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ON GUARD! HE'S COMING!

Luke 21:25-38

By

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Luke Lesson 97

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According to a survey published by *U.S. News and World Report* in late 1997, two-thirds of American adults believe that Jesus someday will return to Earth. However, most who believe in Christ's return placed it well beyond their lifetime, with 33 percent saying it will happen more than a few hundred years from now.

Among us, I would guess that belief in Christ's return is near 100 percent. Yet I wonder how much the awareness of His return affected your life this past week? Did it figure in how you spent your time? Did it fill you with hope as you faced a trial or crisis? Did it enable you to resist temptation, as you thought about what it will be like to stand before Him on that great day? Did it determine how you spent your money as a steward who will give an account? Or did you even think at all about Christ's soon coming as you went about your week?

If the second coming of Jesus Christ is not a major factor in your normal Christian life, you are missing one of the most powerful biblical motivations to godly living. As Jesus continues His discourse to His disciples on future things, He makes the point:

Since Christ is certainly returning, we need to be alert and ready, not dull and surprised by His coming.

The first part of this discourse (21:5-24, [last week]) focuses on the impending judgment of Jerusalem because of rejecting her Messiah. But the terrible events that happened in A.D. 70 were just a portent of the events that will lead up to the second coming of Christ and the final judgment. As I said last week, many of the events that Christ predicted have double or multiple fulfillments, culminating in the grand finale at His return.

At the end of verse 24, Jesus refers to Jerusalem being trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. The "times of the Gentiles" refers to the current age, when God's grace is not dispensed through Israel, but through the church made up of both Jew and Gentile. In our text (21:25-36),

Jesus jumps ahead to the end of that epoch that culminates in His return in power and glory to establish God's kingdom on earth.

Among evangelical Christians, there are three major views regarding future things. I hold to Premillennialism, which means that Jesus will return and establish the kingdom of God on earth in fulfillment of God's promises to Israel in the Old Testament. Jesus has already referred to a present sense of the kingdom (17:21), but here He states that when we see the signs of His second coming, "the kingdom of God is near" (21:31), implying that it will come in its fullness after He returns.

Amillennialists do not believe in a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth. Rather, they think that He will return, judge the earth, and usher in the eternal state. They think that the kingdom of God consists of Christ's present reign from heaven over His people. The millennium is spiritual, not literal or physical. One of the main reasons I hold to the Premillennial view is that I do not believe that Jesus' present spiritual reign over His people comes close to fulfilling the glorious promises given to Israel in the Old Testament.

The other main view, Postmillennialism, teaches that the church will usher in God's kingdom through the worldwide spread of the gospel, culminating in Jesus' return. Thus they view the millennium as the glorious time of worldwide revival just prior to Christ's return, not as a literal 1,000 years. I think it is the least likely view, in that many scriptures (including our text) indicate that things will get worse, not better prior to Christ's return.

Among premillennialists there are a number of views about if and when there is a secret rapture of the church separate from the second coming. Most premillennial dispensationalists hold to a secret pretribulational return of Christ for His church, followed by seven years of the tribulation, culminating in Jesus' second coming. This is the view I have been taught all my life, but I must confess that the longer I study Bible prophecy, the less certain I am about that view. It depends on drawing a sharp distinction between God's programs for Israel and the church, and on interpreting prophetic passages literally. Some dispensationalists hold to a mid-tribulation rapture or a pre-wrath rapture. Non-dispensational premillennialists do not draw a sharp distinction between Israel and

the church. They hold that God's people will go through the tribulation, followed by Christ's return and the millennial kingdom.

