

January 23, 2011
Daniel 7:13-18 / Matthew 24:36-44 / Luke 17:22-37
What to Expect Prior to the Day the Son of Man Returns

I was sitting in the office of my church in Honduras one day, when a young lady who attended the school my children attended, knocked at my door, visibly shaking and nearly in tears.

So I invited her in, only to realize through our conversation, that a group Christians friends she knew, had literally scared the living wits out of her in relation to the second coming of Christ -- using very morbid imagery and unfounded predictions concerning world events.

It was 1999 (just prior to Y2K) and many Christian leaders jumped on the "Tell people their fortune, and make your own" bandwagon, selling millions of books and convincing many earnest believers to prepare for the worst.

And as a result you had people who went out and bought guns / and stored up 2 years worth of food / and built fortified bunkers / prepared for the economic and societal meltdown that would occur, because they were told by these so called prophets of doom that when the date turned from 1999 to 2000 (at the turn of the millennium) every computer in the world would crash and all chaos would break out.

I remember it well! Because unfortunately, she was not the only one who believed them, and came to me nervous and frightened, asking if I thought it was true and what they should do.

And I told her the same thing I told everyone else. That the main thing was not to hunker down, and go into some self-protective survivalist mode, but to be sure she was right with God and had trusted in Christ alone for her salvation.

Jesus call in relation to the end, or His return, is not to escape, or survive, but to persevere unto the end (in the faith), that we might be saved. / It's to believe and never stop believing, not survive!

It's the same thing I told my flock after 9/11: You can't stop living or traveling or attending social gatherings. If you do they've won! We merely need to be ready at any time to meet our Maker! / We need to be sure that no matter where we are or what may happen, the issue of where we stand with Christ has been resolved -- once and for all!

And it's not that God can't use FEAR to bring us to Himself. Yet as Martin Luther was quick to point out (and I'll paraphrase):

If fear is the only thing that drives one to seek Christ, they will just as rapidly stop seeking Him when the fear goes away. The fear of God, must eventually give way to a heartfelt love for God, or people will tend to walk away from God.

We saw that after Y2K. When it passed with barely a blip or a ripple on the world scene, people who had shown spiritual interest beforehand, took a breather / and felt they had a reprieve -- waiting as they always seem to do -- until the next scare comes along to frighten them toward God.

The same was true for 9/11. The Sunday after 9/11 (so the pollsters tell us) 7 million people who had never gone to church before attended some type of worship service! / Yet as their fears subsided so did the church attendance of most. / Continued earnest interest in God waned, as fear waned.

WHY? Because FEAR may cause people to seek Christ, but it doesn't drive people to Christ. That happens as the Holy Spirit convicts people of sin and judgment and the righteousness we need, but do not possess in ourselves. It's the Spirit that drives people to Christ, and then keeps them there until God's mercy takes whatever fear may have been present in all that, and turns to love for Jesus.

So what's my "take" on this passage is this? That Jesus is NOT trying to scare ANYONE, but rather, inform EVERYONE so that they might be prepared for that day -- WHENEVER IT MAY COME. / The issue is NOT to CREATE FEAR or an obsession with self-preservation. The issue is to help people see their need to be saved, as Paul says, so they will NOT have to suffer the wrath that will come upon ALL who have NOT taken refuge in Christ!!

So, having said all that, let's look at our text! And since it going to be impossible to cover every detail of the text in detail, I will instead seek to focus our attention, on what I believe are the main points Jesus wants us to glean from these verses, beginning **FIRST** with verse 22, where Jesus says, "The time is coming when you will long to see ONE OF THE DAYS of the Son of Man, but will not see it."

This is a point many often fail to see when they consider the future: That Jesus is clearly stating that there will not simply be ONE "Day of the Lord," or ONE "Day of the Son of Man," but many. / Because in Scripture, "The Day of the Lord" can refer to any particular occasion or day when God moved in great power / or visited His people / be it in redeeming love and blessing / or harsh discipline and chastisement.

Sometimes the "day of the Lord" is called a "day of reckoning" / or a "day of vengeance" / or a "day of disaster and wrath and darkness and clouds and doom for the nations!" / The "day of God's anger," or very simply "the day God visits you."

