

INTRODUCTION

One night a thief broke into a house he thought was deserted. As he walked through the darkened house with a flashlight he heard a voice from the kitchen that said, "Jesus is watching you." He stopped and said, "Who's there?" There was no answer so he thought he must have imagined it. But after he took a few more steps, the voice said again, "Jesus is watching you." He decided to walk toward the voice, just before he entered the kitchen, he heard it again. "Jesus is watching you." He swung his flashlight up and saw a talking parrot in a cage. The parrot said, "Jesus is watching you." The thief flipped on the kitchen light and said, "Why you're just a dumb bird." Then he noticed a huge Doberman crouching under the cage. The parrot said, "Sic 'im, Jesus."

Criminals can be pretty dumb. Here's a true story from Colorado Springs. A robber held up a convenience store with a shotgun. After the cashier put the money in the bag, the robber saw a bottle of whiskey on the shelf behind and cashier and told him to put it in the bag. The clerk told the robber he couldn't because the robber didn't look like he was 21 years old. The robber promptly showed the clerk his driver's license. The clerk agreed he was 21 and put the whiskey in the bag. Then when the robber left he called 911 and gave them the robber's name and address. We've all heard the "dumb criminal" stories, and they can do some lame-brained things. But if you've ever been robbed, you know it's not a laughing matter.

You might think it strange that Jesus would compare His return to a thief. Of course, Jesus isn't identifying with the sin of stealing. But just a good thief (that's an oxymoron) tries to sneak in quickly and quietly and escape with his loot, that's an apt description of how Jesus will rapture His church.

As you know the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible weren't in the original scriptures. They were added 14 centuries later by a Catholic Bishop named Stephen Langton. He didn't always do a good job. Someone said he marked up his Bible while riding on a donkey from church to church, and every time his donkey stumbled or lurched, he made a new chapter. For certain, there should be no chapter division between the fourth and fifth chapter in 1 Thessalonians. So to keep this text in proper context, let's get a running start at 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and read through 5:15.

1 Thessalonians 4:16–5:5. "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words."

"Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness."

The early believers we so excited about the return of Christ that it occupied their thoughts and conversations. They had used a specific Christian salutation made up of two Aramaic words, *maran atha*. You're probably heard it pronounced *Maranatha*. It literally means, "The Lord comes." Or "The Lord is at hand." When they gathered, they greeted each other with a holy kiss on the cheek and said, "Maranatha, the Lord comes." When they parted they said, "Maranatha, the Lord is at hand." We should have the same holy passion about the return of Christ. This is a crazy world and getting crazier. That's why each of us should maintain hope and be excited about life. We know that one day soon Jesus is going to come and we'll be with Him forever.

The great Bible scholar G. Campbell Morgan wrote: "To me the second coming is the perpetual light on the path which makes the present bearable. I never lay my head on my pillow without thinking that maybe before the morning breaks, the final morning may have dawned."

Let's learn four things about the return of Jesus.

I. JESUS WILL RETURN, BUT WE DON'T KNOW THE EXACT DAY

Can you imagine a thief sending you a text or email saying, "Just want you to know that I'm coming to rob your house tonight?" Of course not. Thieves don't announce when they're coming. They sneak in and sneak out.

When I was growing up, my dad used to take me fishing a lot. We lived only a block away from the largest natural lake in Alabama. My dad's uncle Bill had built a beautiful fourteen-foot wooden boat. The amazing thing is uncle Bill had lost his left arm in a sawmill accident, yet he could build anything. My dad painted it red and white. He bought a mighty 7-horsepower Sea King outboard motor and a trailer. He even built an open boat shed in our back yard to keep it under. We cherished that boat, and had many happy fishing trips in it.

We lived in a place and time where we didn't even lock our doors at night. In fact, we kept the front and back doors open with the screen doors closed to get a breeze at night. Everyone left their keys in their cars. We trusted our neighbors. But one morning we got up and someone had stolen our fishing boat. They had just backed up to the boat shed, hooked it up and drove away. I was so upset I cried. That robbery shook my little world because it was my first exposure to theft. My dad eventually bought another boat, but it was never as special as the one Uncle Bill had built for us. And for years afterward, whenever I saw a boat being pulled down the road or on the lake, I would look to see if it was our boat.

If we had known a thief was coming that night, we would have been ready. My dad would have been sitting out there with his 12-gauge, and I'd have been out there with my BB gun.

Jesus said the same thing about His return. "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." (Matthew 24:42-44)

There have been times throughout history when many people expected Jesus to return. We use the Gregorian calendar now, but when the Julian calendar turned from the year 999 to the year 1000, people expected Jesus to come for a new millennium. People were on their best behavior, worldly goods were sold and money given to the poor. Prisoners were set free, and many pilgrims traveled to Israel to wait for Jesus to return. December 31, 999 was actually on a Sunday and Cathedrals in Europe were filled with thousands of people expecting Jesus to return at midnight. He didn't.

