

"Prepping For Jesus' Coming"

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is a season of *preparation*, as we get ready once again to celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus. The way we prepare for Christmas, and celebrate Christmas, might be different this year in some ways with COVID-19, but the fact that Jesus was sent into the world as our Savior does not change! But Advent is also a time when we think not only of Jesus' *first coming* as a baby, but His *second coming* in glory and power at the end of time. Let's think today about *prepping for Jesus' return*.

Many of us in the church don't think much about the return of Christ. Oh, there are a few Christians who obsess over it. They go to prophecy conferences. They watch TV preachers whose whole message and ministry centers around prophecy, telling us how world events today are unfolding just as the Bible predicted. But for most, thoughts of Jesus' return are not even on our radar screen!

Jesus taught us that He would return in power and glory at the end of the age. The first 3 gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) each feature a chapter highlighting Jesus' words about His return. Today, we will look at Jesus' words found in the Gospel of Mark. "“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory" (Mark 13:24-26).

Notice, Jesus says people will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with power and great glory. There will be cataclysmic disruptions in the natural world: the sun and moon will be darkened, stars will fall from the sky, heavenly bodies shaken.

These words refer back to Isaiah 13:9-11. "See, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the insolence of tyrants." This Scripture says, "The day of the Lord is coming". The ancient Jews spoke of 2 ages. There is the "present age", which is evil, and also the "age to come", the golden age of God, where God rules, and the wicked - enemies of God – will be overcome. The "day of the Lord" would usher in this new age where God rules.

Notice, it will be a time of judgment! The wicked will be separated from the evil. "I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins" (Isaiah 13:11).

A lot of people today don't want to hear about a final judgment, or judgment day. But should there not be some final balancing of the scales of justice? I recently watched a documentary about Joseph Stalin. It estimated that he was responsible for starving to death 4 (even 5) million people in the Ukraine when he replaced the small farms with state-run collective farms. While this was happening, he was relaxing at his hideaway mansion, fishing, and listening to classical music. One month during WWII he became worried that some of his military officers might

challenge his total power, so he ordered the execution of 30,000 Russian officers, or half of the army and navy staff. In total, historians report that Stalin was responsible for the deaths of 15-20 million people through starvation, forced labor camps, executions, etc. So I ask, should Stalin share the same eternal fate as Mother Theresa, or Fred Rogers ("Mr. Rogers")? For me, if there's no ultimate balancing of the scales of right and wrong, life is absurd, a tasteless joke.

Jesus' return will be a time of separation and judgment. All will be judged. The powers of evil will be overcome. Jesus said, "For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done" (Matthew 16:27). For those who have confessed Christ as their Savior and Lord and follow Him, it will be a time of salvation: "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven" (Mark 13:26-27)

Hebrews 9:28 tells us: "So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, *will appear a second time*, not to deal with sin, but *to save* those who are eagerly waiting for him."

How close are we to the day of His return? People into prophecy today claim world events are unfolding just like it says in the Bible, and Jesus' return is just around the corner. *Are they right?* Someone recently sent to the church a CD titled "The Mark of the Beast. The Antichrist and Bill Gates." It's somehow tying in Bill Gates with establishing a one world government and things mentioned in the Book of Revelation. Most people will just blow this off as a crazy conspiracy theory. I just don't know about claims like this. It's easy to read into the Bible things that may not be there.

Jesus told us that nobody but God the Father knows exactly when He will return. "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). The angels don't know when He will return. *Jesus Himself* doesn't know! Only God the Father. It amazes me that we still have people setting dates for His return! Almost 50 years ago a friend gave me as a Christmas gift Hal Lindsay's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which predicted that Jesus' return would be very soon. That was 50 years ago!

Are these people wrong for saying the signs we are seeing today are indications that Christ's return will be soon? Wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines – things mentioned in Matthew, chapter 24? I don't know. Are there more of these now, or is it that with modern communications we immediately know when these things happen somewhere in the world?

But this much can be said: We are living in the last days! How can I say this? Because when Jesus set foot on planet earth the first time that signaled *the beginning of the last days*. Jesus began His preaching and ministry with the words, "The kingdom of God *is at hand*...the kingdom of God is *near*."