Yet other times "the day of the Lord" is called "the day the Lord gives you relief from your suffering," as when He judged the Assyrian armies threatening Jerusalem (Is. 14:3 / Is. 37). / Or "the day that songs will be sung in the land" (Is. 26:1) / or "the day the deaf will hear the Words of the Lord" (Is. 29:18).

In fact, that explains why Jesus can say in verse 22 that they will "long to see one of the days of the Son of Man." Because some of them will be days of deliverance / or rescue / or revival / or the joy of redemption / and not simply black, dark, days of disaster as the present day prophets of doom always seem to suggest.

And in that sense, they are not simply days that are "yet to come." Many of them have already come! A "day of the Lord" occurred in 722 B.C. when God judged the Northern Kingdom by using the Babylonians as the "rod of His anger," to carry out His judgment upon them for their sins of idolatry, greed, hedonism and abuse of the poor and needy.

Lamentations says of that event: "This is the day we have waited for; we have lived to see it." / And Ezekiel says the same: "The day has come!" [That is, the day of the Lord he had warned Israel about because of their idolatry.] "The day is here!" he says. "It has come! Doom has burst forth, the rod has budded, arrogance has blossomed... The time has come, the day has arrived."

Thus it is obvious that some of those days have already come / while others are still yet to come. / Some are days of deliverance / and others are days of judgment and wrath. / Some are past / and some are future. And as Jesus makes clear in this text, there will be MANY such days, and not just ONE!

"The time is coming," said Jesus, "when you will long to see ONE of the days of the Son of Man." Not simply, "THE DAY" of the Son of Man as if somehow there were ONLY ONE!

In fact, we could say that the day Jesus died or rose or poured out the Spirit on Pentecost were "days of the Lord." / The same could be said of the "day" Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. / or the "day" the Roman Empire fell in 476 A.D. / or the "day" of the Bubonic Plague in Europe between 1348-1350, when 75,000,000 people or 1/2 Europe's population died / or the "day" Charlemagne repelled the Muslim invasion of Europe in the Battle of Tours in 732 A.D. / They could all be called "days of the Lord."

One could even make the case that the "day" the Atomic Bomb fell / or Israel was re-established as a nation / or the terrorists attacked on 9/11 / could all be what we might call "days of the Lord" -- days of blessing or judgment.

Then **SECONDLY**, in vv. 23-24, Jesus warns His disciples that throughout the church age, people will be saying, "Here He is!" or "There He is!" / The church will ALWAYS be plagued with "wanna be prophets" who have the inside scoop on the future / and want to convince everyone else they know the day / or the place / or the time / or the events leading up to the exact hour when Jesus will return. And all that despite the fact that Jesus says no one can know the day, and thus, "Do not go running after them!"

Despite that unmistakably clear warning, the history of the church is littered with individuals or groups who have done that very thing.

(So here's a little history lesson)

The first that we know of happened around 53 AD (before all the books of the Bible were written) because a rumor that Christ's return had already taken place caused the Thessalonians to panic, thinking they had missed his return.

The next was in the 2nd century, when a Roman priest (basing his prediction on the dimensions of Noah's ark) said Christ would return in 500 AD.

And the year that goes down as the most heightened period of 2nd coming hysteria ever, was the year 1000 A.D. / As one man records: ***"Nearly all the members of society were affected by the prediction that Jesus would return at the start of the new millennium. Not because any prophecies had been fulfilled, but because the number 1000 was considered the magical -- the number of perfection. During the concluding months of 999 AD, everyone was on their best behavior / people sold all their earthly goods and gave the proceeds to the poor / swarms of pilgrims headed east to meet the Lord at Jerusalem / buildings went unrepaired / crops were left unplanted / and criminals were even set free from jails."***

It happened again in 1033, people thinking they should have measured 1,000 years from Christ's crucifixion rather than His birth.

And I could go on and on to 1186 A.D. in Spain / 1420 A.D. in Czechoslovakia / 1524-1526 A.D. in Munster, Germany with the Anabaptists / and 1666 in London (due in part to the "666" in the date).