Our text does not deal with the question of whether there is a separate rapture of the church, but rather focuses on the second coming of Christ. If you believe that the church will be raptured some time before the second coming, then this text does not directly apply to you. But if you believe that there is only one second coming of Christ for His people (as I am increasingly inclined to believe), then it is quite applicable. We will look at four points:

1. The fact of His coming: It is more certain than heaven and earth.

Either Jesus Christ is returning visibly and bodily with power and great glory (21:27) or He is a liar who cannot be trusted at all. Those are the only options. The language of verse 27 is taken from Daniel 7:13-14, where Daniel saw in his vision one "like a Son of Man." This person came up to the Ancient of Days, where He was given eternal "dominion, glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him." Such eternal dominion could belong to none other than the Lord God. In the Old Testament, it is the Lord who comes on the clouds (Ps. 18:10-12; 104:3; Isa. 19:1). Thus Jesus' language in Luke 21:27 is the language of deity.

The second coming of Jesus Christ in a cloud with power and great glory is in stark contrast with His first coming. True, there were manifestations of power and glory in that first coming: the angel announced the miraculous conception to Mary. The heavenly chorus sang and announced His birth to the shepherds. The miraculous star guided the wise men to the house where He was. Anna and Simeon gave prophecies about the future of this child.

But there were also many commonplace events that masked His divine glory. He was born to a common, working class couple, not to royalty. They were excluded from the inn so that Mary had to give birth in a stable. Common shepherds, not scribes, scholars, or kings, witnessed His birthplace. Contrary to all the pictures on Christmas cards, the baby Jesus did not have a halo. He grew up in relative obscurity, working as a carpenter. There wasn't much divine power and glory manifested in His first coming.

But when He comes again, every eye will see Him. In Matthew 24:31 Jesus states that He will send forth His angels (they belong to Him and obey His command) with a great trumpet to gather "His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other." Revelation 19:11-16 describes Him as riding on a white charger of war, His eyes flaming fire, His robe dipped in blood, and a sharp sword coming out of His mouth to smite the nations. "He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, 'KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS'" (19:15). His exalted second coming will be a total contrast from His lowly first coming!

In case we missed it, Jesus underscores the certainty of His second coming by adding, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away" (19:33). More than you can trust the ground beneath your feet or that there will be a moon and stars in the sky tonight or that the sun will rise tomorrow, you can trust the words of Jesus Christ! Only God in human flesh could make such a claim. Jesus' second coming is not a matter of prophetic speculation. It is a certain fact. If it is not, you cannot trust in Jesus at all.

2. The signs of His coming: Cataclysmic global threats and changes.

In the parallel accounts (Matthew 24, Mark 13) Jesus mentions several other signs that immediately precede His coming. The abomination of desolation prophesied by Daniel will be set up in the holy place of the temple. False Christs and false prophets will arise and deceive many. The hearts of many will grow cold. But, even so, the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations (Matt. 24:14). And there will be signs in the heavens. But Luke only mentions the signs in the heavens and on earth.

These words about cataclysmic changes in the heavens reflect a number of Old Testament prophecies that connect such events with the coming judgment day of the Lord (Isa. 13:10-13; Joel 2:10, 30-31; 3:15). Matthew 24:29 (reflecting Isa. 13:10) states that the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky. Luke adds that the sea and its waves will roar. Some take the words symbolically, but I see no reason not to

take them in a literal sense. Either they refer to changes which God will impose on His creation to show men that He is the Lord of the universe, or they could refer to the effects of nuclear winter caused by the final war at the end of the tribulation period.

These cosmic signs will be so great that the world's population will cower in fear to the point of passing out. The Greek word translated "perplexity" normally refers to being chained; it means that men will be gripped or bound by anxiety. But believers will stand apart from the unbelieving world at this point. Rather than being in distress, believers will be saying, "All right! Jesus is coming soon! Our redemption draws near!"

Whether we go through the great tribulation or not, there is an application here for God's people: Because we trust in our Sovereign Redeemer, the creator of the universe, we do not have to live in fear and anxiety, even in the face of global catastrophe. Even if wars or plagues or natural catastrophes engulf us and take our lives, we can lift up our heads, because our redemption draws near! Death only brings to completion the salvation that our Lord accomplished for us on the cross. Thus we are to be people of hope and joy even when the world is engulfed in anxiety and fear.

