

Hope in Those (These) Days

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on November 15, 2020.

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 heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away (Matthew 24:29-35).¹

There is strong and compelling evidence that the first part of Jesus’ Olivet Discourse, including our passage today, refers to events leading up to and concluding in the destruction of Israel’s temple in A.D. 70. Careful and knowledgeable scholars have connected Jesus’ words and phrases with Old Testament prophetic quotations, lending to a more figurative interpretation, especially of this passage. It is possible that what Jesus tells his disciples in this discourse was fulfilled between A.D. 33 and A.D. 70.

However, there are specific words and phrases in this passage that lead me to believe that Jesus may be referring to “those days” in our past while also speaking of these days in our present and future. There could be an already-but-not-yet aspect to Jesus’ prophetic words. I think the key to understanding them is to not get lost in the prophetic nomenclature and to consider Jesus’ intent. John Calvin explains,

The main object of [Jesus’] answer was to establish His disciples in good hope, in case they should fail in courage at the ensuing chaos. For this reason, He does not speak of His coming in simple terms but helps Himself to prophetic forms of speech, which the more men scrutinize, the harder they must struggle to understand the paradoxical character of events.²

The paradox, as Calvin calls it, is that “the tribulation” that commenced after Jesus’ ascension to heaven and which his disciples witnessed in those days continues in these days. Indeed, the “birth pains” began in A.D. 33, but they continue and will continue until “after the tribulation of those days.”

As Jesus’ disciples in these days, let us remember that we do not come to God’s Word to manipulate it or to use it as a form of speculation. We do not couple God’s Word with news

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. A.W. Morrison (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 3:93.

headlines or interpret it through the lens of current events. God's Word is eternal, and his revelation is for his glory, not to satisfy our fantasies or conspiracy theories. We come to God's Word with the same expectation as Jesus' questioning disciples—hope in Jesus Christ and trust in his Word. As the Apostle Paul encouraged the church in Rome, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

So, consider carefully what you hear today. If Jesus' words strike fear in your heart rather than hope, then you need to consider: In whom is your hope? If you hear of seeming cosmic chaos and fear more for your life than hope in Christ's return, then you need to consider: In what is your hope? If you hear of international mourning upon Christ's return and fear more for your country than hope for the church, then you need to consider: In whom is your hope? If you hear of the trumpet blast and the angelic gathering and doubt your inclusion, then you need to consider: In what is your hope?

Hope is known only through the gospel and found only in Jesus Christ. Jesus' prophetic words though mysterious are actually words of hope for all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, in the hope we have in Christ alone, let us look closely at what Jesus describes, beginning with a cosmic commencement.

A Cosmic Commencement

The disciples originally asked two questions of Jesus. The first was a timing question: When would the temple be destroyed, as Jesus prophesied (Matt. 24:2)? This question Jesus answers, with additional commentary, in the previous verses. The second question was an identifying question: “What will be the sign of [Christ's] coming and of the end of the age” (Matt. 24:3)? Jesus answers this question in our passage.

While Jesus never tells us when his second coming will be, we do know that it will be preceded by universal, cataclysmic events. Echoing the prophecy of Isaiah (13:9-11), Jesus describes the culmination of tribulation, revealed in a darkened sun and moon, falling stars, as “the powers of the heavens” are shaken. While God's judgment was revealed in the siege of Jerusalem and the desolation and destruction of Israel's temple in A.D. 70, what Jesus describes will be witnessed by every man, woman, and child on planet earth.

Before you dismiss such language as merely figurative, consider this: Cannot he who spoke an ever-expanding universe into existence also intervene and alter what he has created? For, our God is not a watchmaker who wound creation into existence and left us to our own self-destructive devices. Indeed, he is actively involved in his creation, and in fact it is our Lord Jesus who “upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:3).