Here in the states the greatest example was a Baptist minister named William Miller, who had thousands of followers scattered across the country. He told them Jesus would return on October 22, 1844.

As a result hundreds sold all their earthly possessions / dressed in white robes / and went up on the highest mountains or hills that they could find, to be closer to heaven when Jesus came back on that day. / It has since come to be called "The Great Disappointment."

In 1910 it was the return of Halley's Comet, seen by many to be a "sign" of Christ's return.

In 1914 it was Charles Taze Russell (founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses) predicting Jesus would return that year, but quickly changing the date to 1918 when He did not. After his death his followers changed it to 1925 / then 1941 / then 1975 / and finally 1984 / earning them the record for "The most wrong predictions of any group in all of history."

In 1988 Edgar Whisenant wrote the book, "88 Reasons Why the Rapture is in 1988," followed one year later by the sequel, "89 Reasons Why the Rapture will be in 1989." (After which he thankfully gave up!)

Two years later it was a group of Australian Christians predicted Jesus would return to Sydney Harbor, in Australia, at 9 a.m. on March 31, 1991 (claiming to know not just the day, but the actual time of His return) -- with at least 18 other well-known predictions made between 1993 and 1999.

And, of course, we now have Harold Camping (Family Christian Radio) telling us it will be May 21, 2011 / while others (basing it on the end of the Mayan calendar) say 2012 / and Don Koenig is predicting it will be 2034.

And what does all this tell us? Something VERY important! That a persuasive, convincing, charismatic type person / appealing to codes and secrets and numbers and mysteries / and preying on the fears and gull abilities of people, can often **SWAY PEOPLE MORE** than the clear warnings of Jesus Himself.

LISTEN: To such people, Jesus says, our response should always be: **"DO NOT GO AFTER THEM!"** (v. 23). / For Jesus is very clear when He says, "NO ONE knows the time or the day, not the angels in heaven, nor even the Son of Man, but only the Father." It is unknown and unknowable!

So don't be fooled! Such people can be so persuasive and so convincing, they can almost seem to cast a spell over even the most devout and well-meaning of believers.

That's why Jesus says in Mt. 24:24-25: ***"False Christ's and false prophets WILL ARISE, and even show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if***

it were possible, even the elect (even earnest believers). Be warned," He says, "for I have told you in advance."

It's His way of calling us to exercise great discernment / and great wisdom / and great restraint, especially as 2012 approaches / or whatever other date someone comes up with in the future!

I plead with you: ***Don't listen to false prophets, fueled by a pride that has convinced them they are so special, they can discover or know for certain that which God says is unknown and unknowable! / It's something He does not want us to know!***

Which brings us to our **THIRD** obvious point from today's text -- that the time of Jesus return will not only be unknown and unknowable to all -- but when it happens, will be visible to all, like lightning that flashes out of one part of the sky and shines to the part (v. 24) / and it will come when one least expects it (vv. 26-30).

LISTEN: ***Jesus doesn't want us to get caught up in waiting or trying to predict when that day will be. / He doesn't want us to drop everything / sell everything / go up on a mountain / and stand around waiting! / He specifically tells us not to! He merely wants us to be ready no matter when that day will be!***

And we'll need to be ready at all times, because the day He returns will not be much different than any other day in history. It will be a mixed bag according to Jesus! There will be wars and rumors of wars (like always) / earthquakes and famines in various places (like always) / false prophets and lawlessness (that is disregard for God's law) / and people lacking love for one another (as has always been the case).

In fact, that seems to be the general overall message He gives. Things will be pretty much the way they always have been. People will be, "eating, and drinking, and giving in marriage," says Jesus, "just like in Noah's day." On the day Jesus returns, brides and grooms will be standing side by side at a church altar / dreaming about their future life together / happy, joyful, and smiling / and without any warning whatsoever, it will happen!

Some places will be at war / and others struggling with some type of natural disaster / or exhibiting a general relational coldness to the plight of others / while still others will be eating with their families / or sitting around chatting over a drink / and getting married (vv. 26-27).

On the very day He returns, says Jesus, people will be "buying and selling" -- shopping for food at the store or clothes at the mall / buying and selling cars or houses or land or stocks or condos or rental proper-ties for retirement!

