

The Return of the Lord!

2 Peter 3:1-18; Matthew 24

A few years ago F.D. Bruner, one of America's noted Bible teachers, said, "Ever since the invention of the Atom Bomb, the end of the world has become a great new modern fear; and since the even more recent environmental crisis, the possibility of the destruction of life as we know it has become a subject of serious discussion and action among responsible people."

A few years ago, we witnessed what is perhaps the cosmic event of the last one hundred years, the collision of Comet Shoemaker-Levy9 with the giant planet Jupiter. At least 21 fragments crashed into Jupiter over a six-day period, sending huge fireballs out into space from the planet's surface. The comet's impact triggered energy bursts hundreds of times greater than an explosion of earth's entire nuclear arsenal, and caused devastation that would destroy the Earth! As a result, a U.S. congressional panel called for a ten-year program to catalogue "all comets and asteroids greater than one kilometer in diameter" on course to cross the orbit of planet Earth.

Yes, there are those who are worried about what the scientists, in the light of Comet Shoemaker-Levy9, have called "celestial suicide" or "cosmic disaster." What does all this mean in light of what Peter says in verse 10, that...

"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."

Recent events give new meaning to that verse and possibly cause us to reflect on it in ways unimagined by Peter and his contemporaries. On the other hand, Jewish writers like the apostle Peter would often write in cataclysmic terms in order to describe great times of social upheaval or crisis.

So we can't be absolutely sure whether Peter was speaking literally or figuratively. What we can be sure of is this: despite appearances to the contrary, and despite the long 2000-year delay, the Lord is going to return, and when He does, it will be an event of cosmic proportions that will turn the world upside down. History as we know it will have come to an end!

This present evil world system, which plagues us all with war and oppression, crime and injustice, sickness and suffering, will be utterly overthrown and destroyed.

Did Jesus have anything to say about this? If He were here in the flesh right now would He be surprised by the condition of the world, taken unawares and perplexed? Not at all!

In Matthew 24:6-14 he said that there would be "wars and rumors of wars, nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes ... All these are the beginning of birth pains." He added that there would be persecution, betrayal, false prophets, deception, and a turning away from the faith in many places. We are seeing these very things today, some of them on an unprecedented scale.

Of recorded history's thirteen most devastating earthquakes in terms of human casualties, eleven of them occurred in the twentieth century! Add to that the extreme meteorological conditions we are experiencing, with their related side-effects, along with the threat of new pandemics, and one begins to wonder if we are seeing the emergence of a developing pattern.

Of course, we understand that such phenomena have been with us throughout history, but our Lord seems to have been indicating that the closer we get to his return, these things will escalate in intensity and flow right into the Great Tribulation, a time of unprecedented trouble on earth.

What about the wars and rumors of wars? Since WW2 there have been dozens of limited wars, at least 38 political assassinations, 74 rebellions for independence, 162 revolutions of either a political, economic, racial, or religious nature.

In fact, these numbers are already out of date as they do not include such current conflicts as Afghanistan and Iraq, and they do not take into account the currently raging “war on terrorism.” Who knows where this war will ultimately take us. Some pundits are already labeling it “world war three!”

In Luke 17:26-30 the Lord added that, “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying ... up to the day Noah entered into the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all!”

It was the same in the days of Lot at Sodom. “People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all!”

Note this well, however, our Lord did not warn of these developments in order to frighten or discourage his followers. He quickly added that the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. Moreover, the gospel of the Kingdom of God will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations. Then the end will come! We are close to having achieved that goal and fulfilled our Lord’s prophecy.

Jesus knew how perilous and troubled the end times would be. He knew that Man would also strive to maintain a state of normality, insanely pursuing our downward course without reference to His second coming. That’s just the way it is. The developed countries of the world have effectively put the return of Christ out of mind and we behave as if it is not going to happen. But Jesus spoke of the certainty of His return.

In Matthew 16:27 he promised, “For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.”

