

The Coming of the Lord

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For as long as I can remember, there's been a certain amount of national concern about the possibility of mankind destroying the planet and itself. Back during the bad old days of the Cold War, the threat that had everybody worried was the possibility of nuclear war. That worry led to the invention of the Doomsday Clock and Dr. Strangelove and all of those other frightening symbols of the time. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, though, all of the nuclear-annihilation talk died down. More recently, the concern has been about us destroying ourselves by accident, through abuse of the environment. Everything from global warming to the BP oil disaster seems to point in that direction.

Although I certainly don't favor nuclear war, and I believe that mankind should be responsible stewards of the planet, I have no concern that the human race is going to succeed in wiping itself out. Instead, the true threat to us and to the earth, if indeed it can be called a threat, is an external one. The Scripture leaves us with no doubt that when Jesus returns in the sky, He will summon both the living and the dead to judgment and will obliterate the physical creation.

On the one hand, this is reassuring. It tells us that God is in control of the ultimate destiny of the human race, and no matter how foolish we may become, we will not be permitted to annihilate ourselves, either accidentally or intentionally. When Jesus appears, there will be somebody on hand besides the cockroaches to see Him.

On the other hand, though, this realization can be very sobering and indeed ominous. After all, mankind will never be capable of the destruction of more than the physical body. If, hypothetically, warring superpowers did reduce the planet to a cinder, we would all be dead, and that would be it. God, however, is capable of much more than that. As Jesus tells us in Matthew 10, He can destroy both body and soul in hell. That's the endgame that we should really be concerned about. If we aren't prepared for it, we will face disaster. Let's consider then, the coming of the Lord.

Its Nature

One of the best places in Scripture to find a description of this coming is in the last part of Matthew 24 and all of Matthew 25, and this text begins with several important revelations about its nature. First, we learn that this coming is going to be surprising. Look with me at Matthew 24:36. In this text and throughout, Jesus is speaking. In fact, He's finishing His answer to a three-part question from the third verse of the chapter. Jesus has already discussed when the temple will be destroyed. He's revealed what the signs of His coming in judgment on the Jewish nation are going to be, and now, finally, He is describing what the signs of the end of the age will be. His point is that there won't be any. It was possible for first-century Christians to discern when Jerusalem was going to be destroyed, but it will be impossible to figure out when the world is going to end. In fact, Jesus Himself doesn't know. Only the Father does.

Clearly, this text poses a huge problem for all of the so-called "experts" who make a living off of books and TV shows that predict the end of time. No matter how carefully they calculate dates from the book of Revelation, no matter how thoroughly they analyze current events, their work is futile. We should dismiss all such predictions as false.

Second, just as this coming is going to be unexpected, it is going to be sudden. Consider the warning of Matthew 24:37-39. Basically, there isn't going to be any ramp-up to the day of judgment. One moment, people are going to be going about their normal everyday business, and then wham! The skies are going to be filled with Jesus and His angels. Nobody's going to have a chance to adjust to the obvious presence of God. Nobody's going to have time to do any last-minute spiritual housekeeping. Instead, everyone is going to face judgment in their normal spiritual condition. It's going to be a surprise inspection of all of our souls, and that's just the way that God wants it.

Third, the effects of this coming are going to be individual in nature. Even though Jesus is going to come in a rush, He's going to be very precise in what He does. He tells us so in Matthew 24:40-41. Just as important as what this text says, though, is what it doesn't say. It doesn't read, "One family will be taken and one family will be left." It doesn't read, "One church will be taken and one church will be left." Instead, those who rise to meet Jesus in the clouds will be chosen on the basis of what they have done as individuals. In other words, friends, it doesn't matter that we have parents and grandparents who were really good Christians. It doesn't matter that we worship with a church that's full of good people who are pleasing to God. None of that will help us a bit if we aren't doing what is pleasing to God ourselves. Instead, we must acknowledge our own responsibility to do the things that will ensure our salvation on that day.

Be Watchful.

Jesus then proceeds to tell us that because His coming is going to play out in this way, that there are several things we must do. First, we must be watchful. We see His introductory remarks on this theme in Matthew 24:42-44. All of this logically follows from the sudden and unexpected nature of His return. Because we can't predict the time of that return, and because we can't change its impact on us after it occurs, we have to be ready all the time, just like a homeowner who

is expecting an attack by thieves. Of course, this watchfulness isn't literal. Staring up into the skies all the time won't accomplish anything useful. Instead, this must be a spiritual watchfulness, in which we order our lives according to God's word, so that whenever the divine surprise inspection happens, we aren't going to be caught in anything shameful.