Early Christians saw themselves living in the last days: Jesus could return at any moment. Hebrews 1:1-2 says this: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many

times and in various ways, *but in these last days* he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe." 1 Corinthians 10:11 says, "These things happened to them as an example, and were written as a warning for us *to whom the end of time has come.*" 1 Peter 4:7 says, "The end of all things is near." Remember, Peter wrote this in the 1st century! Then he adds: "Therefore be alert and of sober mind." Notice the "therefore".

We are to be prepared for His coming. Jesus clearly told us this. "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake" (Mark 13:33-37). When teaching about His return, Jesus clearly emphasized that we should be ready at all times for His return. Don't be sleeping! Don't be caught off guard! Stay alert!

Other Scripture passages pick up on what Jesus said: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23). The word "sanctify" means to be "set apart" for God, dedicated to His purposes. We are to be sound and blameless: i.e. to live a clean life; to strive for purity. 1 John 2:28 also emphasizes this truth: "And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming." Don't do things that would make us ashamed if He were to come at that moment.

But being prepared for the Lord's coming doesn't mean just keeping our nose clean and not doing bad stuff! It means doing good, positive things: helping others, caring about people, forgiving those who hurt us, encouraging individuals, going the extra mile to show kindness to those who don't deserve it, etc.

This should be the way we live, so that any time Jesus comes back, we'll be ready! A well-known pastor tells of the time when he was 16, and playing pool with a Catholic friend, the friend's father, and their priest. While the priest was bending over the pool table, lining up a shot, the friend's father asked him a far out question: "If you knew Jesus was going to return in the next 5 minutes, what would you do?" Almost without hesitation, the priest said, "I would finish my shot."

I realize that preaching about the second coming of Christ is probably not the most popular subject to talk about. Maybe some of us have trouble believing that Jesus is going to literally and visibly come back to wrap up life here on earth and bring in the new realm Jesus called the kingdom of God – where God will completely rule forever and forever. We may wonder how it relates to the things we deal with in the daily routine of living. In one church I served, our worship team met about once a month to look at upcoming sermon themes, and plan music, and videos, and skits or dramas that would enhance that theme. One Sunday I was going to preach on the return of Christ, and I asked the group how I could make that sermon relate to daily life,

and the things we deal with on a practical level. They suggested that being reminded of Christ's return gives life perspective. Life is more than just paying bills, doing the laundry, cleaning and grocery shopping. They were saying that we shouldn't get so immersed in living that we lose a sense of our eternal destiny as daughters and sons of God. *I like that!*

The second coming of Christ gives us hope for the future. If you don't accept what the Bible teaches about Christ's return, then what do you think about the future of this planet and how it will end? Do we merely hang on to what scientists tell us? Perhaps our sun will just burn itself out, and that will be curtains for us! Will a nuclear war end it all? Some cosmic catastrophe that will spell doom for this planet – a huge asteroid colliding with planet earth? Climate change slowly or rapidly snuffing out life here on earth? Do these scenarios give us any hope for the future?

Belief in the return of our Lord means history is moving towards a climax! Human history is not just an endless round of "same old, same old", repeating itself, going nowhere. God is moving history towards a meaningful and purposeful goal. God is in control! (Isn't that good news for these chaotic times)! Nothing will thwart God's ultimate purposes or prevent God from one day establishing His kingdom, where He reigns forever and forever. And sorrow and sighing and sickness and pain and death will be no more! Hallelujah! No wonder the Bible calls the return of Jesus "our blessed hope" in Titus 2:13!

One of the great theologians of the 20th century was Emil Brunner. He wrote books on theology, one of which was called "Church, Faith and the Consummation". This esteemed scholar ends that book by saying that throughout church history, the more powerfully the Spirit of God is present in the church, the more urgent has been our expectation of Christ's return. *Think about that!*

The early Christians had a phrase they used, *maranatha*. It's found in 1 Corinthians 16:22. It's an invitation for His quick return. It means, "Our Lord comes" or "Our Lord will come", or simply "Come!"

Let that be the church's cry, and a good way to end this sermon, and a fitting way to begin the season of Advent: "Maranatha!" Come, Lord Jesus!

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