

The End of the World

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I now want to discuss something that is clearly, openly taught in Scripture which affects everybody, but is seldom mentioned and even less discussed. There is no doubt about Bible references to this event. The Bible tells us clearly and plainly that there will be the end of the world. The Bible tells us about the beginning in creation and the end in judgment.

Here the Bible differs from popular ideas of the world being here forever. Men are so often fanciful concerning the origin and the destiny of the world. The Bible is very plain: "In the beginning God created." And in the end God will judge and destroy. That is just a simple story. Details are not given about either phase, either at the beginning or at the end. Exposition has always been confusing. When anyone attempts to give one complete view, then confusion results.

In the first three verses of Matthew 24, we are told how the disciples asked the Lord three questions.

And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple; and his disciples came to him for to show him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world (Matthew 24:1-3)?

In this passage is the record of how they asked three questions: "When shall these things be? What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" Here are three different questions. By keeping those three perspectives in view, some feeling of understanding can come to the reader.

These three are by no means identical questions. For instance, when they asked, "When shall these things be?" they were probably referring to the destruction of the temple. I think they were asking, "When do you think the city of Jerusalem will be destroyed?"

Jesus began His answer to these three questions by saying that there would be wars and rumors of wars, and famine, pestilence and earthquakes in various places. Saints will be persecuted, believers will quarrel with each other. False doctrine and heresies will arise. Iniquity shall abound. But in spite of all this, the Gospel will be preached to the ends of the earth. We may recall that all this has been going on ever since the Lord Jesus Christ was on earth. These happenings were not to be the end of the world, rather, they precede the end of the world.

Jesus also taught that there would be a time of great tribulation. People who study the Scriptures differ on when the Great Tribulation will be, but regardless of the differing views, all agree the Scriptures teach there will be a time of tribulation. Jesus also taught that there would be a great catastrophe of natural events. This might be called a cosmic eruption. The sun, moon and stars will all be affected. When this universal calamity occurs, this age will come to an end.

No man knows when the end of this world will be. In fact, Jesus said that He Himself did not know and that the angels did not know. God the Father alone knows. He is working according to His will. He is not as interested in when as He is in what. He is not as interested in time as He is in people and events. One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as one day.

However, even though we do not know when it will occur, we should certainly be ready for the end of the world. When should we get ready? The only answer for that is "Today." Jesus Christ may come back today, and so we should be ready today.

When someone says, "Oh, I know the Lord will come back, but it will be sometime later," this is dangerous. When someone says, "Oh, I don't think Jesus will ever return," this is wrong.

You will remember on that Ascension day when He went up in full view of them all the angels said, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). There is no possible way of understanding that statement without admitting that the early church was actually taught by the Word of God to expect His coming in due time.

Spiritual blessings will come to those who believe that His coming is imminent. The belief in the imminent coming of Christ means that there is no reason why He could not come back today. There is no big event in God's program which has to happen before He can return. But even this wise attitude toward the time of His coming is not as important as the simple conviction: "Jesus Christ is coming back!"

In verses 4-14 there is a general description of conditions prevailing between the first and the second coming of the Lord. It is not difficult to recognize contemporary conditions in this. We should note how the Lord said, "Take heed that no man deceive you." This is a warning that one needs to keep in mind in everything he reads or hears that has to do with the predictions about the future.

And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come (Matthew 24:4-14).

This seems to be actually a description of our present day. As you see one feature after another as it is described it would seem we are living in that time between the first and the second coming of the Son of God.

Matthew 24:15-22 records a description of conditions at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. The disciples asked, "When shall these things be?" And so He describes it.

When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand;) then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains: let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house: neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes. And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days! But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day: for then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened (Matthew 24:15-22).

All of that fits in a description of the conditions that there were in Judea at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem.

In Matthew 24:23-35 there is a description of conditions at the time of the end of the world, and of the time of His second coming. After the destruction of Jerusalem the next event in God's whole program is the end of the world with the anticipated return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect (Matthew 24:23-24).

During this time while we are awaiting the coming of the Lord, conditions in the world will develop in such a way that there will be many people claiming that they are bringing us the last word, the final word of the whole program. The Lord is warning us not to pay any attention to this kind of thing.

Behold, I have told you before. Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not. For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be (Matthew 24:25-27).

If anybody has any private secret insight to share with us different from what is in Scripture, we are warned to pay them no attention, because the coming of the Lord will not be private and will not be secret. Everyone will know. "For wheresoever the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together." And may I say that so far as that verse is concerned, I have never anywhere ever read anything from anybody that felt he could fully explain what those words mean.

Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken (Matthew 24:29).

A similar passage in Scripture is in the book of Revelation where you are pointed forward to the future: the windup so far as this whole world is concerned.

And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Matthew 24:30).

In II Thessalonians there is another description of this same thing (II Thessalonians 1:7-9).

And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: so likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away (Matthew 24:31-35).

I am inclined to feel when He speaks about this generation, this particular time in the history of the world, this particular experience will not be over until all these things will come to pass. In other words, present conditions as they are will continue right up to the time of the coming of the Lord. Speculating on the time of these things (Matthew 24:36-41): the destruction of Jerusalem, the end of the world, the coming of the Lord, is not wise.

But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only. But as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be (Matthew 24:36-37).