3. The danger before His coming: To be weighed down with current worries.

Jesus warns His hearers, including the disciples, "Be on guard, that your hearts may not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day come on you suddenly like a trap, for it will come on all those who dwell on the face of all the earth" (19:34, 35). Dissipation refers to the dizziness or carousing associated with drunkenness. I would not think that the Lord would have to warn His people about drunkenness, but when you remember that even the godly Noah got drunk, you must realize that you are not exempt from the temptation. If you take a drink or use drugs to relax, then you are especially in danger of the sin that Jesus here warns against. Christ Himself is to be the source of our peace in this troubled world, not alcohol or drugs.

Jesus not only mentions the dangers of dissipation and drunkenness, but also the danger of being weighted with the worries of the world. Worry is a sin because it is opposed to faith in the living

God. The absence of worry does not mean shrugging our shoulders and doing nothing about problems. There is a proper sense of concern that should move us to responsible action. But when we get stressed out, we need to take the time to get alone with the Lord, to claim the promises of His Word, and to pour out our troubles to Him in prayer. Then He may direct us as to a course of action. Then we proceed with His joy and peace filling our hearts, not in fearful anxiety. If we live daily in dependence on Him, the frightening events of the end times will not snap shut on us like a trap. We will be ready and rejoicing because we have the habit of daily trust in God, in contrast to the stressful ways of the world.

Thus Jesus emphasizes the certainty of His second coming. He tells us the cataclysmic signs that precede it. He warns us about the danger of being fearful and dealing with that fear in the world's way, through drunkenness and worry. Finally, He shows us:

4. Readiness for His coming: Keep on the alert through prayer and obedience.

As I understand Jesus' words, all of these final events will take place rather quickly. He states, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all things take place" (19:32). This verse has caused much controversy and even some heretical conclusions. Some say that Jesus was claiming that those hearing Him speak would see His return to usher in His kingdom. If so, Jesus was obviously mistaken. It would be likely that the early church would not have reported this remark or would have abandoned hope in His coming if this were what Jesus meant.

Others have gone to the extreme of saying that Jesus returned in A.D. 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed. One man from Flagstaff has written a booklet promoting this view. He claims that Jesus has already returned and will not be coming back again. Although he is sincerely trying to explain this difficult verse so that Jesus' prediction came true, he has fallen into serious heresy. To deny that Jesus will return in the future is to rob believers of the hope of His coming. Besides, the destruction of Jerusalem cannot be described as Jesus' coming on the clouds with power and great glory to establish His kingdom on earth and to judge the nations.

Others explain the word "generation" to mean "race," so that Jesus is saying, "The Jewish race will not cease to be until all these things take place." The problem with this view is that the word "generation" almost always means those living at a given time, not a race of people. So it would be a highly unusual use of the word. Also, Jesus was probably speaking Aramaic, and the Aramaic term for generation cannot carry the sense of race (Darrell Bock, *Luke* [Baker], 2:1690).

Another view is that the verse refers to the judgment on Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but not to the second coming. But Jesus' words about the kingdom of God being near when all these signs take place does not fit this view. The judgment on Jerusalem had nothing to do with the kingdom's soon coming. Also, this view must interpret the drastic signs in the heavens in a symbolic or greatly diminished sense. Some argue that several comets that appeared just prior to A.D. 70 fulfill the "signs in the heavens" prophecy (Keith Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* [P & R Publishing], p.140). The prophecy about the sun and moon being darkened is explained as symbolic Old Testament language for terrible judgments on the nations (*ibid.*, p. 142). But to say that the judgment on Jerusalem totally fulfilled these verses seems to me to be stretching it beyond credulity. The nations were not perplexed and gripped with terror because of these signs in the heavens just prior to Jerusalem's destruction.