However there was one consequence of this hysteria: Pilgrims from Israel returned and reported that the Muslims had desecrated many of the Holy Christian sites in Jerusalem. Thus, the ill-fated Crusades were launched to liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims.

William Miller was a Baptist Preacher in New York who predicted Jesus would return on October 22, 1845. Thousands of people in white robes walked to the top of hills waiting to be caught up—but Jesus was a no-show.

Edgar Whisenant, a former NASA engineer, wrote a book entitled, *88 Reasons Why Jesus will Return in 1988*, which sold 4.5 million copies. Wrong.

And most of you recall that Radio Bible Preacher, Harold Camping predicted Jesus would return on May 21, 2011. His radio ministry received millions in donations. But Jesus didn't follow Harold Camping's predictions. Since then, Mr. Camping had a stroke, and their donations have dwindled to almost nothing.

The bottom line is that whenever you hear ANYONE start giving a day and date, you know without any equivocation they are wrong, in fact, they become false prophets.

Jesus said NOBODY knows the day and the date except for the Father. I've said before I'm not on the scheduling committee; I'm on the welcoming committee.

How many of you believe, like me, that Jesus will return in our lifetime? How many of you think He will return before the end of 2013? How many of you believe He will return before the end of this worship service? Then this would be a perfect time because Jesus said, "The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." (Matthew 24:44)

II. JESUS WILL RESCUE HIS FAMILY FROM THE COMING JUDGMENT

There are many different views about the timing of the end time events. In Revelation 20, the Bible says Jesus will set up a Kingdom on earth for 1,000 years, or a millennium. Some believers call themselves amillennial. They believe the 1,000 years is only symbolic.

Another group of believers are post-millennial. They believe Jesus will return after a thousand years of peace and prosperity on the earth. This position was popular around the beginning of the 20th century when humanity seemed to be advancing. The airplane and telephone were invented. Darwin's theory of biological evolution had been applied to social evolution. There was a belief that people were getting better and better and soon there would be no war, hunger, crime, or

injustice. Christians were going to create a utopia on earth and Jesus would return. But two bloody world wars ended that belief.

Others, like me, hold to a premillennial position. In other words, we believe Jesus will return before His 1,000 reign. Don't worry if you don't know what position you hold, those are mostly big words theologians like to throw around. I knew one preacher who said that he was pro-millennial: He was just FOR it, whenever it happened. Another said, "I'm pan-millennial; I believe it will all pan out in the end!"

Not all Christians agree on the order of the events. And it's okay if you don't agree with every point I believe. You go your way and I'll go His way. Seriously, as long as you believe Jesus is going to return, we can fellowship together.

But there is a reason WHY I believe Jesus will come before the tribulation and His 1,000-year reign. I believe He is coming back to rescue His church, His Bride, from the terrible period of tribulation and judgment that will happen on earth.

In the second and third chapters of Revelation, Jesus gave messages to the seven churches, which represent all churches of all time. When He wrote to the church at Philadelphia, He said, "Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I also will keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth." (Revelation 3:10)

In Luke 17 Jesus compared His return to a couple of Old Testament events. "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed." (Luke 17:26-30)

For many years I read that statement thought the only take-away from it was that life would be going on as normal as possible when Jesus returns. People would be eating, drinking, marrying off their children, etc. But as I examined it more closely I came to see a deeper meaning. What do the flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah have in common with the second coming? First, the people were so wicked before the flood, that God sent the flood as a judgment against sinful humanity. The residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, who staged their own gay-pride parades, were so sinful that God sent a fiery judgment on those people. Doesn't that remind you of the times we're living in? We talk about God judging America; we're not that special. The time is going to come when God will judge all humanity again. It's described in Revelation chapters 6-19. What else did Noah and Lot have in common? In both cases, God rescued a FAMILY. God put Noah and his family into the ark and they escaped the watery judgment. The same thing happened with Lot. Before God sent the fiery judgment on those two cities, God had His angels let Lot and his family to a safe distance away.

The tribulation is another example of how God is going to pour out His wrath on a sinful world, and like Noah and Lot, He is going to come and rescue us out of here before the judgment comes.

III. THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL BRING DESTRUCTION TO MANY

There are many references to the Day of the Lord in the Bible. But remember, this isn't one single 24-hour period. The Day of the Lord describes the end time events at begin with the rapture. For those of us who know Jesus, it will be a delightful experience, but for those left behind, it will mean destruction for many. It will not be a time of celebration and reunion for those who don't know Christ. It will begin the worst chapter in the history of the world.

Here's how Isaiah described the Day of the Lord, "See, the day of the Lord is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it...I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless." (Isaiah 13:9, 11)

Paul used the analogy of birth pains to describe this time of tribulation. He wrote, "While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape." (1 Thessalonians 5:3)

Once an expectant mother starts having contractions, then there's no way to stop the process—a baby is coming, ready or not. He said once these end time events start happening, there's nothing to stop it. Judgment is coming whether you're ready or not.