Jesus confirms this understanding of watchfulness by describing what will happen to a servant who is obedient when his master returns. This description unfolds in Matthew 24:45-47. Notice first of all that Jesus portrays this servant as both faithful and wise. This isn't by accident. A faithful servant will be found ready when his master comes, simply because he is loyal to that master and carries out his will. A wise servant will be found ready because he knows that sooner or later the master will come back, and if he is unready, he will be punished. Both of these things apply to Christians today. Both our loyalty to God and our wisdom point us in the direction of readiness.

This servant was ready because he carried out the charge that His master had given him—to provide food for the master's household. As Christians, our task is much more complicated. We have a number of different duties to the Lord and to others. Sometimes, those responsibilities are explicitly defined; at other times, they are outlined in principle. Despite these differences, God expects us to be carrying out the tasks we have been given too. Let's ask ourselves: if we knew the Lord was coming back in a week, how would that knowledge change our lives? For most of us, there would be a significant difference. We'd spend that week getting as ready as we could. Brethren, if that's the way we would live if we knew, why should we live any differently now when we don't know? The truth is, underneath most of our lives is the assumption that the Lord isn't coming back anytime soon now, and that's why we make the decisions we make.

Jesus exposes the fallacy of this line of thinking in His tale of the wicked servant in Matthew 24:48-51. Notice that just like we so often think that the Lord will return a long time from now, this wicked servant expects the master to delay his coming, and that's why he lives the way that he lives. He abuses those who are in his care, and he associates with the wicked. For that, just as the faithful servant is rewarded, the wicked servant is cut in pieces. He's cast into torment with the hypocrites, because that's what somebody is who claims to be a servant but only lives for himself.

We need to appreciate what this means for us. So many times, there are spiritual changes in our lives that we put off until tomorrow. We say, "I'll get my life right with God tomorrow," or "I'll really get to work on uprooting that sin tomorrow," or "I'll talk to my neighbor about the gospel tomorrow," as though we have all the time in the world. Friends, that's exactly the same reasoning that the wicked servant used, and it will land us in the same disaster that he landed in. After all, anything that we can put off till tomorrow, we can put off till the next day, or the day after that, and with the prodding of Satan, we will put it off. How terrible it would be to lose our souls because of procrastination!

Be Steadfast.

As important as it is to be watchful, it's equally important to be steadfast. Jesus makes this point with the parable of the virgins, which begins in Matthew 25:1-4. Even though Jesus doesn't explain this one, the meaning of the parable is obvious. The bridegroom is the Lord Himself, and the virgins are the Christians who are waiting for His return. All of these virgins start off with lamps filled with oil, which we can think of as faith or commitment to Christ. Some of them, though, start off with only a limited amount of commitment, while others have reserves of steadfastness. Right now, each one of us has some amount of commitment in our hearts too. In some cases, because we faithfully assemble with the saints, study the Bible on our own, pray, and practice good works, we're all kinds of committed. In other cases, because those things aren't our priority, we're uncommitted, and whether we see it or not, we're vulnerable.

We see the vulnerability of the foolish virgins exposed in Matthew 25:5-9. If the bridegroom had come in the time they were expecting, they would have been fine, but instead, he was delayed. As a result, their lamps started running out of oil, and they didn't have any extra to refill those lamps with. The wise virgins couldn't help them without landing in the same fix, so the foolish virgins had to leave to find more oil. In the same way, Christians who don't have extra reserves of steadfastness and faith will be exposed. Maybe, like the foolish virgins, time will do them in, as the lamp of their faith flickers and finally goes out. Maybe, to expand the parable, they run into some crisis that makes them spill some oil out of their lamps, and they don't have anything to replace it with. Like the foolish virgins, those foolish Christians will drift off, and they won't be ready for the Lord when He returns. Notice too that this is an individual problem. No matter what help others provide or don't provide, if we fall away, we have only ourselves to blame.

We see the bittersweet conclusion of this story in Matthew 25:10-13. Things work out really well for the virgins who were prepared. The bridegroom finally shows up, and he invites the wise virgins into the wedding feast with him. Likewise, things will work out well for Christians who are prepared. If we are committed to sticking it out until the end, we will be invited into the joys of heaven. However, the foolish virgins get left out in the cold. The bridegroom wasn't interested that they had stood there for hours until they ran out of oil. He only cared that they weren't there when he returned, and the fact that they weren't there was their fault. Likewise, when the Lord returns, He will have no interest in our past works. His only concern will be what we're doing for Him right now, and if we've left for whatever reason, that too will be our own fault, and we too will be shut out of an eternity spent with God.