And consider this: If our Lord does uphold the universe in which we live and move and have our being, enjoying the consistency of a well-ordered creation, can he not command darkness? Can he not tell each star to fall as he pleases? I can think of no better way to gain the attention of all of the inhabitants of earth than to shake the powers of the heavens. And when they shake, the fool will not say in his heart there is no God (Ps. 14:1). In that moment, the fool will not

exchange the glory of the immortal God for images of creation (Rom. 1:23). No, everyone will know there is a King of creation. Fools will tremble, but saints will rejoice at the regal return of our Lord.

A Regal Return

For the sake of context, remember that the disciples asked, “What will be the sign of your coming?” Using his frequently used self-identifying title, Jesus now answers, “Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man.” What is the sign? First, “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” Second, the sending out of Christ’s angels “with a loud trumpet call.” And third, the gathering of the elect past and present “from one end of heaven to the other.” That will be quite a sign, unmistakable indeed.

As extraordinary as all of this sounds, how will the world respond? Denial? Impossible. No, “all the tribes [or nations] of the earth will mourn.” Why mourning? In Zechariah 12:10, our Lord says, “when they look on me, on whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him...” The nations will mourn because Judgment Day has come, and their Judge they crucified.

In Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection the nation of Israel rejected him, and they were judged initially. But ultimate judgment awaits every tribe, tongue, and nation apart from Christ. In that day there will be dreadful mourning throughout the world, “When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:7-8).

Now, consider this scene through the eyes of a Christian? What will we see? Will we shriek in terror at the revelation of our Lord? Will we fear the judgment to come? Will we mourn with the world? No, we do not mourn as those who have no hope, for our hope is in the One who is “coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”

Some consider the Christian longing for Christ’s return to be escapism, a sacralized denial of reality. In some cases, I agree. If we close our eyes to the joys and sorrows, the gifts and needs in this life, to be whisked away from reality, it is escapism. But if we long for Christ’s return as the fulfillment of our sanctification, as the consummation of our redemption, as the union of natural and spiritual reality, then such a longing will encourage, not detract from, living in the presence of today. Let us live life for Christ in light of his spiritual presence with us today and the surety of his physical presence to come.

A Glorious Gathering

In Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the tares (or weeds), he describes a separation at the end of the age (Matt. 13:38-42). The wheat, or “the sons of the kingdom,” are now identified as the “elect.” It is those who were chosen in Christ “before the foundation of the world”, those predestined for adoption as children of God through Christ, those who by God’s grace through the gift of faith in Christ (Eph. 1:4-5, 2:8-9) are gathered from the “four winds” (or corners) of the earth.

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To be clear, this is not a secret event, nor is it a preliminary exodus of the church out of redemptive history. This may very well be the loudest, most visible, concluding public event in human history. Angels will be dispersed not at a toot but “a loud trumpet call.” Paul describes this worldwide event like this: “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Far from a secret rapture, it will be a glorious gathering.

What then are we to discern of those days to come in these days? Jesus tells us to learn from the fig tree: “as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.” Indeed, the fig tree has budded and bloomed, as Jesus’ first disciples and their generation witnessed the signs of the beginning of the end. And creation continues to groan in pains of childbirth (Rom. 8:22), together we await the final consummation of our salvation.

The second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will be unmistakable, as evident to the entire world as lightning in the sky (Matt. 24:27). Until then, anticipating his imminent and inevitable return, we are to live for Christ. Living blamelessly, living wakefully, and living faithfully for Christ, we are not to hole up into a holy huddle. Rather, we are to carry on in the life we have been given, living as God instructed the Babylonian exiles: building houses, planting gardens, marrying and giving in marriage; enjoying children and grandchildren; living locally and praying for peace; sharing the gospel and advancing it to the four corners of the earth.

Then one day, the trials and tribulations of this life will culminate into one grand cosmic commencement, announcing the regal return of our Lord, and the glorious gathering of the elect. “For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:52), conformed in glory to the image of our Lord. Until that day in these days, let us encourage one another with the Word of Christ, for it will never pass away.