

“Coming in Clouds with Great Power and Glory”
Mark 13:1-37

December 20, 2015

SCRIPTURE INTRO: We’re spending these Sundays of Advent looking a few great New Testament passages on Christ’s Second Coming.

It’s been the practice of the church through the centuries to prepare for our celebration of Christ’s first coming to Bethlehem, by studying and reflecting on his second coming in glory at end of age. Just as the Old Testament believers were made holy and happy by looking forward to Christ’s coming, so we are made holy and happy as we look forward to him.

Mark 13 starts out with Jesus prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, but then he begins to speak of his Second Coming.

INTRO: When I was a little 4th grade Presbyterian boy, my parents sent me to a Christian school run by Free Will Baptists. There I was taken out of my comfortable theological bubble, and for the next 5 years exposed to teachings that were amazing and at times perplexing to me.

One of the areas that caused me the most amazement and perplexity was their teaching on end times.

I had been taught a rather simple view all my life.

It basically went like this: Jesus will come again one day with his angels to judge the living and the dead. We don't know when he'll come, but we must be ready. That means living a faithful and moral life before God.

There weren't many more details than that.

But his coming was very much alive in my mind

because we said the Apostles' Creed every Sunday which says:

“He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.”

That was enough for me.

Then I got to the Free Will Baptist school and I heard them connecting current events in the Middle East with the Second Coming.

This was in the 70s, and they were often saying that it was just a matter of time before the Soviet Union and China were going to join armies to invade Israel.

But instead of destroying Israel, they would be destroyed in a terrible battle and the blood of all their soldiers would be as deep as the bridles of horses in the Valley of Armageddon. I had never heard that before.

They speculated on the identity of the Antichrist.

They talked about the Lord coming secretly, half way, and a rapture where Christians would just suddenly disappear and leave piles of clothes.

It all blew my sheltered Presbyterian mind.

So I would ask my dad about these things.

He very carefully and slowly helped me see the symbolism of Revelation.

Why Christians get into trouble applying newspaper headlines to prophecy. And how the details of the Second Coming are very hard to understand, and that we need to be humble in asserting exactly what something means.

And he also told me that even though we disagree with other Christians, like the Free Will Baptists, on the details, we agree on the big thing—

Jesus is coming back one day to judge the world and set things right.
Now Mark 13 is a tough passage. And the difficulty is in the details.

When you read it, lots of questions come to mind.

Which parts are about the destruction of Jerusalem, which about Second Coming?

What is the abomination that causes desolation?

What does it mean that the stars will fall from the sky?

What does it mean that this generation will not pass away
until all these things have happened?

How can it be that not even the Son knows the day or the hour?

If no one knows, then what does it mean to watch for his coming?

I can't answer all of those in a sermon.

A Sunday school class would be a better format for working through those details.

I have opinions about all of the details in Mark 13.

But I feel the force of other views. No single interpretation of details water-tight.

So I'm not going to focus on explaining the details in this sermon.

I'm not even going to focus the three times Jesus talks about the elect.

That's like throwing red meat to a Calvinist, but I'm going to skip that.

So what are we left with if we don't dig into the details?

We're left with something huge, the Second Coming itself!

The Second Coming of Jesus Christ, with all of its certainty, all of its mystery.

I want us to focus on what Jesus tells us we ought to do with this doctrine.

Look, there are two commands he gives us, one at the beginning, one at the end.

He says:

1. Do not be alarmed.
2. Be alert, be on guard, keep watch.

These are very important, very practical life applications of
the doctrine of the Second Coming. Let's look at each.

MP#1 First, Jesus tells us: Do not be alarmed.

What's the opposite of being alarmed or panicked?

It's being calm. It's being balanced and realistic.

Christians should be the most calm of all people in the face of disasters.

We should never be alarmed by politics or economics or bad news.

Because Jesus' Second Coming gives us the ultimate reason to be calm.

To the degree that you believe in his coming, you will be calm and not alarmed.

Look at the context of Jesus' teaching.

They were leaving the Temple and one of his disciples looked at Temple and said:

Wow, just look at that. How massive. How magnificent.

And it was. History and archaeology tells us Temple was an amazing structure.

Then Jesus made his famous prophecy:

“Not one stone here will be left on another, every one will be thrown down.”

It's hard to fully appreciate what a jolt those words would have been to disciples.

They couldn't really comprehend it.

The Jerusalem Temple was the center of the Jewish world.

There was nothing more central and stabilizing in the Jewish mind than the Temple of God in Jerusalem.

It's as if Jesus said to us—in this generation you will see the utter destruction of the American way of life. A total economic meltdown.

Abandonment of all democratic principles, violation of all civil rights.

