

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

Chapter 9. Matthew 24:32-44

by Ray C. Stedman

How can we be sure all this will happen? No doubt you have asked that more than once before now. If you have, you are not the first one to do so. In fact it would be rather strange if you haven't. Even Jesus anticipates a certain degree of honest doubt, for at this point in his discourse (verse 32) he breaks off his description of the last days to give three powerful guarantees that all he has said will actually come to pass.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson; as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates."

This is the first guarantee. It is another pattern from nature which illustrates the point he wishes to make. Everyone knows that when the trees begin to put forth their leaves it is an infallible indication that summer is near. Some have misread this to mean that the fig tree is a symbol for the nation Israel and that the Lord means to say that when Israel shows signs of life as a nation that then the end is near. Of course that is perfectly true, but that is not what he is saying here. Luke tells us that he said this is not only about the fig tree, but also of "all the trees" (Luke 21:29).

What the Lord means is that as history unfolds and it becomes apparent that the world is heading toward the conditions he describes, then men can be very sure that his coming is near. The trend of world events is the guarantee that he has been telling the truth about the future. History will confirm his predictions as it unfolds. When the world reaches the stage he describes, and the possibility of the coming of the Lawless One looms on the horizon of current affairs, then "he is near, at the very gates." We are now nearing the end of two thousand years of history and each man can judge for himself whether or not the world is approaching these events.

The Indestructible Generation

Then the Lord offers a second guarantee, contained in an often misunderstood statement in verse 34:

"Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place."

Many have wondered exactly what he meant by these words. Did he refer to the generation to which he was speaking, i.e., the disciples and their contemporaries? Or did he perhaps mean the generation which would be alive when the events he predicted will begin to be fulfilled? If that is what he meant, he would have been saying that when these events begin they would be completed before the generation would pass. Each of these meanings has been suggested as a possible explanation of his words.

But the truth is, he meant neither of these. Of course, if he meant the disciples' generation then his words have long ago been proven false. And the second explanation involves a very forced and unnatural meaning for the word "this." The only other alternative is that the word "generation" means the Jewish people. "This people will not pass away till all these things take place."

The Indestructible People

It is almost certain that this is what the Lord meant, for he used the word "generation" in this very sense in the previous chapter, Matthew 23:33-36. He was speaking in severe and sharp tones to the Pharisees, and he said: "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this generation."

The Lord surely did not mean by this that the Pharisees and their contemporaries would bear the blame for all the injustice of the ages. No, he meant that Israel was the nation chosen to be the instrument of God to teach the whole world what he is like. When Israel failed, it became culpable for all the dire results that failure brings. It is the nation which was in view when he uses the term, "this generation."

Throughout twenty centuries of dispersion and persecution a most remarkable demonstration of the truth of the Bible has been the Jewish people and their uncanny ability to survive as an identifiable race. Despite the long centuries of hardship and cruelty they have proved to be an indestructible people. That fact constitutes proof that what Jesus predicts will surely come to pass.

Surer Than Sunrise

The third assurance Jesus offers is his own infallible promise: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (verse 35). How much value do you give to what he says? This is the One who came to blind eyes-and he did! He declared he would give his life as a ransom for many-and he did! He said he would rise again from the dead-and he did! Now he says he will come again-can you believe him?

What is it we count on today as the most dependable thing we know? Is it not the continuity of events? We count on tomorrow's sun to rise, on there being a future. We lay our plans on that basis. But Jesus says that will stop, will pass away, but his words will not. His coming, then, is more certain than the most certain thing we know of. The word by which all things were called into being is the foundation upon which he rests his statement, "my words will not pass away."

Unpredictable Timing

At this point in the discourse there comes a definite break. The Lord has completed his outline of the events during the end of the age. He has revealed his parousia, his presence on earth, during the entire period of the last days and also the spectacular outshining of his presence on earth, during the entire period of the last days and also the spectacular outshining of his presence to occur at the end. But he has said very little about its beginning. Now, in verses 36-41, he brings that remarkable event before the disciples as the dominant point of emphasis:

"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man. Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left."

As we mentioned in an earlier chapter, some have confused this coming with the glorious manifestation of his presence, described in verse 30. But the first sentence of this section makes clear which aspect of his presence the Lord is describing. He states most forcefully that this coming will be completely unpredictable. "But of the day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only."

This unpredictable element is underscored heavily in the additional warning he gives the disciples in verses 42-44:

"Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

It would be impossible for Jesus to use these words if he were referring to the coming in power and great glory. Before that event occurs "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." Who could miss that? Who, knowing the Scriptures, would not expect the return of Jesus after such dramatic events? But to his disciples he says, "The Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

This is clearly then his coming as a thief in the night. It is his coming for the church, the unsuspected treasure of earth. He will come to take it to himself, and the world will have no inkling that it is about to occur. As he has just said, we can know that the time is drawing near as we observe the predicted pattern taking shape in the affairs of men. We can see the attitudes that he says will prevail in that day beginning to emerge as the dominant philosophy of the day. But we can never know the day nor the hour. Even the angels do not know, nor did the Son in the time of his earthly limitation, but only the Father.

