

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

52.1 When Will Jesus Christ Return?

Part I

Scripture: Matthew 24:3-36

Our study to this point has dealt with certain events which will take place when Christ returns. He will return to justify His cross and complete our redemption, to remove His Church, to relieve a struggling and waiting creation, to renew the earth, and to exercise judgment according to perfect knowledge so as to both reward and separate. These are the events to be set in motion at the coming again of Christ, and it is for His personal return Christians have waited for centuries. Inasmuch as God has chosen to channel blessing through his Son, it is for the Son we wait, rather than for the blessings themselves.

The Apostle Paul, in fact, identifies this perspective as the aim of conversion and the characteristic of the true Christian. In I Thessalonians 1:9-10 he speaks of turning from idols to service the true and living God, and to wait for his Son from heaven. We assign to the word “wait” the attitudes of patience and confidence. What is it that the Christian waits for? It is not death. Nowhere in the Bible are believers enjoined to wait for death. Death is an enemy. While it can do the Christian no harm, it nevertheless is a destroyer and separator. Neither is it for any of the various signs which will signal the coming again of Christ, that believers wait. It is for a whom rather than a what, for their dearest friend, the creator King of the earth, the remover of all evil and misery, the Bridegroom of the Church, the restorer of creation, it is for the Savior Jesus Christ Christians wait. Such true waiters have the benediction of blessing upon their lives as Isaiah was moved to write centuries ago, *“Blessed are they that wait for Him.”* (Isaiah 30:18) Many have known this blessing because for centuries the faithful Church of Christ has surveyed the horizon waiting to be raptured by her returning Spouse. However, it was the early disciples who first caught the concern of every generation when they desired to know the time of His coming. (Matthew 24:3) We ask with them, Lord, how long? The response of the Lord was wise and helpful.

I. NO ONE CAN PREDICT THE EXACT TIME OF CHRIST'S RETURN:

The teaching of Jesus is very precise in this regard. *"Concerning that day and hour, no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but the Father alone."* (Matthew 24:36) Related passages are Mark 13:33, 35-37; I Thessalonians 5:1-2; II Peter 3:10a; Revelation 3:3b) Christ will come in due time, but it is not for us to know. (Acts 1:7) It is reasonable that the exact time be hidden from us in order that we always be prepared for it. There is an intentional vagueness here that we might always be expecting Christ to come. Readiness is a result of watchfulness. The person who fails to watch easily succumbs to the temptation toward indifference in spiritual pursuits. With such a tendency toward laziness, the Lord has chosen to keep His Church in suspense with the moving imperative, *"Watch therefore for ye neither know the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh."* (Matthew 25:13)

Another passage which clearly teaches we cannot know the exact time of Christ's return is found in Mark 13:32-33 where we read, *"But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father. Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is."* I believe the significance of these words lies in the fact that if anyone knew the time of Christ's return, surely Christ himself would know or would have desired to know. Therefore, let us be content to be ignorant of what Christ himself consented to.

Through the years some have to prove that Jesus would come during a given year or limited period of time. One such attempt arises from the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 24:32•34. The expression, *"This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled"* has caused some teachers to feel Christ will come very soon. They interpret the fig tree mentioned in verse 32 as being Israel, the Jewish nation. The fig tree putting forth leaves is a sign that summer for Israel is near, it is a time of realization and fulfillment. When the Republic of Israel was established on May 14, 1948 the foundation was laid for the return of the Jews to Palestine, surely a kind of realization. The suggestion is that the generation alive at that time will not pass away before Christ comes. If one considers one generation about forty years, Christ must come sometime before 1988 or thereabouts. Serious objections to this interpretation of Matthew 24:32-34 can be raised. **First**, in verse 36 the intent of Christ is clearly against fixing dates. **Secondly**, it cannot be said for certain Jesus was speaking of Israel here at all. He