A variation on this view is a double fulfillment approach that argues that the judgment on Jerusalem is linked with the final judgment as the beginning or type of that final judgment on all the earth. Thus "Jesus is saying that this group of disciples will experience the catastrophe of A.D. 70 within their lifetime, an event that itself pictures the beginning of end-time events" (Bock, 2:1691). This view is a good possibility, especially when you study the parallels in Matthew and Mark. The problem with it in Luke is that you have to shift back in focus to the judgment of A.D. 70, which seemingly was left at verse 24. And, you have to interpret the signs in the heavens in connection with A.D. 70 in a much lesser degree than the final signs that will grip the whole world with fear.

Perhaps the best solution is to say that "this generation" refers to the generation that is living when all of these end time signs be-

gin to occur. Jesus then is saying that “the generation that sees the beginning of the end, also sees its end. When the signs come, they will proceed quickly; they will not drag on for many generations” (Bock, 2:1691-1692). The main objection to this view is that “this generation” usually refers to the present generation, not to a later one. But in this context, Jesus is referring to these cataclysmic signs. Thus the phrase “this generation” could refer to the generation that sees these unusual events unfold. Since there is so much controversy over the verse, we should not be dogmatic.

But to return to the point, the references to this generation not passing away until these things take place, and the warning that these final events will come on us suddenly like a trap, underscore the element of surprise or quickness. Jesus tells us, “Keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (21:36). The way to be ready so that the day does not surprise us like a trap is to be in daily prayer for strength to endure (“escape” has the sense of enduring) persecution and these world-shaking events; and to be obedient so that we can stand before the Lord without fear.

Luke’s mention (21:37-38) of the people getting up early to come and listen to Jesus may simply be a factual notice. But it also may be a subtle warning. These people listened in the sense of enjoying Christ’s teaching. He was an interesting and engaging speaker. They were curious about these prophetic matters. But many of these same people would shortly be crying, “Crucify Him!” There is a big difference between being curious about Bible prophecy and living daily by faith, prayer, and obedience to God’s Word. If studying prophecy does not make us more godly people, we are not studying it rightly.

When I was in the Coast Guard, the chief on our boat was a profane and worldly man. One time he came up on the bridge where I was on radio watch to get something and he noticed that I was reading the Bible. He said, “Whatcha reading?” Then seeing that I was reading First Peter, he said, “Oh, Peters, huh? You ought to read Revelations. It’s really ____.” He used a mild swear word to mean, “It’s really cool.” He thought that prophecy was interesting. If he had really taken it to heart, he would have real-

ized that Christ is coming back to judge the earth. He would have repented and lived much differently. Bible prophecy is not given to satisfy our curiosity. It is given so that we will live in prayerful obedience, ready for that fearful day of judgment.

Conclusion

I once worked at the swanky Drake Hotel in Chicago. Years before I was there, in July of 1959, Queen Elizabeth was scheduled to visit Chicago. Elaborate preparations were made for her visit. The waterfront was readied for docking her ship. Litter baskets were painted and a red carpet was ready to be rolled out for her to walk on. Many hotels were alerted to be ready. But when they contacted the Drake, the manager said, "We are making no plans for the Queen. Our rooms are always ready for royalty."

That's how our lives should be in light of Christ's return. We shouldn't have to make any special or unusual preparations. We should live each day alert and ready, dependent on Him in prayer, and obedient to His Word. When the world is gripped with fear because of frightening events, we should look up, filled with hope because our redemption draws near.

Discussion Questions

1. Since prophecy seems to be so open to different interpretations, how can we be certain enough about it for it to affect our lives?
2. What are some possible practical implications of the different major prophetic views? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each view?
3. Should Christians divide over different prophetic views? Which prophetic views (if any) cross the line into heresy?
4. Note Jesus' imperatives. What is His main concern for His hearers in terms of application?

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