

Theme: God Has a Plan for Us
Subject: **The Nearness of Christ's Return**
Reading: Mark 12

Global warming has been talked about, has been warned of by climate specialists and is gradually making itself felt around the world for all of this century. It has been discounted and mocked by those who have not wanted to change their industries (and their driving habits) to avoid adding CO₂ to our atmosphere. But the drastic effects of worldwide changes to our weather are being felt in almost all nations. Extreme heat is now drying vegetation to the point where there are widespread forest fires in so many countries. Also, in recent years, there have been violent and heavy rains causing floods of extraordinary proportions. Earthquakes and volcanic activity are increasing. Glaciers are melting at ever faster rates, causing both a rise in sea levels and a dilution of the salt level. Storms of epic proportions raging across countries have caused much loss of life and flattened buildings. This is a grim picture indeed. Even the larger countries, such as China and the USA, now accept this as a reality that needs urgent human endeavour to correct, if that is even possible.

But it is a picture predicted 2000 years ago by no less a person than Jesus himself:

“And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars: and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near”. (Luke 21:25-28)

So, if what we are experiencing now is what Jesus warned would happen just before his return to the earth, as a great King over all of its nations, then this subject we are now considering is of vital importance.

Jesus chose twelve special disciples who would become his apostles (*a word from Greek for 'sent men'*). For three and a half years, he preached unceasingly about the future Kingdom of God as the central part of the gospel message. He had promised that those men would then sit on twelve thrones judging the tribes of Israel. He had also spoken about the near-future invasion of Jerusalem which would destroy it – talking in some detail and warning that, when the invasion began, they should flee to the mountains and hide. Naturally enough, his disciples wanted to know when this might happen (In fact it happened in AD 70). But they also wanted to know when God and His Son would set up the promised Kingdom. After his resurrection, they asked him this question, recorded in Acts 1:6,7: ‘Therefore, when they had come together, they asked him, saying, “Lord will You at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel”, he said to them; “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority”.’

Jesus told them that these things were not for them to know and repeated his promise that the holy spirit power would be given to them so that they would be able to obey his command to become his witnesses throughout the land of Israel, and throughout the earth. While they were thinking about these words, suddenly – as they looked at him – he was lifted from the earth and a cloud received him out of their sight. What is important for us is that, while they were standing there gazing up into heaven, they became aware that two angels had joined them on the Mount of Olives. The words of the angels were: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven”.

These words form a solid foundation for our faith in the return of Jesus Christ to this earth. But there is even more impressive Biblical proof in the prophecy of Zechariah chapter 14. The chapter opens with the words ‘Behold the day of the Lord is coming, and your spoil will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem’. Now verses 3 and 4: ‘Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations as he fights in the day of battle. And in that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives which faces Jerusalem on the east’. Powerful words indeed, and words that come to us from a very long time ago written at the time of the Persian Empire, at least 500 years before the time of Jesus.

What is so convincing is the consistency of the Bible message: the way that the promise of the angels to the disciples had been prophesied in detail so many years before.

Now we need to look at more verses in the New Testament about the second coming of Jesus. We see how Jesus' promises, and the words of the angels on the Mount of Olives, had fired the imagination as well as the anticipation of those men and women who formed the new congregations of believers in Christ throughout the cities of the Roman Empire. First of all, some words of the apostle Paul in Thessalonians 5:1-5: 'But concerning the times and seasons brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say 'Peace and safety' then sudden destruction comes upon them as labour pains upon a pregnant woman and they shall not escape. But you brethren are not in darkness so that this day should overtake you as a thief: you are all sons of light and sons of the day, we are not of the night nor of darkness'.

The words "come as a thief" are also Jesus' own words in Revelation 3:3.

Peter, seen as the most senior of the apostles of Jesus, writes about this warning in 2 Peter 3:10: 'But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat: both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up'. In this letter Peter used some very extreme descriptive language, so please see the footnote.

Jesus used this principle of "coming as a thief" in several of his parables. He had already told his disciples that the day and hour of his coming, only his Father knew. If we go to Matthew 24:42 we find Jesus saying: "Watch therefore, for you do not know at what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore, you also be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect!"

We have seen that, in our times, the state of the earth is causing very serious problems for many nations and then we have read that this was predicted by Jesus to happen just before he would return to earth as a Great King over all of the nations. We have then seen promises about that return, and confirmed that it really will be to earth. Finally, we have seen warnings that Jesus will come suddenly, when he is least expected; and then highlighted the word "Watch".

We live such short lives, and can never be certain just how long they will last. This means that, in the time we do have, we need to be looking for that return of Jesus – doing what he told us. That is to be "watching for his coming" and, having committed ourselves to be his disciples by belief and immersion, holding onto our personal faith – strong in the certainty of that coming.

Footnote: descriptive language

We need to be clear about the terms "heaven" and "earth" as used here by Peter. From way back in Israel's history these words had meant the ruling classes (heaven) and the common people (earth). When we use this understanding, Peter's words, whilst still very serious, are less alarming.

For a very good example of this concept look at Deuteronomy 32:1, where Moses spoke in the 'hearing of all the assembly of Israel the words of this song ... Give ear O heavens and I will speak, and hear O earth the words of my mouth'. Clearly Moses, as the opening words tell us, was speaking to the assembled nation of Israel, when they were east of the Jordan River, about to cross into the land of their inheritance.