Thirty-five years ago, before our older daughter, Jenni, was born, we took Lamaze classes. At that time, the only way a husband could be in the delivery room was if they had completed Lamaze training. I was going to be the birthing coach. One of the first things they taught us was that you don't ever call them "labor pains." If you call them pains, they will hurt. They were contractions, not pains. And by concentrating on your focal point and controlling your breathing, it wouldn't even hurt. Of course, I became an expert coach. I knew how to time the contractions, and when to leave for the hospital. Because we were thirty miles away, I decided we would leave when the contractions were about twenty minutes apart.

It was about 3:30 a.m. on Mother's Day and I had a great Mother's Day sermon ready that I never delivered, because Cindy decided it was time for her to deliver a baby instead. I started timing her contractions, but she wasn't cooperating. She was supposed to start with contractions thirty minutes apart, then twenty-five minutes apart, and then twenty minutes. Instead she claimed she was having contractions ten or even five minutes apart. I knew that wasn't possible, so on the sheet of paper where I was writing down the times, I just scratched out the ones that I thought were too close.

But then she had a real, unmistakable birth pain—I mean contraction. She let me know in no uncertain terms that we needed to leave for the hospital at THAT moment. So we got in our 1976 Malibu Classic with the 350-cubic inch engine, and we covered the 30 miles to the hospital in a little over 15 minutes. That was about the only time Cindy didn't tell me to slow down. I dropped

her off at the ER entrance and I went to park the car. Eighteen minutes later Jenni was born. And I didn't even get to do my coaching! She didn't wait on me, once the contractions started, there was going to be a birth.

And Paul wrote that many people will be living their lives totally separate from a relationship with God, and they scoff and laugh at the idea of the second coming. But like birth contractions, when Jesus returns, everything else is going to happen just as the Bible predicted.

For those of us who know the Lord, the rapture will mean deliverance, but for many who are left behind, there will be destruction. If you want to read about the destructive judgment poured out on the earth after the rapture, consult my book *Revelation: God's Final Word*.

Again, I want to urge you to give your life to Christ now. You don't want to be left behind when He comes to rapture the church.

IV. CHRISTIANS SHOULD NOT BE SURPRISED BY THESE FINAL EVENTS

Imagine you were leaving for a trip and you posted on your Facebook page that you're going to be gone for two weeks on vacation and your alarm system is broken, and nobody is staying in your home. And then you post, "I hope nobody takes the \$50,000 cash I have hidden in my freezer." Now, if you return home, you shouldn't be surprised if that money was gone.

Jesus is coming suddenly, and without warning. He's coming like a thief in the night. But we have been warned in scripture, so we should not be surprised. Paul wrote, "But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief." (1 Thessalonians 5:4)

Are you ready for the second coming? You have a choice right now, but there will be a time, when you will no longer have a choice.

C.S. Lewis was one of the most respected scholars of the 20th century. For many years he was an atheist, having rejected his Anglican upbringing. But another brilliant scholar, J.R.R. Tolkien, who wrote the Lord of the Rings trilogy, befriended C.S. Lewis and led him to faith in Jesus Christ. Then Lewis became one of the most influential Christian intellectuals in history. Here's what he wrote about the Second Coming: "God is going to invade this earth in force. For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing. It will be the time when we discover which side we have really chosen whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it." (*The Case for Christianity*)

CONCLUSION

A tourist was visiting a beautiful farm and vineyard in Tuscany. He approached a man who was pruning the vines and said, "Do you own this farm?" The man said, "No, this estate is owned by

an absentee landowner in Rome. I just manage it for him." The tourist asked if he could look around, and the manager nodded his head and went back to work.

The tourist noticed the estate was in immaculate condition. The house was spotless, the shrubbery was pruned, and the gardens were full of flowers and vegetables.

The tourist returned to the manager and said, "How long has it been since the owner was here?" The manager said, "Oh, it's been about 12 years or so since he was here."

The tourist said, "Well, who tells you what to do?"

The manager said, "When he hired me, he told me to make sure everything was taken care of, so that's what I've been doing."

The tourist said, "I don't understand it. The owner hasn't been here in 12 years, and yet these grounds are beautiful. You're working as if you're expecting him next week."

The manager said, "No sir. I expect him today. Every day I expect him to return. That's why I keep working so hard."

That's the way every Christian should be living. We should all be living as if Jesus was crucified yesterday; raised from the dead this morning, and is coming back this afternoon. Are you ready?

Are you ready for the rapture? These words in the Bible are intended for us to encourage one another. Christians, I encourage you to live in a way that you can meet the Lord with confidence. Believers, I encourage you to share your faith with everyone you care about.

Friends without Christ, I encourage you to give your heart to Jesus today. Do you know why Jesus hasn't come yet? God is waiting on you. 2 Peter 3:9 says "God is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

OUTLINE

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David O. Dykes, Pastor
Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes