

“Look Out!”

(Matthew 24:3-51)

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There seems to be a lot of interest these days in the end of the world, at least if you watch the History Channel, and all its specials on Nostradamus and the year 2012, when the world supposedly is going to end. Whenever times are tough or chaotic, people get interested in how the world is going, whether there is meaning in the course of history, and what is our final hope.

It was like that in Bible times, too. In fact, in times of great national stress, there developed a kind of literature called “apocalyptic” writing. It’s what you see in part of the book of Daniel, and in the last book of the Bible, Revelation. It contained strange images and predictions of the end, and a picture of God’s final victory in history. That day was called “the Day of the LORD,” and it was the day God would return to judge the world. The end of the world is going to be the time Jesus’ returns. In fact, this long passage from Matthew 24 is so important to the Bible’s perspective that it is repeated in Mark 13 and in Luke 21. It telescopes the events of the end of the world with the destruction of Jerusalem just 40 years down the road from Jesus’ earthly career. That was something the prophets in Israel often did—they combined both a long view and a short view in their prophecy, looking at the coming judgment that was just around the corner, and the end of the age or end of the world that would bring in God’s kingdom.

Let me share some characteristics of Jesus’ Second Coming, because God has some important things for us to understand.

First, the end of the world will come at a time of moral confusion:

I don’t think we have to spend a lot of time describing how morally corrupt our world has become. We don’t have to read headlines to know that people have lost their moral compass.

I see moral compromise in the way government works, or fails to work. For a lot of the country, it makes no difference what the political party is, the people have lost confidence in the government’s willingness to act for the public good. Not all politicians are like that, but too many get confused, and see public office as just a way to get money and power for themselves.

I see moral compromise in the kind of entertainment we spend time with. Movies and shows and video games keep pushing the envelope to become more violent, more sexually explicit. And we get used to it. I remember how much I loved shows like Batman or Bonanza when I was a kid. One time I saw the old show Bonanza was on TV, and I told my daughter, “This is a great show. Let’s watch it—you’re going to love it.” We watched for a while and she was completely bored. I said, “Uh, this is really dumb.” It was too old-fashioned. Hard to watch that when you’ve gotten used to the adrenaline rush of 24. Sometimes I wonder if we get a little jaded. And if we slip in our commitment to living God’s way, our commitment to holiness, that doesn’t necessarily mean we aren’t real Christians. But it does mean it’s going to hurt our faith, and that’s why Jesus says, “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold” (Matthew 24:12).

When societies run down, ethical standards get compromised. It will be like that in the end. The Book of Revelation paints a portrait of immorality that gets outrageous in the end. It says,

“The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.” (Revelation 10:20-21)

Again I ask, you think are society has a problem with any of that stuff?

I see moral compromise in the spiritual confusion of our times. People push themselves forward and spiritual leaders and authorities, as new messiahs. Others say you can push Islam or New Age, but don't not Christian faith. Last month, Brit Hume suggested that Tiger Woods should check out Christianity, because it offers forgiveness in a way that Buddhism doesn't, and he got blasted in the press. There are many ways we can get deceived.

Jesus tells us that is going to happen, and it's a sign of the end. He says,

“Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. (Matthew 24:4-5)

“At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time.

“So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it.” (Matthew 24:23-25)

Paul says in the New Testament that we need to be wise, not swept along with the false reports of our day. He writes,

“Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way.” (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3a)

Second, the end of the world will come will come suddenly.

The Old Testament prophets said it was going to come that way, too. The prophet Zephaniah wrote,

"The great day of the LORD is near—
near and coming quickly. (Zephaniah 1:14)

Jesus teaches that in our passage. The end is near, and it will come quickly, especially if you're wrapped up in worldly things. It's like in the time of Noah in Genesis. Jesus says,

“For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two

women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.” (Matthew 24:38-41)

When the flood came, Noah was ready. Everyone else was working, partying, continuing on in family life, not paying attention. It’s a warning to us to pay attention to eternal matters, to the affairs of the soul, of life and death and that God has a claim on us. It should give perspective and motivation for everything we do. The early church lived in that expectation, too, like when Paul wrote,

“The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman.” (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3)

There is a God in heaven, and he has a claim on your life. One of these days, he’s coming to judge the world, and his coming will be sudden.

Third, end of the world will be terrifying.

Jesus says,

“How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.” (Matthew 24:19-22)

At this point in the passage, Jesus is telescoping the events of the end of the world with the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple at the hands of the Romans. It’s a scary picture. Why does Jesus talk about that? What’s the point?

I think it is so we will have hope. “In this world, you will have tribulation,” says Jesus, “But take heart, I have overcome the world.” He even tells us, “For the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.” That is, evil is strong in this world, but it is not ultimate. It has boundaries, because God sets limits on it.

It’s also so that we’ll take seriously those days and prepare. Not by becoming survivalists, and building bomb shelters. But by being about the work he has for us. And that leads to the next thing.

Fourth, in light of the end of the world we need to be spiritually prepared.

Jesus lets us know about the end so we will be ready, so we’ll do more than simply survive but will thrive. Like God told the Old Testament prophet,

“Even now,” declares the LORD,
 “return to me with all your heart,
 with fasting and weeping and mourning.”

“Rend your heart
 and not your garments.

Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity.” (Joel 2:12-13)

Rending the garment, that is tearing your clothes was a sign of grief over sin, a sign of repentance, and that’s what the Lenten season is about. It’s turning away from sin and turning to God. It’s an opportunity to take stock of our lives and to come to God who is ready to receive us. The coming conclusion of all things means we need to be ready. Jesus says,

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” (Matthew 24:42-44)

He also says,

“He who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24:13-14)

So, the end of the world will come at a morally confusing time. It will come suddenly. It will be terrifying. And we need to be prepared.

Let me close with just one more observation. It is simply this, that the end of the world means we stand before our judge, and that judge is Jesus. It isn’t just unbelievers who come before the judgment seat. We must all appear before the judgment seat of God, and the judge is Jesus, who carries the authority of God. That is what the Hebrews makes clear when it says, “It is appointed for people to die once and after this comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). That judgment scene is the concluding scene from the Bible:

“Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me, to render to every person according to what he has done” (Revelation 22:12).

If you know Jesus, that shouldn’t scare us but give us hope. Like the old catechism says:

How does Christ's return "to judge the living and the dead" comfort you?

In all my distress and persecution
I turn my eyes to the heavens
and confidently await as judge the very One
who has already stood trial in my place before God
and so has removed the whole curse from me.
All his enemies and mine
he will condemn to everlasting punishment:
but me and all his chosen ones
he will take along with him
into the joy and the glory of heaven. (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 52)

It's important how we live, and we live in light of his coming. That gives us both accountability and hope.