Men seem to display an urgent passion to set dates for the coming of Christ. Several times in history it has been announced that Jesus Christ would return on such and such a date. Some fanatics who believed these reports sold their property, donned white robes, and gone out on some hilltop to wait for him to appear. The whole subject of the return of Christ has been cast into disrepute by such foolish actions. God has maintained an inscrutable silence about certain matters and this is one of them. The day nor the hour is clearly marked "Top Secret," just as Jesus told the disciples after the resurrection, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). The activity Jesus wants to encourage is not date-setting but readiness.

Business as Usual

Jesus makes even more forceful this totally unexpected character of his initial coming by comparing it to the days of Noah in verses verse 37-39:

"As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming [parousia] of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man."

There have been many attempts to make these words, "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage," to indicate signs of evil things in the affairs of men. "Eating" has been taken to mean an increase in gluttony throughout the earth. It is, of course, true that one of the signs of middle age is to grow thick, and tired of it, but this is not a sign of the times! Also, "drinking" has been taken to mark an increase in alcoholism and drunkenness, while "marrying and giving in marriage" has been made to refer to the rocketing divorce rate.

But there is no thought of this in the mind of our Lord. What he is saying is, life will be going on as usual. Men will eat, drink and marry just as they have always done. It was like that in the days of Noah, before the flood. Life was going on in ordinary fashion. Moral conditions were bad, there was violence and corruption

throughout the earth, but they were not worse than they had been for quite some time.

The point our Lord makes is that "they did not know" until the flood came. There was no sense of any coming disaster. This went on, despite the preaching of Noah for one hundred and twenty years, during which he faithfully warned his generation that God would judge the world of that day. And despite the familiar sight of the huge ark that was built a long way from any ocean large enough to float it. Men must have laughed and called him "crazy Noah." But life went on as usual and the first sign of any coming disaster was the quiet, almost unnoticed removal of a select company from the world of that day.

Noah and his family were told to take the animals and go into the ark. God shut the door of the ark so that Noah and his family, eight people in all, were separated from the world. Then a full week went by and nothing happened. Noah, his family and all the animals were in the ark for a week and during that time the skies were blue, the sun shone, men went to work in the morning and came home in the evening. Lovers strolled hand in hand as they had done for centuries. Babies cried, men ate and drank and rose up to play; life went on as usual. Then suddenly clouds began to form, the skies darkened, the earth began to heave, the bottom of the sea raised and great tidal waves came crashing across the earth, the skies poured down untold tons of water for forty days and forty nights. All those who lived in the world of that day, "Went down with a bubbly groan, Unwept, unhonored and unknown."

So, the Lord says, will be the "parousia," the coming as a thief in the night. Jesus Christ will come stealthily, without warning, and a select company will be removed from the earth. That event he plainly describes in verses 40,41: "Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and the other is left."

A Selective Removal

The event will be highly selective, distinguishing even between two people working side by side. Further, it will be worldwide, for Luke tells us (17:34), "There will be two men in one bed; one will be taken, and the other left." While men work in their fields on one side of the earth, others will be asleep in their beds on the other side. But simultaneously, both in the day and in the night, the great removal will occur.

From human experience we feel there is only one way to leave this life. We enter it through the door marked "birth," and we will leave it through the door marked "death." But on the Mount of Transfiguration the Lord showed Peter, James and John that there is another way by which men could go to glory. He was suddenly transfigured before their astonished eyes. His raiment began to glow and he was a different person, yet the same Jesus.

So Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:51,52: "We shall not all sleep [die], but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." It is an event simply unexplainable in natural terms, but there can be no questions about the clear language Scripture employs. As Paul told the Thessalonians: "The dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:16,17).

There are some Bible scholars who take the Lord's words, "one is taken and the other left," in a somewhat different light. They feel the ones taken are not taken to glory but taken in judgment during the tribulation, i.e., killed, while the ones left are left alive to enter into the kingdom following. This, they say, would be more in line with the illustration the Lord uses of Noah's flood where men were swept away by the judgment of the flood.

But several severe objections appear to this opinion. First, no one was left behind in Noah's flood. They were all taken in judgment and there was nothing selective about it. The only ones who survived were Noah and his family who were taken out of the flood before it began. Second, the word the Lord uses for "taken" is a different Greek word from that which is used for the effect of the flood. That is one word, translated, "swept away." Third, the picture the Lord draws is one of sudden, unexpected removal and it is quite a straining of

that picture to imagine execution as always occurring in that manner throughout the Tribulation. Fourth, if the Lord is not here describing his coming for the church then we have no description from his lips of that tremendous event. All we would have would be his promise, "I will come again and will take you to myself" (John 14:3).