They'll be planting flowers or vegetables in their gardens / listening to the birds chirping - just like the people of Sodom, when all of a sudden, without any warning whatsoever -- it rained down fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all (vv. 28-29).

People will be up on their "roof tops," He says. And He doesn't mean clamoring to escape rising flood waters! / In the Middle East the "roof" was their version of a porch! It's where someone went to relax after a hard day's work, to see the view, or get a better chance of catching the evening breeze!

It's His way of saying people will be relaxing and caught totally unprepared! Which is why He warns them: "Don't go down into your house to get anything!" (v. 31).

People, He says, will be working in the field, having gone to work like any other typical workday. They'll be caught so much by surprise, that they never would have dreamed of saying goodbye to their family as they left for work that morning! And they won't have the chance to run back to do it once it every-thing begins! That's how suddenly and unexpectedly it will happen.

The sun may be shinning / or it may be setting / or it may be night (v. 34). / And all of a sudden with NO WARNING WHATSOEVER -- it will happen! / "It will come," says Jesus, "like a thief in the night." / That is, TOTALLY UNNANOUNCED and UNEXPECTED!

That's why we need to be ready at all times! Because the only "sign" that will definitively and undeniably declare the day of His coming, will be His coming on

the clouds of heaven with great power and glory! / His actual coming is the only thing that will definitively pinpoint the day of His coming!

Which is why He can say in Mt. 24:42: "Be on the alert, for you do not know which day the Lord is coming." It could be any day -- even today!

Which brings us to the **LAST** and most important point of all -- the one stressed in the last 7 verses: Don't go back inside your house to retrieve your things (v. 31a). Don't go back in from the field to get your family, or your things (v. 31b). Don't look back! "Remember Lot's wife" He says. She merely looked back to the city she loved and called home or maybe the house she so cherished and enjoyed, and was judged on the spot!

You see, this passage means a lot to me. And it means a lot to me because of a spiritual experience I had way back in 1980, just about two months after I was converted. It's an experience I've only shared from the pulpit twice in 24 years, but it fits here because it summarizes this text.

I was in Marion, Indiana, living on the second floor of a house for delinquent youth. I had finished my chores and duties around 11:00 p.m. and headed to bed. It was a good day and my heart was rejoicing in God. So after I read the Bible a little, just before midnight, I shut off my light and began praying.

Actually, I simply started saying, over and over and over again: "Praise you Lord. Praise you Lord. Praise You. Praise You..." And all of a sudden -- while I laid there on my bed fully awake -- I felt an intense electrical-like sensation begin in my feet / flow up through my body / and out the top of my head!

In fact, every time I said the words, "praise God," it increased in speed and intensity, and started to rush so fast through my body that I felt like my spirit was being sucked out of me!

Better yet, I felt like God was asking me to stop resisting it, and let go, and let my spirit be sucked leave my body! And as soon as I thought that I remember

saying to myself: "But I can't Lord. I need time to say goodbye to my family and friends."

In fact, I became so scared that started rebuking it, until it gradually went away, thinking it couldn't be from God because God wouldn't do some-thing to me that would frighten me so much!

But then, given what I believed at that time, it hit me: I thought it must have been the rapture and I refused to go because I could not bring myself to say goodbye to this life or the things of this life.

In fact, when I prayed about what it possibly could have meant, God led me right to these verses (v. 31 in particular). / And believe me when I say I've prayed many times since then that it would happen again -- that God would give me another chance, and that this time I would not hesitate or resist, or rebuke it. Yet it's never happened again.

Yet the one thing it **DID DO** was confirm in my heart the message of these verses: That we must be ready at any moment for His return, which will mean being called immediately to leave all that is near and dear to us. It will involve "being taken" as Jesus puts it.

And because that's true, we must be so loosely attached (affection-wise) to anything in this world / that when He does come / and He does call us / we will gladly go to be with Him -- without hesitating, or looking back, or turning back, or clinging to anything in this world -- and I do mean anything!

If your family members are not saved, you won't have time to witness to them, and if they are you will see them in eternity. So don't turn back!