them coming in the clouds and know that He has returned to establish His earthly kingdom for one thousand years, after which the final judgment will put all things right and a new heaven and new earth will be created. Such a moment can only be even vaguely imagined.

The Illustration

But the disciples must have wondered when all this would happen. The events themselves were too much for these uneducated men to get their humble minds around, but perhaps these simple followers could at least have some idea of when these events would occur. As ever, Jesus chose not to be specific. Instead ²⁹“He told them a parable: “behold the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near. ³¹So you also, when you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near” (v. 29-31).

The fig tree was as common in Israel as the Joshua tree is in the Antelope Valley. So much so, that it had often been used as an illustration. The prophets Hosea (Hosea 9:10), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 24:1-10), and Joel (Joel 1:6-7) all used it to their advantage at different points in their careers. Fig trees, like all other trees, flower and bud in the spring. The logical assumption was that when that occurred, winter was over and summer was approaching. This was easy for these rural folk to understand and appreciate. Even the simplest among the followers of Jesus could understand that when these signs began to occur, the time of Jesus' return was near.

The Application

Then Jesus affirmed, “truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all things take place” (v. 32). However that was understood by His disciples, it is as the modern reader considers the words “this generation” that some confusion results. To whom was Jesus referring? Clearly He was speaking to His disciples when He said the words. Did He mean them? Did He mean that these things would come to pass before the last of them had died?

Surely this cannot be the correct interpretation, for the obvious reason that if this was what Jesus meant, He was wrong. Amazingly, some who consider themselves believers argue just that. They take Mark 13:32 where Jesus said “but of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone” to mean that Jesus was simply mistaken when He told His disciples that He would return during their lifetimes. But we cannot accept this interpretation. Though Jesus did set aside some of His divine attributes, He never erred. Therefore, He cannot have meant that He would return during the lifetime of His disciples, and to infer that from Mark 13:32 is an error in judgment.

A second viewpoint is that Jesus meant the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 as the event to which He was referring. While this event did occur before all of the disciples had died, and therefore meets the requirement of a literal rendering of the text, it cannot have been the event to which Jesus was referring. As we have discussed, there were other elements of His second coming were not completed by AD 70. There were no worldwide natural disasters, the persecution of the Church was sporadic and largely ineffective, there was no period of Tribulation, and the Antichrist did not establish the Abomination of Desolation in the temple. So, again, this cannot be what Jesus meant when He spoke of “this generation” which would witness His second coming.

*As a note, there are those, and they would consider themselves believers, who do argue that Jesus did, in fact, return in AD 70. This view, called hyper-preterism, claims that Jesus did return but not in a physical sense. The primary error in this view is that it requires those who accept it to also then argue that Jesus

then did not literally rise from the grave and ascend into heaven since we are told that He would return just as He left (Acts 1:11).

A third understanding of what Jesus meant is that He was referring to the Jews. Speaking to His disciples, Jews all, those with this perspective insist that He meant that the race of Israel would not die out until He returned. While that is certainly true, it is unlikely that this is what Jesus meant, since it would have not told the disciples anything they did not already know. God's promise had always been to His people. The Old Testament prophets specifically talked of God's eternal covenant with Israel. The eternity of God and His promises was not an issue for the disciples, so Jesus would have had no need to reassure them on this point.

A fourth view is that put forward relatively recently by those who argue that the reestablishment of the nation of Israel was the starting point of the end times. They imply that the generation that witnessed the restoration of Israel in 1948 is the "this generation" that will see the return of Christ. According to this interpretation, the fig tree represented Israel as a nation state, and a generation was forty years. However, that means that Jesus should have returned prior to 1988. Since that did not happen, this idea too can be dismissed.

The best interpretation of "this generation" must be that Jesus was speaking about the generation that would be alive when these events occurred. That is to say, what he intended to communicate to His disciples was that when these events happen, they will happen quickly. There would not be a long gap of years between the rapture, the beginning of the catastrophic signs of the end of the age, the Tribulation, and return of Christ. Those alive at the beginning of these developments will, many of them at least, live to see the end.

