



"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. 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."

He told them this parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees. 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."

"I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."

"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. 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." (Luke 21:25-36)

When the city of Warsaw, Poland was bombed during World War II by the Germans, the city was leveled. One woman, the wife of the director of the British Bible society in Warsaw, had hidden 2000 Bibles in a storeroom in the basement before the bombing began. When the Germans invaded she was captured by the Nazis. She survived the conflict and eventually went back to check on the building. The Bibles in the basement had survived, but the building above had been completely destroyed, just like all the other buildings in that whole street—except for one section of wall. When the woman saw the surviving wall standing amidst the rubble of the city she was awe-struck. Because the wall that survived was the one that had this inscription: "

"Heaven and earth may pass away, but my words will never pass away."

Those are Jesus' words in our Gospel today. The day when heaven and earth pass away is what Jesus talked to us about in today's Gospel. But in that same Word, a Word which will never pass away, Jesus tells us what to do and how to prepare for that day. In particular Jesus' words talk to us about two attitudes or mindsets we ought to have as we see the end of days approaching. Jesus tells us:

- 1. BE HOPEFUL!** and
- 2. BE CAREFUL!**

I. Be hopeful!

Jesus first had this to say:

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...When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

As the day of judgment arrives, Jesus says, there will be unmistakable signs that God's created order is breaking down. Sun, moon, and stars, land and sea will be in turmoil. The signs of impending catastrophe will be so clear that Jesus said that men would faint from terror—translated literally, they will be 'out of their minds', they will go mad from fear. It's an awesome thing to imagine, the shaking of the heaven and earth—but it's not a fairy tale but a real prediction of the final fate of this world, the last pages in this world's long history book.

And yet Jesus says that in that day his people can and will rejoice! They can ***“stand up and lift up their heads,”*** because they will know that their “redemption” is drawing near.

What does that mean, their redemption? Redemption means to set free by paying a ransom price. The Bible often uses that word to describe the payment Jesus made for us in dying on the cross. So why, if redemption happened at the cross, does Jesus say here that at the end of the world redemption will draw near? It's because at that time Jesus will be coming to claim the property that he has purchased for himself. And that property is you and me! On the Last Day Jesus will rescue his people out of the destruction of this created world and take us to himself. So when Christians still living on that final day—maybe us, if we live long enough—see the created world breaking apart, their hearts will not break with fear but leap for joy at the knowledge that Jesus has come back for them, to take them to their new glorious home with him!

Those obvious, unmistakable signs of the end are still in the future—how far, we don't know. But there are plenty of other signs of the end that we do see. Jesus describes them elsewhere in the Bible—love growing cold, apostasy, persecution, famines and wars and earthquakes and violence. These are signs of the end which we see happening already!

How should we react when we see these things happen? As Christians it's easy to get depressed about them. Immorality runs rampant and godlessness is more public than ever. Maybe we struggle with heartache from family strife. Maybe our own lives have been touched by violence. Maybe we mourn the lack of true biblical teaching in the church at large. As bad as these things are, all of them are exactly what Jesus said would happen! It's just what he predicted in his Word! Heaven and earth may pass away, but his Word will never pass away.

He told them this parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees. 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.

The trees are budding, so to speak. The signs are being fulfilled. So what should our attitude be? This is no time for Christians to be hanging our heads! The words of our Savior are coming true! The kingdom of God is near! We can lift up our eyes with hope and get ready to greet our Savior.

II. Be careful!

But even as Jesus encourages us to be hopeful, he also warns us to be careful as we live in these last days before his return. He says:

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

It's so easy to take your eyes off the prize. It's so easy to just adopt the world's view as your own. It's so easy to be lured into deadly temptation, or to get distracted by thinking only about your next paycheck; to be so filled with the worries of life that weigh down our hearts, so that we are no longer looking in faith to him. Maybe you think: "It could never happen to me." Ask yourself: if it were such a farfetched thing that we Christians could be led astray, then why does Jesus plead with us so earnestly, ***"Be careful!...Be always on the watch!"***?

Notice what Jesus say can make us unprepared for that day. It almost seems like the danger comes in two categories. On the one hand there is ***"dissipation and drunkenness."*** There are some who seek to deal with the world's problems merely by escaping them. Chasing whatever thrills or pleasures—sinful or otherwise—that you can find. Pills, drugs, excessive drinking—anything to numb your mind to the hardships of your life. On the other hand you have those weighed down by ***"the anxieties of life"***—those who pay attention to every detail, who are so consumed and obsessed with trying to make a good earthly life for themselves and their children that they forget about what is more important—preparing for the life to come.

And so Jesus pleads with you to watch out for both of these wrong attitudes. He pleads with you because he knows how dreadful on that day it will be for those who are not prepared. He pleads with you because he knows that eternal damnation is just as real as eternal life in heaven. He pleads with you because he loved you, he suffered and died for you, and he did everything to spare you from that fate so that you could live with him in glory.

So his words are meant for you and me when he says to you: pray. ***"Pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen."*** Pray fervently. Pray every day that you won't be caught off guard but are always thinking of your eternal home and of the Savior who died to

bring you there—that you are always worshipping him and hearing his Word gladly. Pray that the day does not trap you with the rest of this fallen world, but that as Paul said in our second lesson, that you may be found blameless and pure on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

“At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

And what could be better than that for you and me—to see with our eyes the One who loved us most of all, the One whom we love above all things?

Today we begin our Advent preparations for Christmas. For the next 3-plus weeks we will be celebrating the first coming of the one who will come again. We look ahead not only to the day when he will reappear but for what will come afterward. For when he comes again he comes to make his presence with us permanent! We won't only see him coming in glory on that one day; we will see him for every day thereafter, forever and ever! We kneel beside the manger to worship the one who came to live with us for a time so that we can live forever and ever with him. We are his people! He won't ever abandon us!

Lord Jesus, by your birth and death you have made us ready for that wonderful day! In your grace keep us ready for your second Advent. Amen.