America will become a third-world country. America will become Haiti.

We would not even be able to comprehend what that would be like.

It must have shocked them into silence.

Then later that day, sitting on Mount of Olives, opposite the Temple—

Peter, James, John, and Andrew said: Tell us when this will happen.

And Jesus began to tell about all the terrible things would happen in the build up

to this destruction of Jerusalem: Wars, rumors of wars, economic and social turmoil, natural disasters, religious persecution.

All of those things did happen in that generation.

About 40 years later, in 70 A.D. the Romans tore the Temple down to the ground, destroyed Jerusalem and brought an end to the Jewish world as they knew it.

For the Jews of that day the stars did fall from the sky

and the heavenly bodies were shaken.

But in the context of all of this Jesus said: “Do not be alarmed.”

And then he began to weave into his prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, the promise of his Second Coming.

Here we learn something absolutely invaluable for Christians.

Every disaster, every calamity—whether natural or manmade—everything that shakes our world, is a pointer to Christ’s Second Coming.

We have to consciously make that jump. We have to say.

This reminds me that Jesus is coming back to judge the world and set things right.

After Jesus said: “Do not be alarmed.” He explained why.

He said: “Such things must happen.”

Do not be alarmed. Such things must happen.

What did he mean? Why must such things happen?

Jesus often spoke like this. He often said that important things “must” happen.

Remember the time he said the Son of Man “must” go to Jerusalem.

He “must” be delivered over to death and rise again.

That was Jesus’ way of talking about the sovereignty of God.

It must happen because God has willed it. It’s part of his plan.

Jesus was telling the disciples that this great disaster that would fall on Jerusalem as not the result of random forces, it was part of the plan of God.

And what a great comfort that is. All history is under God’s control.

You listen to the news and hear about political forces, economic, natural forces.

And at times we seem to be at the mercy of those forces.

What’s going to happen with Islamic expansion in the West?

What’s going to happen in the presidential election?

What’s going to happen to the economy?

But Jesus reminds his disciples that above all of these forces is God himself.

He directs the rise and fall of nations.

He shakes the things that people trust.

God is in control of history and for that reason we should not be alarmed.

The Jesus said it again in another way:

“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.

There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines.

These are the beginning of birth pains.”

What a powerful image this is.

Jesus is saying that God has turned all of the disasters and evils into labor pains.

Wars, earthquakes, famines are part of the curse. They are the result of sin.

This is not the way God created the world. He created it good.

Adam fell and creation is groaning under the curse.

But God in his grace has turned these into labor pains.

When I was 14 I got appendicitis. For some reason, I don't remember why,

I spent 24 hours before surgery without any painkillers. It was horrible.

My mother was there wringing her hands.

She asked the doctor how bad I was hurting. He said that it felt like labor pains.

Allison hates it when I tell that story! Says: You don't know how labor feels, you wuss!

I say: I'm just quoting a medical authority. You'll have to take it up with him.

She says: What he know, he never experienced labor! We've argued for years.

Labor pain is terrible pain but it's pain with a happy ending.

A woman suffers but she knows it will result in something wonderful, a new life!

Jesus was saying to his disciples in every age.

Don't be alarmed. All of the terrible things you may experience in this old world as a result of the curse, God in his amazing grace has turned into birth pains.

There will be an amazing re-birth of the world as God intended it to be.

When will that happen? At Christ's Second Coming.

When he comes, he will set things right and creation will be restored.

The fig tree will bud and leaf, the reaper will overtake the harvester, and we will enjoy the eternal summer of the new heavens and new earth.

If you believe that, you will not be alarmed when these things happen.

Yes, they are terrible. Yes, they are the result of the curse.

No, this is not how the world is supposed to be.

But God in his grace has turned them into labor pains—

as we look forward to the return of the Son of God.

Do not be alarmed. These things must happen. They are birth pains.

Jesus is coming back.

That brings us to the second command at the end of the chapter.

Or maybe we should say a group of commands. Jesus says:

MP#2 Be alert, be on guard, keep watch.

What does this group of commands mean?

It is simply a call to integrity and faithfulness.

It is like the commands: Fight the good fight. Or keep in step with the Spirit. But in stating them this way, Jesus is saying that his Second Coming is one of the great motives for righteous living.

There are lots of details in Mark 13 that are hard to understand.

But there are two teachings in this chapter that are crystal clear:

1. Jesus is coming back. 2. We don't know when.

It's interesting how strongly Jesus pushes home the point that we don't know when.

No one knows. Not even the angels, not even the Son.

Jesus as man does not know the time of his return. (That's another mystery!)

Then he has that little parable.