In John 14:3 Jesus promised, “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

Due to the certainty of his return, Jesus spoke of the need for us to be ready, because the time of His second coming is unknown. Matthew 24:44 he warned, “So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” Similarly, in Matthew 25:13 he warns, “Therefore keep watch because you do not know the day or the hour.”

The question is: How to be ready? Or as Peter put it in our text, “What sort of persons ought you to be?” Peter supplies the answer without hesitation: “You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.” How do we “speed its coming?” The short answer is by witnessing for Jesus and working to make Kingdom principles and lifestyle an increasing reality on planet earth. Jesus himself gives us some important principles for us to live by in Matthew 24 as we await His return:

1. Don't be **deceived** (v.4) by false Messiahs peddling vain human religion and philosophies such as secular humanism, which does away with God, relativism, which asserts that there are no absolutes, pragmatism, which encourages you to do whatever works for you, and materialism, which prompts us to behave as if there is no spiritual realm.
2. Don't be **discouraged** (v. 6). The world may well be out of man's control, but it is not out of God's control! He is still active and there are signs of His grace: the abolition of apartheid, the recent destruction of the Iron Curtain, the opening up of former USSR and third world to the Gospel (Papua New Guinea, India, China, etc.).
3. Don't be a **drop-out!** In other words, don't turn away from the faith, and don't let your love grow cold (vv. 10-13). Be diligent servants during the time we have available. Let our light shine as we wait and watch.

In the 1987 NCAA Regional Finals, LSU was leading Indiana by eight points with only a few minutes left in the game. As is often the case with a team in the lead, LSU began playing a different ball game. The television announcer pointed out that the LSU players were beginning to watch the clock rather than wholeheartedly play the game. As a result of this shift in focus, Indiana closed the gap, won the game by one point, and eventually went on to become NCAA champions.

While both Jesus and Peter call us to be aware of the "signs of the times," they clearly call us to expend our energies in faithful, active service. As we await our Lord's promised return, we are not so much to watch the clock as we are to be diligent servants during the time we have available. We speed his return by means of our Christian witness and work.

During his 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with the story of Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives. One day in 1789, the sky over Hartford darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, looking out of the windows, feared that the end was at hand. Quelling a clamour for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought."

The ultimate "sign" of the second coming will not be miraculous supernatural phenomena or cosmic cataclysms, but Christ himself. He will be seen as never before and the nations will mourn because unbelievers will suddenly realize that they have chosen the wrong side and rejected the Living God. Everything they have scoffed about will now be happening – but it will be too late for them (Matt. 24:29-31).

In Rev. 19:11-21 heaven opens and Jesus appears – this time not as a lamb but as a warrior on a white horse (symbolizing victory). Jesus came the first time as a Lamb in order to sacrifice himself for our sins, but when he returns it is as a conqueror and king to execute judgment on all those who have rejected his sacrifice.

We cannot trust the way things look now, and we cannot trust the religious man-pleasers who peddle a palatable message that never assaults our pride and never throws us on our knees before our Holy God. Without repentance there is no salvation! Without faith it is impossible to please God. Without holiness and godly living we will not hasten the day of our Lord's return. Let us hold fast to the promises of God and the testimony of Jesus! This alone is our sure guide through a world swarming with pleasing and plausible lies. In the Chronicles of Narnia, Aslan, who represents Christ, gives sage advice to guide a rescue party through a world of illusion:

“Remember, remember, remember the signs. Say them to yourself when you wake in the morning and when you lie down at night, and when you wake in the middle of the night. And whatever strange things may happen to you, let nothing turn your mind from following the signs ... And the signs which you have learned here (on the mountain) will not look at all as you expect them to look when you meet them there (down in Narnia). That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearances. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters.”

We are the Lord’s rescue party in a world of illusion. This present hour is dark indeed. The skies of human history have been overlaid with ominous clouds. But rather than fearing what is to come, we are to be faithful until Christ returns. Instead of fearing the darkness, we are to be lights as we watch and wait! Let us remember the signs! Even more, let us remember our Lord’s promises. Let us serve the Lord with all our might!