

“Loving His Appearing”
Luke 21:20-36
November 6, 2011

INTRODUCTION:

Our passage today is Luke’s version of the most significant address given by Jesus on the topic of his second coming. It is commonly referred to as the Olivet Discourse because, according to Matthew, he spoke these words on the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem. The speech was occasioned by an admiring comment made by the disciples about the temple. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, it was an impressive edifice. King Herod the Great launched a building project on the temple that lasted over 80 years, from 19 B.C. to A.D. 63. During this time, the temple was enlarged and beautified. Josephus reports that Herod used large marble stones that were 67 feet long, 12 feet high and 18 feet deep. He also gold-plated the gates and doors, as well as several sections of the walls. Between the gold plating and the white marble, it was reported that when the sun shone upon it, the glare was such that one’s eyes had to be averted. It was like looking at the splendor of God himself. It’s no wonder that the disciples looked at it admiringly.

Jesus sees things with different eyes, eyes that grasp the future as easily as the present. What he sees is that in just a few decades every one of these giant marble stones will be torn down and all the gold stripped from the temple. The entire city will be ruined, and the Jewish nation will be no more. We know from historical records outside the Bible that this happened in A.D. 70, when the Romans laid siege to the city and destroyed it. According to Josephus, the siege was so bad and food became so scarce that the residents of the city resorted to cannibalism of their own children. During the entire ordeal, 1.1 million Jews lost their lives. Much of this chapter is devoted to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. In verse 25, Jesus expands the discussion to an end other than that of Jerusalem—the end of the world when Jesus returns. After informing them of some of the particulars of his return, Jesus spends most of his effort in warning his followers to be ready for this return.

I’ve taken the title of this sermon from Paul’s second letter to Timothy. He says there that the Lord will award a crown of righteousness **“to all who have loved his appearing”** (4:8). In the very next paragraph, Paul goes on to talk about someone who has not loved the appearing of Jesus. Instead, he has loved the world. **“For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me”** (4:10). Our attitude toward the return of Jesus is the canary in the coal mine. If there is dread of his return rather than a love for it, the indication is of a heart that is amiss. Do we love his appearing, or, like Demas, do we love the world and fear his appearing? I find it significant that Jesus doesn’t bring up this topic of his return in order to satisfy our curiosity. He does so instead for a very

practical and pastoral reason, that we might love him and his appearing instead of loving the world. Let's listen to his teaching that we might learn to love his appearing.

I. The Signs of His Appearing

Jesus speaks, both here and elsewhere, of several signs pointing to his return. He says in verse 25, **“There will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves.”** Let me first survey all the signs of the second coming spoken of throughout the New Testament, and then return to the ones mentioned specifically in our passage.

In his book *The Bible and the Future*, Anthony Hoekema summarizes the signs of Jesus' return by listing them in three categories. First are the signs evidencing the grace of God. There are two of these, beginning with the statement in Matthew 24:14 that the gospel will be preached throughout the whole world before the end will come. The second sign of God's grace, developed by Paul in Romans 11, is something called the fullness of Israel, by which I understand him to mean that there will be a period of time in which many Jews will come to faith in Christ just prior to the close of this age. The second category of signs are those indicating opposition to God. There are three of these: apostasy, the appearance of the antichrist, and tribulation for God's people. Jesus speaks of the last of these, tribulation, in our passage. The third category of signs are those indicating divine judgment. They include such things as wars, earthquakes and famines.

That's the overview of all the signs, and I want to look more carefully at the specific signs Jesus speaks of in our passage. But before doing that, let me say just a couple of general things about all these signs. First, these signs should not be viewed as applying exclusively to the time just prior to Jesus' return. They are viewed in the New Testament as applying to the entire period of time between the first and second coming of Christ. But the signs increase in intensity until they reach a climax just prior to Jesus' return. We can see this easily with the teaching about the antichrist. In his first epistle, John wrote, **“Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come”** (2:18). He speaks both of many antichrists and one particular antichrist. Both are true. Throughout this era, many will come who will embody the spirit of the antichrist. But there will be one who will be the champion antichrist just before the appearing of Jesus. The same is true of the other signs.

The second thing I want to say about these signs in general is that they are not meant to be so precise as to allow us to date the return of Christ with any precision. Church history is filled with those who have made the error of

thinking they have cracked some imagined Bible code and can date with precision the return of Christ. A popular book on this when I was a young Christian was *The Late Great Planet Earth*, by Hal Lindsey, in which he said that Jesus would return within 40 years of Israel's regaining of its nationhood in 1948. More recently, the popular radio preacher Harold Camping claimed that Jesus would return on May 21 of this year. When that date passed without Jesus' predicted return, Camping revised his interpretation on the fly and said that a spiritual judgment occurred on that date, and the real end would occur on October 21 of this year, just two and a half weeks ago. Jesus had said that no one could know the time of his return. So whenever anyone says they do know the time we can know they are at worst a false prophet, and at best a misguided and poor interpreter of the Scriptures.

Let's look a little more carefully at the sign spoken of in verses 25-26. **“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the power of the heavens will be shaken.”** These are all signs within nature itself, not only on the earth, but in the heavens as well. While Jesus doesn't specify the exact nature of these signs, he does speak clearly about people's reaction to these events in nature. He speaks of the emotional responses of people, using words such as distress, perplexity, fear and foreboding. There will be natural disasters over which the residents on the earth will feel completely helpless. Such will be the force of these disasters that the strong emotional response will be one of fear and foreboding. Note too that it won't be localized, as are many of the natural disasters we witness today. We experience natural disasters such as floods, tornadoes and earthquakes. But the disasters preceding the return of Christ are far more widespread, so that all the nations will be in distress.

