

+ Luke 21:5-19, 25-28 + The Promises of End Time: Your Redemption Is Drawing Near +
+ 4th Sunday of End Time + 17 November 2013 +

When is the world going to end and how will we know when it's going to happen? Jesus' disciples weren't the first people to wonder about such things or the last. Fascination with the events surrounding the end of the world and when it's going to happen has been around for centuries, even before Jesus' day. People have always been trying to identify "the signs" and make predictions about dates and times for the end of the world.

Nowadays the destruction and end of our world make for exciting television and thrilling movies. Some of the most popular Christian novels out there are one author's misguided attempt to describe what he thinks the end of the world is going to be like. Every few years someone makes some pretty specific predictions when the end is going to come. We even once received a prediction from an anonymous person on the church voicemail. Of course, their predictions have failed and the world has not yet come to an end, but we all seem to know that the end is coming someday.

Why so much fascination with the end of the world? Why were the disciples asking questions of Jesus that seem so familiar to us today? Often it's simple curiosity about events so strange and supernatural and exciting. Often it's because people want to be prepared for good reasons or bad ones. "If I know when the end is going to come, I can go and do whatever I want until then" or "if I'm prepared, then I have nothing to fear."

That last element is a big reason people want to know when and what about the Last Day. I don't want to be afraid when it comes. As Christians, we don't want to be caught off-guard when Christ returns. We don't want to be overcome with fear by the terrifying things going on around us in a world that seems to get worse and more anti-Christian with every passing month.

So how does Jesus answer these questions of when and what? Yes, he describes some pretty frightening events before the end of the world. Yet amidst those frightening details, Jesus gives us reasons for hope, for confidence, for patience, for joy as we await his return. He tells us, "***When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because YOUR REDEMPTION IS DRAWING NEAR.***"

Who knew that a discussion about architecture would lead to such hope? It was Tuesday of Holy Week. In a matter of days, Jesus would be betrayed, crucified, dead, buried, and risen again, but not today. He had spent some time teaching his disciples in the courts of the temple in Jerusalem. It was getting late and it was time to head back to where they were staying outside the city. As they walked through the temple courts marveling at the marble columns, the gold and bronze doors, and the massive stones, the disciples couldn't help but talk about the amazing architecture of the temple complex. They came to a dead stop, however, when Jesus told them, "***As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.***"

Destruction was coming for this place? Yes, it would come for Jerusalem and one day for the entire world too. Some of the disciples asked Jesus, "***Teacher...when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?***" They wanted to know not only what would happen to the temple and Jerusalem, but also when Christ would come again in glory. So Jesus began telling them what was to come.

"Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and 'The time is near.' Do not follow them. False teachers would come claiming to be God's Anointed. Some would claim to have a divine revelation from God that no one else knows. All would come appealing to what people want to hear rather than what they need to hear. Their false teaching would even deceive many Christians.

Jesus spoke of wars and rumors of wars. "***Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.***" There would be no "war to end all wars", but conflict and warfare that would ravage nations and peoples. Jesus spoke of natural disasters "***in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.***" Rather than speak of global warming, Jesus spoke of creation recognizing that its end and Christ are coming soon.

Such "***fearful events***" would clearly indicate that the end is coming, but "***the end will not come right away***". Jesus didn't want his followers to be frightened, because "***these things must happen***". Yet even if these signs seemed bad enough, Jesus told them even more. "***But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name... You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me.***"

Persecution was coming for Christ's followers. At first, it would be ridicule and strange looks and confused reactions. Then it would become loss of jobs, loss of homes, loss of status, and betrayal by loved ones and former friends. Eventually it would become even more painful—separation of families, imprisonment, and even death. Such painful

persecution would come to the early church and has continued in different parts of the world to the present day. ***“All men will hate you because of me.”***

...But the Lord of heaven and earth, who is in control of all things and who watches over his flock, had promises for his fearful followers. ***“This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict... All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life.”***

Jesus would use that persecution as an opportunity for his followers of every age to testify about him, about their Savior who remained faithful to them to the end, about their Savior who would die in just a few days, but who would rise again and conquer Satan and his hellish minions forever. He would provide words and wisdom that could not be overcome by imperial decree or beaten out of them or put to death when their blood was shed. ***“Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”*** (Acts 4:12) ***“We must obey God rather than men.”*** (Acts 5:29) ***“For 86 years I have been Christ’s servant and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”*** (Polycarp of Smyrna) ***“I cannot and I will not recant. Here I stand.”*** (Martin Luther)

Yes, those who follow Christ may lose everything, may even be beaten or put to death ***“but not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life”***, that is, eternal life. Jesus, who had saved them from an eternity in hell by forgiving their sins, would graciously give them eternal life. So as they saw those signs, Jesus wanted them to remember ***“your redemption is drawing near”***. He would rescue his followers. He would deliver them from all those ***“fearful events”*** and from painful persecution, and his return in glory and power would make that happen.

We see all these signs today, too. We see terrifying things in our world—natural disasters that no one can really explain. We see how easily even Christians can be deceived by flashy false prophets. We see how easily even Christians can get caught up in the bloodlust of wars and rumors of wars. We see terrible tragedies on the news and we’re tempted to cry out, “Why God?!? Why did you allow this to happen?” Then we see how much people freely express their hatred for Christians because they follow Jesus, his Word, and his will. We see it in their ridicule and their public attacks. While we haven’t seen violence here, in just the last few months, thousands of people in Africa and Asia and the Middle East have lost their livelihoods, their churches, their loved ones, and their lives because they followed Christ. By all accounts, we have every reason to be terrified of the chaos around us.

...But Jesus’ promises are for us too. Those promises are given with the ironclad guarantee of his blood and righteousness, of his life sacrificed on the cross and his empty tomb on Easter Sunday. ***“By standing firm you will gain life.”*** That doesn’t mean you’ll somehow earn eternal life, but because you stand firm on Christ alone, who has created faith in him in your heart through the hearing of his Holy Word. Through our fumbling lips, he gives us words and wisdom from his Word to testify about him even to those who hate him, and he cares for us even amidst all these ***“fearful events”***.

Yes, ***“there will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”*** Yes, as we see wars and natural disasters and persecution increase all the more around us, Jesus is reminding us that the Last Day is coming soon, but we have no need to fear. ***“At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”***

When you see another headline about another ***“fearful event”***, rather than lower your head in sadness, ***“stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*** Jesus is coming soon! We live in a world that is becoming increasingly anti-Christian and the heat will only turn up until Christ’s return. When you see persecution, rather than lower your head in fear, ***“stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*** Jesus is coming to rescue you!

Jesus wants you to be ready ***“because your redemption is drawing near.”*** One day he will come with power and great glory, but we can be confident, joyful, and filled with peace no matter the chaos around us. Why? That’s our Savior, our Redeemer, our Jesus coming who remains with us when everyone else leaves, who gives us wisdom when we don’t know what to say, who strengthens us when we are powerless, who saved us from hell.

I can’t tell you when Jesus will come again. Jesus doesn’t either, but he will and you will know when he does. Like every generation, we see the signs that Jesus is coming soon, but we’re closer to that time than any generation before us. So my friends, keep watch. Be ready. Have no fear, for ***“when you see these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*** Amen.