may have simply meant that certain events cast their shadows before them as the approach of summer is signaled by the budding of the fig tree. **Thirdly**, the primary use of the word “*generation*” is not a particular and limited period of time. It is rather used to mean “race, kind, family, stock or breed.” (Greek: *genea*) Christ was teaching that the nation or family of Israel will not pass away in spite of the attacks of Satan to destroy this people. It is folly to set dates. People have looked for Christ in 1844, 1914, 1932 and 1936 according to various calculations. Surely, the doctrine of His coming again is made to look foolish and is belittled. I give this one example in order that we understand that the time of Christ's return cannot be foreknown. There is only one thing certain about it, He will come. His coming is imminent, that is to say, it could happen at any moment. The language is clear, the trend of the appeals is toward immanency. If the New Testament is an instrument for the transmission of intelligent thought, let us be forewarned, *“Watch therefore; for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.”*

II. LET US SEE TO IT WE ARE NOT DECEIVED:

It is a strange motivation man has to do what God has forbidden. It has been so since the beginning. Everything was allowed in the paradise of Eden except the partaking of a forbidden fruit. It was precisely that fruit that was desired. We see this trend in our own lives. It is a constant suspicion that we are the losers by obeying the Lord. Eden is really not something that happened all that long ago. It happens every day.

Such is the tendency about Christ's coming. Satan continually urges upon Christians the setting of a date. Being wrong, we will then tend toward doubt. Believing it a long way off, we will forget it altogether. Mindful of these snares, Christians are repeatedly warned not to be misled by false teachers. *“See that you are not deceived; for many shall come in my name, saying, I am he, and, The time has come. Do not go after them.”* (Luke 21:8) Other references are Matthew 24:23,27 and II Thessalonians 2:1-3.

Having understood that we are not to know the precise time of Christ's return, and that it will be a glad surprise one fine day, let us go on to understand further truth concerning the timing of the event. The truth is that what we are not to know in particular, we can know in general.

III. LET US TAKE HEED TO THINGS WE HAVE BEEN TOLD IN ADVANCE:

It is interesting to note that Christ chided the Pharisees and Sadducees because they knew how to discern the face of the heavens; but the signs of the times they

could not discern. (Matthew 16:3) In the parable referred to earlier Christ asked them to learn from the fig tree when summer is nigh. (Matthew 24:32-33) An Old Testament passage is I Chronicles 12:32 where the men of Issachar are praised because they *“had understanding of the times to know what Israel ought to do.”* In Mark 13:23 we read, *“Take heed; behold I have foretold you all things.”* Lightning does not fall from a clear sky. It is possible to be mindful of the approaching storm. While the day and hour are kept secret, it is evident that believers should be able to discern the times in which they live and to understand that the end approaches. Those who have no use for the prophetic Word will doubtless scoff and be taken unprepared. (Matthew 24:37-39) Those who are open to what the Scriptures teach will not be unmindful of significant events taking place before their eyes. After being questioned about His coming, Jesus mentioned several signs which would precede that day and added, *“Thus also you, when you see all these things, know that he is near, upon the threshold.”* (Matthew 24:33)

IV. CONSIDER THE CHURCH AND CHRIST'S RETURN:

The New Testament has a great deal to say about the Church in regard to the coming again of Christ. This should not be surprising to us because our Lord *“loved the church and gave himself for it.”* The church figures very significantly in Christ's return.

1. There Is the Recruitment of the Saints:

One of the most important passages having to do with Christ's coming is found in Acts 15:14-16. It is the occasion of the Jerusalem council where several matters were being taken under consideration. Following the report given by Paul and Barnabas, James calls for attention and declares that God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. After this I (Jesus) will return. James's word to those delegates was that the age was opened with Pentecost and will close when the last believer is added to the church. At that moment the Lord will rapture His awaiting church.