II. The Nature of His Appearing

Only verse 27 speaks of the actual coming of Jesus. **“And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”** Note two things about the nature of his coming. It will be visible and filled with glory. The first thing Jesus mentions about his coming is that it will be seen by all. “They will see the Son of Man coming.” The antecedent of the pronoun *they* is the fearful and distressed nations. Unlike Jesus' first coming, in which he slipped in unnoticed except for a few shepherds, all will see his return. Also in contrast to his first coming, his return will be characterized by “power and great glory.” His first coming was about as plain as it could be, born to a poor family in a remote part of a small and insignificant nation. He was born in a stable, surrounded by the odors emanating from animals, and with no glory. His second, though, will be a coming in the clouds, reminiscent of the glory cloud of God's presence with his people during their wilderness wanderings.

Part of this glorious coming will be that he will be accompanied by all the saints of all ages. I want to mention this because I think there is widespread misunderstanding about this. Many evangelicals today think that Jesus will return in two stages, with stage one being a rapture in which Jesus will come halfway to the earth, summon his people and then return to heaven. The earth will then endure a time of great tribulation for seven years, after which Jesus will return a second time. This interpretation is based in part on a misreading of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. **“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.”** This is sometimes referred to as the rapture, because the word *rapture* is derived from the Latin word *rapere*, which means to seize. It is the Latin word for the Greek verb that is translated in our versions “caught up”. It expresses the suddenness of the action, meaning that we will be snatched up by the Lord.

What Paul is doing in 1 Thessalonians 4 is giving some details about the second coming of Christ that are designed to give comfort to those with loved ones who have died. He explains that when Jesus returns, he will first of all raise to new life the bodies of all believers in Christ from all time who have died prior to his return. Second, those who are alive on the earth at the time of his return will be caught up or snatched up to meet the Lord in the air. John Stott points out that this word for meeting the Lord is a technical term. The Greek word, *apantesis*, was used when a dignitary paid an official visit to a city in Hellenistic times. The leading citizens of the city would go out to meet him and escort him back on the final stage of his journey into the city. The act of meeting him was called the *apantesis*. So the rapture isn't when Christians will be whisked off to heaven, but part of the second coming in which Jesus' followers will be given the privilege of accompanying him in his glory. What Paul is teaching, then, is that when Jesus returns, all those who belong to him, both among the dead and the living, will join him in coming to the earth in a glorious entry. The true King will come to take full possession of what has belonged to him all along, but which was stolen by Satan and those who didn't submit to the rule of Jesus.

III. The Preparation for His Appearing

Jesus closes his teaching on the second coming with a practical application. **“But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap”** (v. 34). It's vital to know who the enemy is, and Jesus here identifies the enemy we need to watch for. The enemy is not the frightening events that will happen before the end. The enemy that Jesus says to watch out for is worldliness, an intoxicating attachment to the world rather than an attachment to Jesus and his kingdom. This love of the world is what

Paul said Demas was guilty of. It has the effect of weighing us down with the cares of this life. If we don't watch for that day and guard our hearts, then it will come upon us as a trap, undetected until it suddenly trips and there is nothing to be done.

Let me give a couple of specific applications. First, this means that we will have to fight to stay awake spiritually. That's what Jesus commands in verse 36. Have you ever been driving at night and battling sleep. Everything in you just wants to go to sleep, but you dare not do so because you know the consequences. I have driven in cold weather with the window down to try to stay awake. Sometimes we must do the same spiritually. Jesus says that prayer is one of the ways we fight to stay awake. We pray that we may have the strength to escape the trap of worldliness.

A second application is to be willing to suffer with Jesus. Jesus told us to follow him, and we see here that his path leads eventually to glory and reigning with him forever. But the path Jesus takes doesn't go immediately to glory. He walked through suffering before he experienced the glory. Only those who follow Jesus into suffering now will come with him in glory later. That doesn't mean that we should seek out suffering, only that we should seek to be faithful to Jesus and willing to suffer should faithfulness require it.

Finally, we need not fear the tribulations that will come just prior to the end. In Matthew 24:8, Jesus referred to these tribulations as **“the beginning of the birth pains.”** They are like a woman in labor. I have mentioned before that Wendy and I signed up for a natural childbirth class prior to the birth of our first child, Matthew. It was a long labor, lasting 36 hours before he was finally born. I think it was one of the most difficult 36 hours in my life, and I wasn't even the one having labor pains. So I can't imagine what it was like for Wendy. The most amazing thing happened when Matthew was finally born. The pain of labor was completely forgotten in the overwhelming joy of welcoming our son into the world. The trials prior to Jesus' return will be like that, completely eclipsed in the joy of living forever with Jesus and his people.

CONCLUSION:

Notice the two kinds of people described in our passage. There are those who faint in fear at the coming of Jesus (v. 26), and those who stand before him (v. 36). The standing here is by those who love his appearing and stand with him in victory. The difference between the two is those who have followed Jesus in their lives. They have followed him when he bids them cast their sin upon him. They have followed him in service to others. They have followed him in suffering, and now they follow him in glory. May God grant you the great of following Jesus by faith!