Many people will say, "I do not know anything about it." That is very likely quite true: they do not know anything about it. That does not mean it is not going to happen.

Actually in Noah's time "they knew not until the flood came and took them all away." Those people had been told that it would rain, and that the flood would come, but they did not believe it. They never took it to heart. But it came.

... So shall also the coming of the Son of man be. Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come (Matthew 21:39-42).

After He had commented on the fact that the time would be uncertain and unknown as to when He would come, then He gave a parable to warn against speculating.

Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh. Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season (Matthew 24:42-45)?

Then Jesus of Nazareth told the parable of how the Lord came back suddenly, and the servant that had anticipated that he would come back later, did not figure on him coming back that night, was the one that was actually judged. Speculating on the time of the fulfillment of the prophecies of God is not wise.

While details may be obscure, vague and confusing, borne facts are obvious. In this discussion let us keep some things in mind. There are some things that we know for sure. This world will pass away. That is very important. The Lord will return. No one knows when. Speculation as to when is dangerous. These things we can know for sure.

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, and the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up (II Peter 3:10).

A person believing in the Lord Jesus Christ needs to believe all the way through because a very important truth about Christ is His return. As surely as you believe in His coming again it will affect you. Our Lord Jesus Christ, in speaking about His coming back and pointing out that nobody knew the day and the hour (not even the Son), told a parable of an evil servant who thought that the master was not coming back any time soon, and because of that he mistreated his fellow servants. The Lord told that parable by way of warning that no one knows when He is coming.

And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure (I John 3:3).

This is one of the most dynamic of all truths. Some people feel that we would be motivated to do the will of God out of gratitude: inclined to serve God because He has done something for us, and inclined to turn to the Lord Jesus Christ because He died for us. All of which is true, but not the whole truth. The truth is that the Lord Jesus Christ is now alive and we should turn to Him, not only because He once died for us but because He now lives for us. It is not only true that I can be grateful that one time Jesus Christ took my sins upon Himself and bore them away in His own body on the cross, but even now He intercedes on my behalf and prays for me every day. But more than that is true: He will come again. And those who will be with Him or will be here when He comes will see Him person to person.

In II Peter 3:10 we have two aspects of the truth of the coming of the Lord: one refers to the time of

His coming, and the other to the result of His coming. "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night." This probably does not refer to any one calendar date: this is the time of His appearing. It might not be a twenty-four hour period; it might be a split second, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, that He will come. He will come in the clouds of heaven and in great glory.

This is not seen in the natural process; He is not coming as a result of anything going on in this world. There are things coming because of natural process: we having morning, noon and night; we have the sun rising and setting. If the sun rises in the morning, normally speaking it will set at night. We have springtime, summer, harvest and winter. If you put your seed in the ground, later in the year will be the time of the harvest. This is predictable. But the coming of the Lord is not predictable in that fashion; it will not be the result of anything done in this world. It is in the will of God, as part of an act of God. The day of the Lord will be according to the mind and will of God. As such it will come as a unit by itself like an act of God. We do not know too much about how thieves come in the night, but they are unexpected and unannounced. That is the way it will be with His coming, in such an hour as you think not.

There follows a description of what will happen, ". . . the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up." Have you ever thought through the fact that nobody knows what fire is? What happens is according to the material: wood burns one way, cloth another; coal burns one way and straw burns another way, and oil burns differently. When we speak about the heavens burning, we do not know what the heavens are composed of, but when we speak about the earth burning, it will melt. Whatever the heavens are composed of, they will "pass away with a great noise, the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up." The description here is very much like the explosion of an atomic bomb.

Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved and the elements shall melt with fervent heat (II Peter 3:11-12)?

What does the end of the world mean to people who believe it? Is this unsettling to people? It can be. Then shall we not believe it? Is it unsettling to think about dying? It depends entirely on what we base our thinking. The Bible warns us about expecting that we have a long time. The Lord Jesus told the parable about a farmer who had such good crops his barns and granaries could not hold the produce.

And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou has provided (Luke 12:18-20)?

Scripture tells us that the coming of the Lord is something sure. Peter discussed what difference it will make. "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness." Some may think that "holy conversation" means being exceptionally spiritual, probably spending our time in praying or something of that nature. That would be a commendable practice but that is not what is meant by holy conversation. The word "holy" as an adjective means a hundred percent sincere, and "conversation" here means manner of life. So Peter asked what kind of person ought we to be in all our affairs. We should play it honest and straight. Godliness is that condition in you or in me when we are obedient to God and we respond to Him. It refers to an

attitude of walking with the Lord and doing the things that are pleasing in His sight. "Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God" means simply moving along day by day. A good phrase to use here would be anticipating it, expecting it, realizing there is nothing that will interfere with it. Here the phrase "the day of God" is used like "the day of the Lord" is used in verse 10: the time when God will reveal Himself, and the time when He will go into action, "wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved."

Someone may say that if they are to be dissolved it must be going on now. How do we know it isn't going on now? You and I do not know. We do know that in the day of God the heavens being on fire will be dissolved and the elements shall melt with fervent heat. When we think of elements we can think of earth: the elements on earth shall melt with fervent heat. Inasmuch as it will happen that way, what kind of people ought we to be? We ought to be genuinely sincere and humbly walking with God.