Because of these objections it is much more plausible to view this passage as our Lord's clear description of his coming "as a thief in the night," accomplishing a silent resurrection and transfiguration which will take the true church out of judgment of the tribulation, as Noah and his family were taken out of the judgment of the flood. To this vivid description of the silent departure of the church, the Lord immediately adds a word of admonition: "Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched, and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Notice carefully his argument here. He says that if the householder had known when the thief was coming he would have watched and prevented the robbery. That is, if a man knows he is to be robbed at night, and knows the very hour in which it will take place, he will be ready for the burglar when he comes. No burglar sends a notice ahead of time of his arrival, but if he did he could count on being met by a reception committee. When the robber arrived, the householder would be ready.

So says Jesus, since you do not know when your Lord is coming, then keep ready all the time. Be always ready. Surely that does not mean we are to gaze skyward all the time, or fold our hands and sit down to wait for him. Some years ago a religious magazine published a cartoon that showed a man standing in a wheat field. The sheaves had been stacked in bundles waiting for the harvest. He was standing there with a telescope glued to his eyes looking out to the horizon. Underneath was the caption, "Looking for the coming of the Lord." It suggested that such looking was foolish while the fields were white unto harvest all around, and nothing was being done.

It is very difficult, of course, to keep one eye peeled toward the sky while doing your daily work. But our Lord does not mean this when he says, "Watch!" What does he mean? Clearly one thing he means by this, as highlighted throughout this discourse, is, be not deceived! He has been warning of the deceitfulness of the age. We shall be surrounded by the spurious, the phony, which will nevertheless dazzle us and draw us. If we believe the lies that are part of the great brainwashing campaign behind the philosophy of the world, we shall soon lose our perspective. Life will then get out of focus and we shall become blinded and tragically self-deceived.

The only defense is a continuous, step-by-step, reliance on the truth of God, illuminated to us by an indwelling Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31,32). That is why we desperately need the Word of God, and the Spirit of God to apply that Word to our daily experience. The only defense against deceit is an obedient ear and a willingness to follow the promptings of the Spirit into an unceasing ministry of loving concern and service, in the name of Jesus Christ. In another place, Jesus said "Occupy till I come" (Luke 19:13, KJV). That means, keep going, keep busy in the strength and the purpose of God.

A Strange Paradox

Many Christians seem to feel that waiting for Christ's coming means that we must behave ourselves lest we should suddenly be caught short by his appearing and be ashamed of what we were doing. But Jesus is no policeman, waiting to surprise us in an unguarded moment. The paradox of the Christian life is that though we look for him to come, yet all the while we are enjoying his presence and experiencing his power. He is coming, and yet he is with us now.

What Jesus wants us to grasp is that these two activities are related. The intensity with which we love his coming is the revelation of the degree to which we are experiencing his presence. The hunger you may feel to

see his face is directly proportionate to the present enjoyment you have of his presence. If, to you, the thought of his coming is a frightening thing, then you know little or nothing of his presence now. But if you do know what it means to live by Christ, if moment by moment with your whole being you are taking from him all that he makes available to you, you will find a longing, a yearning in your heart for his personal coming.

A Christian poetess, Annie Johnson Flint, has put that thought in a wonderful fashion:

"It is not for a sign we are watching
For wonders above and below,
The pouring of vials of judgment,
The sounding of trumpets of woe;
It is not for a Day we are looking,
Not even the time yet to be
When the earth shall be filled with God's glory
As the waters cover the sea;
It is not for a King we are longing
To make the world-kingsdoms His own;
It is not for a Judge who shall summon
The nations of earth to His throne.

Not for these, though we know they are coming;
For they are but adjuncts of Him,
Before whom all glory is clouded,
Besides whom all splendor grows dim.
We wait for the Lord, our Beloved,
Our Comforter, Master and Friend,
The substance of all that we hope for,
Beginning of faith, and its end;
We watch for our Savior and Bridegroom,
Who loved us and made us His own;
For Him we are looking and longing:
For Jesus, and Jesus alone."*

The great Scottish minister, Horatio Bonar, on one occasion sat with a number of fellow ministers. He said to them, "Do you really expect Jesus Christ to come today?" One by one he went around the circle and put that question to each. And one by one they shook their heads and said, "No, not today." Then without comment he wrote on a piece of paper these words and passed it around:

"Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Prayer

Lord Jesus, Thank you that we do not need to wait until some future day to know the glory of your presence, but can experience it during every day we live. But we pray that in this moment of waiting and watching we shall recognize that the strength of our hope is determined by the experience of your present life. Teach us then how to "occupy till you come," in a ministry of loving concern and help to others. In your name, Amen.

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