This same thought is expressed in Romans 11:25-26. Paul says in effect that the rapture will occur when the church is complete, when the totality of the Gentiles has come in. Only God knows in advance the number of His Church. When the last one has received the Savior, the era of grace will then be completed, and the Church will be taken up. That moment, of course, is locked in the mind of God. It is amazing, however, to realize that we can

hasten the day of Christ's' coming by working for the conversion of those whom God puts in our way. Who is to know when that moment will be? What is holding Him back? The last person to be added, the last person who is willing to come, God will not leave one sincere and seeking individual outside the opportunity to enter His Church. Think of it, we here at Hope Church are part of the witness that hastens the coming again of Christ. In the words of Dr. Donald Coggan, Archbishop of York in England, "May God grant that this present generation may strain every nerve to complete the task and evangelize to a finish to bring back the King."

2. There Is The Widespread Apostasy and Delusion:

"See that no one lead you astray. For many shall come in my name saying, I am the Christ, and they shall lead many astray." This same sign is mentioned two more times in Matthew 24. (4-5,11-12, 23-26) Paul speaks of this defection in II Thessalonians 2:3, *"Now we beseech you brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ...for that day shall not come except there come a falling away first."* Jude 4:16-18 are also important verses in this regard. The coming again of Christ will be marked by the growth of apostasy which may be defined as "a falling away, a defection." There are many texts which describe apostasy. Those which can be mentioned are II Timothy 4:3; II Peter 2:1-2, 17; Galatians 1:7-8, 2:4. In the time preceding the coming of Christ, there will take place a great revolt, an open rebellion against the historic Christian faith, and against God's revelation of truth as contained in the Bible.

If there is apostasy, there is that from which one has apostatized That would be a rejection of the content of Christianity as it is revealed in Christ and Scripture. These Scriptures tell that Christ was alive before the world was formed and became incarnate in the womb of a virgin, that He lived without sin in this world, was true God and true man, shed His blood in death as an atonement for sin, was resurrected from the dead bodily, and has ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father on high. From that point Christ exercises mediatorial effect upon those who know Him. The basic facts about Christ are found in I Corinthians 15:1-3. Christians are people who have believed these things about Christ and who, by a committal of faith, have experienced forgiveness for their sins and the life of Christ within them. The historic creeds of Christendom confirm these beliefs.

Yet, at the turn of the century there came a widespread revolt against these beliefs. Biblical Christianity gave way to the influence of evolutionary naturalism which dismissed the supernatural and introduced the scientific method in theology. Every major doctrine was affected. The Bible became a mere history of Israel's search for God. Christ was a man born out of wedlock. His miracles are no more than legend. His body remains in some grave. Salvation is by following the worthy example of Christ. Christian character is fashioned by education and necessary restrictions upon society. The church is not a redemptive agency, but a reform society helping others. The coming again of Christ has no literal meaning, it is merely a symbol of truth triumphant. Now, in this apostasy from New Testament Christianity, there is a sign that the coming of Christ draws near. There has always been apostasy, but not as we have seen it in our time. We will see an extraordinary seduction (II Thessalonians 2:9-12; Matthew 24:4, 5, 11, 24) and masses deluded. (Matthew 24:11-12)

3. There Is the Trouble Which Is Ahead:

There is one promise that Christ made which has no appeal whatsoever. He said, *"In the world you shall have tribulation."* (John 16:33) The original word is *"thlipsis"* and it means pressure, burden, persecution, or, to use a term we are familiar with, trouble. The tribulation of a believer in this world is inevitable. It arises from illness, disappointment, social conditions, and etc. On a much broader scale, the history of the church has been one of tribulation. We have no guarantee that God will not allow His church to suffer at the hands of men as we approach the coming of Christ and lawlessness and apostasy increase. As men come to rebel more and more against Christ, they will cause followers of Christ to suffer all the more. Paganism in the past was never able to break the spirit of the Christian who counted it an honor to suffer for his Lord. (II Thessalonians. 1:5; Romans 8:17; II Corinthians 4:17) Should trouble come, may the Lord give us grace to take as our watchword, *"If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf."* (I Peter 4:12-16)

Alan B. Christensen, Pastor, Hope Evangelical Free Church, Wilton, CT,
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