

## LIFT UP YOUR HEADS!

[Luke 21:5-11, 25-36]

Ever since Jesus ascended into heaven, Christians have speculated about when he will return, and what it will be like when he does.

The time of his return has come to be called the “end of the age” or the “end times”—the final days when, according to the Scriptures, the final judgment will take place and God will destroy this world and create a new heavens and a new earth.

All those who have placed their faith in Jesus will go to dwell eternally with him in heaven and those who have not will go to a place of eternal suffering and torment.

So the endtimes will be a calamity for unbelievers but a time of rejoicing for the faithful.

In today’s Bible lesson Jesus describes the “*signs of the end of the age*”—the cataclysmic events which will mark the arrival of the endtimes.

But one might ask why Jesus considered it important for his followers to have a knowledge of the signs of the endtimes when as it turned out neither they nor another sixty or so generations would be around when the endtimes came?

Why tell people about things they were never going to experience?

Still, the fact remains that Jesus thought it important for us to know about these signs and therefore it behooves us to take a closer look at them.

This will be an expository sermon, so I invite you to follow along on the monitors.

[Read 21:5-11] “Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, ‘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.’ ‘Teacher,’ they asked, ‘when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place’ He replied: ‘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. When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.’ Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.”

The first sign of the endtimes would be the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies and “made desolate”—in other words, totally destroyed.

This prophecy was fulfilled about forty years later when the Israelites rebelled against Rome and the emperor dispatched five Roman legions to put down the rebellion.

The Roman armies besieged Jerusalem, breached her walls, slaughtered her inhabitants and set fire to the city.

The temple was torn down and all its stones were thrown down into the valley surrounding the city.

Literally, not one stone remained on top of another.

Everything that Jesus had predicted came to pass.

But as is often the case with Biblical prophecies, events that were to take place in the immediate future served as preliminary signs of larger events that would take place in the distant future.

The catastrophe which fell upon Jerusalem would one day fall upon the entire world.

And so having described the tribulations which would come upon Israel in the near future, Jesus breaks into a prophecy of the signs which would accompany the end of the world.

Beginning with vs. 25 we read: “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.”

Fearful signs indeed.

Cataclysmic upheavals that will shake the universe.

There will be two kinds of fear that will fall upon people’s hearts: 1) the fear of death, and 2) the even greater fear of God’s wrath which would follow death.

In the *Book of Revelation* we are told that the fear of God’s wrath will be so great that men will hide “...in caves and among the rocks of the mountains” and will call out, “...to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne.’”

Can you imagine anything so fearful that you would rather have a mountain fall on you than face it?

That is how terrible it would be to face God’s wrath.

The author of the *Book of Hebrews* wrote, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

Next, Jesus tells them that he himself will dispense God’s wrath: “At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

But when Jesus returns it will be “no more Mr. nice guy.”

He who first came as the agent of God’s mercy and love will return as the agent of God’s judgment and wrath.

He who came in meekness and humility as our Savior will return in power and majesty as the harvester of souls—of those who trusted Him unto eternal life, and of those who spurned Him unto eternal torment.

The same signs which will produce fear and dread in the hearts of His enemies, will give rise to unimaginable joy in the hearts of His people: “When these things begin to take place,” Jesus says, “stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then Jesus tells his disciples a parable about a fig tree.

“Look at the fig tree and all the trees,” he says. “When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

Now the meaning of this parable hinges on what we understand the word “near” to mean.

Did “near” mean that when the signs appeared, the Kingdom of God would be just around the corner?

That it would soon be here?

If that’s what we understand “near” to mean, then the purpose of the parable would be to teach us that when the signs of the end of the age appear, there will still be time for us to repent and believe the Gospel in order to be saved.

But not only would that lesson be utterly useless to all those who died before the signs appeared, it would be totally contrary to everything else Jesus taught about entering the Kingdom.

Jesus NEVER advised anyone to “wait.”

On the contrary, according to the author of *Hebrews*, “...God...set a certain day, calling it Today, [saying]: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’”

God's time is NOW—not tomorrow or the next day.

“Near” doesn't mean “on the way” or “right around the corner”; “near” means “At hand!” “Right now!”

Sprouting leaves are not signs that summer is on the way; they are evidence that summer has arrived!

And just like sprouting leaves, when the signs of the endtimes appear, they will mean that the Kingdom has arrived.

And the good news is *that these signs have appeared!*

The endtimes are not “on the way,” the endtimes are here!

Doesn't Matthew record that as the Magi journeyed from the east, “...the star they had seen...went ahead of them until it came to rest over the tiny town of Bethlehem?”

Doesn't Matthew report that when Jesus was crucified the sun stopped shining and darkness covered the land for three hours?

That “The earth shook and the rocks split.

That tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life?”

Stars descending, darkness covering the earth, earthquakes and the dead rising from their tombs: what were these if not “signs in the sun, moon and stars”?

Signs given at his birth and signs given at his crucifixion: evidence that the Kingdom had arrived!

The Kingdom arrived with the King!

That is why Jesus began his ministry with the words: “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!”

The next verse bears witness to the accuracy of this interpretation: Jesus adds, “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.”

And so it came to pass: the Kingdom came and the Jerusalem temple was destroyed within one generation.

The Scriptures cannot be broken, as Jesus says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

It is as if he were saying: “*Do not disregard this word, my friends, for it will surely come to pass.*”

And, of course, it will—just as it did.

Finally, Jesus gives us the “moral of the story” as he shows us what practical use we can make of this information.

*Be careful,” [he says,] “or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close upon you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth.”*

Be alert! Be watchful because the endtimes are here!

Avoid things which interfere with watchfulness.

Jesus only mentions some of them, but the ones he mentions are comprehensive: “drunkenness, dissipation and the anxieties of life.”

Don’t let these things cloud your mind so that they weaken your faith and hinder your love.

Jesus isn’t giving us this information merely to satisfy our curiosity; he wants us to be ready for the day of his return, when nothing but a living faith in Him can save us.

It’s easy to become preoccupied with worldly things.

And the way to avoid being seduced and overwhelmed by worldly things is to watch and wait, watch and wait.

Keep your eyes on the signs of the endtimes and on heaven and on the One who rules in heaven and on earth.

Then, when He appears it will be as a friend, and not as a stranger..

“Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

“All that is about to happen.” There is foreboding in those words, isn't there?

Judging from what is going on in the world today, it's hard to imagine what IS GOING to happen.

The great Irish poet William Butler Yeats described it this way: “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

I can truthfully say that most of the people I know who have lived a long time in this world are not particularly

anxious to see what is going to happen next, nor are they sad that they are probably going to miss it.

Terrible, terrible things are going to come upon this world.

But One who is beautiful is also going to come.

He first came two thousand years ago to bear our sins and He has promised to return and take us to live with him eternally.

His Kingdom is here now and it is forcefully advancing.

May the King and His Kingdom overwhelm you with the love and grace of God so that as the signs of the endtimes continue you will be able to lift up your heads and know that your redemption is near.

Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, create in us a sense of urgency, of expectancy, of eager anticipation for your return. We know that we allow the cares of this world to burden our spirits and dull us to the joys you hold in store for us. Help us to turn these burdens over to you and to keep our eyes fixed upon you, Lord Jesus, so that we long for your return above all other things. Amen.

Father, please draw near to those who are hurting...

Lord, remember us in Your kingdom and teach us to pray....