

Adventuring with God

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Keeping Watch

Back in the '70s, when Tony and I got saved, the Christian community was all excited about Jesus' soon return. Following on the heels of Hal Lindsey's books (*The Late Great Planet Earth*, *Israel and the Last Days*, *There's a New World Coming*) and certain world events, we felt like things were moving rapidly towards the fulfillment of Last Days biblical prophecy. We actually asked ourselves whether we should be buying a house or getting our teeth fixed. If Jesus was coming back within a year or two, why bother with such things?

This end times fervor waned eventually as Cold War tensions eased and things seemed to return to normal. In time, most of us looked back on our "any minute" anticipation with some embarrassment. Christians began to turn their attention to fixing up this present world – investing in property and outreaches to the neighborhood, educating their children for the long haul, and figuring out how they could effectively "take back" their culture from the enemy. Our focus returned to the here and now and how we could improve life for ourselves and the people around us.

In the past thirty years, we've seen one global crisis after another unfold in rapid succession, but because we've been wrong in our interpretations before (remember the concern about Y2K?), we barely blink an eye at these developments. The European Union being formed and gaining strength on the financial stage would have been the cause of great alarm in the 1970s, but now we take little note of it.

In His discourse about signs of His return in Matthew 24, Jesus answered questions raised by His disciples and warned them about two extremes that should be avoided. He didn't want them to become obsessive about the event and try to set dates, because *"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son"* (Matthew 24:36). If Jesus doesn't know when it's going to happen, we can be sure that we aren't smart

enough to figure it out, so spending an inordinate amount of time on prophecy speculation is not spiritually edifying.

But the other extreme is also problematic. We don't want to become like the people in Noah's day that simply didn't care to know what was on the horizon. Such complacency is costly, as Jesus pointed out: "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. ... *Therefore keep watch*" (vv. 38-39, 42).

"Keeping watch" is not a full time job, but it's something that is in the back of our minds all the time as we carry out our daily tasks. Back in the 1800s some Christians figured that because the end was so close, they needed to leave their jobs and worldly possessions behind and go to the top of a mountain to await Him in white clothing (I guess to make sure He could see them from the air). They were sincere in wanting to hasten His coming, and I don't mean to make fun of them. But this is not what God is looking for in His children as we await Christ's return.

Titus wrote that the grace of God teaches us to say *"No" to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ* (Titus 2:12-13). The fact of His return puts everything else in life in the right perspective and shows us what our priorities should be. We don't neglect our earthly duties and human relationships as we wait for Him, but we recognize that they will one day be set aside, eclipsed by something far more important.

Certain characteristics will mark the last days of earth's history. In his second epistle Peter talks about scoffers who will mock the idea of Christ's return. They will follow their own evil desires,

because they don't believe judgment will ever come. They don't understand that God's judgment is presently being held back so everyone has a chance to repent and be saved. Peter goes on to tell what the Day of the Lord will be like: "The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way," he asks rhetorically, *"What kind of people ought you to be?"* (vv. 10-11).

Watching for Jesus Christ's return motivates us to live lives pleasing to Him, and the coming judgment that will accompany His second coming compels us to warn others while there is still time to do so. We know we can't set dates or pinpoint it exactly, but we can discern seasons. That's why Jesus reprimanded the religious leaders in Matthew 16. *"When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red, and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times"* (vv. 2-3). His implication was that they should have been able to figure out who He was.

Jesus' second coming will occur suddenly and take the world by surprise. But this sudden event is preceded by a time of preparation, and as children of light we can discern its approach. Jesus likened it to childbirth, when closer and more intense contractions signal the impending birth of a child. It may seem sudden to those not paying attention, but it has been in the works for some time before it actually occurs.

If we're aware and alert, we can see the stage being set for His second coming. Like contractions, significant world events fulfilling biblical prophecy will take place in waves, each bringing the event of His second coming closer to its fulfillment. At this

point, we don't know which set of catastrophic events will be the final push in the delivery process, but we can rejoice that He will one day appear and restore all things to their original glory. Evil will be judged, and those who know God will reign with Him over new heavens and a new earth. This is what Scripture calls the "blessed hope" – something we can encourage one another with as we live out our Christian lives. This hope has the power to keep us moving forward with faith in spite of earthly problems and motivate us to share the Good News with those who are still in darkness.

One day, when everything is in place, the Father will say to the Son: *"Go, the time is fulfilled."* When this happens, we will hopefully be like the wise and faithful servants Jesus commended: *"It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. He will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them"* (Luke 12:37).

We need to refocus on the fact of Jesus' return, since it is closer now than it was in the '70s. But we must be careful to strike a balance in our attitude, avoiding both possible extremes. While we wait, we continue to faithfully serve our families, communities, and the world at large, but we also remember that all our earthly labors are at best a temporary fix. Only the Deliverer can bring a complete restoration to our sin-sick world, and so we eagerly await His arrival.

At the very end of Revelation (22:20) the apostle John reiterates the certainty of Jesus' promised return: *"He who testifies to these things says, 'I am coming soon.'"* Hopefully we can echo John's response: *"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"*

"Lamb of God, Thou soon in glory wilt to this sad earth return;
All Thy foes shall quake before Thee, all that now despise Thee mourn;
Then Thy saints all gathered to Thee, with Thee in Thy kingdom reign;
Thine the praise and Thine the glory, Lamb of God, for sinners slain!"

("Lamb of God!" by James G. Deck, 1802-1884)