Finally, let us note that Jesus demonstrated the sincerity of His words when He concluded, "heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away" (v. 33). This was not mere metaphor. Jesus was speaking literally in both cases. One day heaven and earth will indeed be destroyed. "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up." (2 Peter 3:10). We all understand the transient nature of this world. But the Word of God, like God Himself, is eternal.

"The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

There is complete certainty that God's words will come to pass. What a comfort this is to the believer. Let us take encouragement from the fact that God has ordained He will fulfill. What He has said, He will do. But it is also important to remember that God will be as faithful and punctual in the keeping of His threats as has been in the keeping of His promises.

The Exhortation

Jesus had given His listeners much food for thought. So now He turned to practical application. He moved from political upheavals, persecution, natural disasters, and family divisions to what to do next. This was the immediate relevance of the Olivet discourse for both the disciples and ourselves.

His first exhortation was for the disciples to “³⁴be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap; ³⁵for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth” (v. 34-35). We are to be “on our guard.” The first event in the sequence of the end times will be the rapture of the Church. We do not know when it *will* happen, but we can be certain that there is no time when we can be certain it *will not* happen.

When the end begins, mankind will be going on about its business. For billions of people it will be just another day. As Jesus had already taught, it will be

“²⁶just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: ²⁷they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. ²⁸It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; ²⁹but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. ³⁰It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed” (Luke 17:26-30).

Therefore, we must live in imminent expectation of the rapture and beginning of the end times. The practical way to do this is to avoid the two extremes Jesus mentioned. We ought neither to be “weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness” nor overly concerned with “the worries of life.” To be “weighted down” means to be burdened or overcome. It referred to the slave-like condition to which a need for pleasure can reduce a person. Our indulgences soon become habits, and then necessities. Soon what was a mere occasional extravagance becomes something we cannot live without.

The same is true of worldly concerns. Remember the caution Jesus mentioned earlier. “The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity” (Luke 8:14). It was the tragic example of the natural overshadowing the spiritual. The enthusiasm of spiritual awakening dims as the realities of the world reawaken. The mountain top where we encountered God becomes hazy as we return to the valley in which we live.

Jesus cautioned against both inordinate indulgence in worldly pleasures and anxiety over worldly cares. The point was to emphasize the believer's need to be separate from this world. Either extreme is an indication that the believer is more caught up in this world than they should be. These are temptations from which none of us is exempt. “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Even the holiest are subject to such spiritual dangers. Recall that Jesus was not speaking to Pharisees, Sadducees, or Herodians, but to Peter, James, and John. This lesson had its precedents. Noah had escaped the flood, but then fell into drunkenness. Abraham had proved himself faithful, but then sinned with Hagar. Lot had avoided the worst of Sodom and Gomorrah, but then sinned with his daughters in the cave. And David was a man after God's heart, but he was also an adulterer and murderer. Can there be any doubt that we, too, must “be on guard”?

The second exhortation was to “keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (v. 36). In Matthew’s account, Jesus was recorded as giving this illustration, “be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into” (Matthew 24:43). Of course he would have. And so would we be living godly lives on that day if we knew the very day Christ would come for us. But we do not know, and we cannot know. Therefore the only sensible response is to live as if Christ could come for us at any time.

There are two promises given to believers who persevere by remaining on the alert. First, they will “escape all these things.” That is, they will be those who do not receive the divine wrath of God and the future final judgment. Before Christ returns we know that believers will either be raptured (if living) or brought to glory (if they died before the rapture). Those who come to faith during the Tribulation will be spared the wrath of God unleashed on unbelievers when He returns. It is this ultimate wrath of God that believers will escape.

The second promise is that believers will “stand before the Son of Man.” Believers will be accepted and approved by the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. They will enter into their reward in full. It will be a moment know one can describe and no one will forget. They will be that servant to whom the master said “well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:23). There can be no more pleasing words to fall upon our ears.

Takeaways

God’s Word is true, and in it He has promised to return for His Church. Until He does, or until we go to Him, let us live in anticipation of one day seeing our King face to face. Let us resolve to live godly lives, evangelize the lost, and do all that He gives us to do to move forward the kingdom of God.