The servants don't know when the master is returning.

It will be sudden and unexpected. Jesus could not say it more clearly.

He is coming back. We don't know when.

When you believe both of these truths together, they produce an incredibly powerful motivation to live a life of integrity and faithfulness.

That's what Jesus means when he says: Watch.

Watch doesn't mean: Try to figure out when it will happen.

Watch means: Be ready spiritually and morally.

Love your neighbor. Obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Seek first the kingdom of God. Repent of your sins and fight against them.

Jesus is coming back and we don't know when. .

CS Lewis puts this so well:

“Precisely because we cannot predict the moment, we must be ready at all times. We must train ourselves to ask more and more often how the thing we are saying or doing or failing to do at each moment will look when the irresistible light streams in upon it. That irresistible light that is so different from the light of this world, that will reveal all things as they truly are.

(Then he gives an illustration.)

Women sometimes have the problem of judging by artificial electric lights how their clothing and makeup will look by the full light of the sun. That is what we have to do. We have to learn

how to dress our souls not for the electric lights of the present world but for the daylight of the next one. The good dress is the one that will face that light, for that light will last forever.” Isn’t that a powerful image? You are living your life. Doing your thing.

And suddenly, the irresistible light streams in upon you.
Jesus’ coming reveals everything instantly and fully—
your behavior, thoughts, and affections.

You have no time to cover up or spruce up.
All the changes you’ve said you will make—
Some day I’ll start pray with my children at night.
Some day I’ll be more generous with my money.
Some day I’ll forgive that person and get over my bitterness.
Some day I’ll be more outspoken about my faith.

That time is over and Jesus is here.

The owner of the house has come, and his servants are working or sleeping.
If you believe that, what a powerful motive for faithful living.

But it also presents a problem, doesn’t it?

The thought of Christ coming when we least expect him,
and the thought of that irresistible light streaming in upon us is frightening.
Will I be ready when he comes? What will be revealed?

If you have any self-awareness at all, the Second Coming itself is frightening.

It’s well and good for Jesus to tell us not be alarmed by all the calamities
and disasters in this fallen world because he is coming back to set things right.
But when you think about him coming to set things right—that’s even scarier.
Forget Islamic terrorism, the Son of God coming to judge the world,
and in the light of his coming, nothing will be hidden.
That can truly keep you awake at night.

Jesus says: Don’t let the owner of the house find you sleeping.

But knowing myself, and how much I sin every day—odds are he will!
I feel like the Psalmist who says:

“If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?”

Francis Schaeffer, a famous Presbyterian missionary and writer once put it this way.
Image if when you were born, God put an invisible voice recorder around neck.
Only time it would record, was when you criticized someone, or told them what
they ought to do, how they ought to live.

What if on the judgment day God said:

I'm not going to judge you by the 10 Commandments or by the Golden Rule or by anything in Bible, I'm going to judge you by your own words and standards. And then he played the recording. You would be condemned.

We would all be condemned.

None of us would stand—even by our own standards.

How much more would we be condemned by God's law.

So if that is how we are, how can you look at the Second Coming with anything but fear? How can you long for it and want Jesus to come and set things right?

There is only one way.

Have to look at all these terrible images of judgment, and see that Jesus himself has already suffered every one.

This verse in Isaiah that Jesus quotes, seems to sum up the terror of that day.

The sun will be darkened—everything will be shaken.

How sobering that just days after Jesus spoke these words—he experienced this.

The sun was darkened for those three terrible hours.

And his world was shaken as he suffered God's wrath and cried out:

“My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?”

On the cross the good Son of God, who lived all of his life so perfectly, that if the irresistible light had shined on him at any time—it would have exposed a life of perfect goodness inside and out—

He got rejection and judgment and death.

And if you trust him, and follow him, then he makes his judgment and death count as yours, so when he return, your judgment is already passed.

When the irresistible light shines upon you, it will show you to be a person whose sin is already paid for and whose guilt and shame is covered by Christ's blood.

That's the Gospel. And that is what makes Christ's Second Coming good news.

When the Apostle John had his great vision of Revelation—

do you remember how he sees Jesus in the throne room of heaven?

I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain.

That's how you can watch for the Second Coming without fear and with actual hope and eagerness.

Because you know that Christ has suffered for your sins—

and you will ultimately stand in that day, and get the commendation

of the master, not because of your merits, but because of his.
So the most important question of all is this:
Where do you stand with Jesus Christ?

Do you believe in him? Have you submitted your life to him?
Are you trusting in him alone, in his life and death, to be right with God?
You must, or when the light shines on the day of his coming,
you will call out to the rocks to fall on you to hide you from
the wrath of the Lamb.