

THREE DON'TS CONCERNING CHRIST'S RETURN

13 As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What a magnificent building! **2**But Jesus said to him, You see these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left upon another, every one of them will be thrown down [to the ground]. **3**As he sat on the mount of Olives across from the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, **4**Tell us, when shall these things happen? And what shall be the sign that these things are all about to occur?

5Then Jesus began [to teach them by] saying, Be careful that no one leads you astray. **6**Many shall come in my name, saying, I am he; but they shall lead many astray. **7**When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. It is necessary for these things to happen; but the end has not yet come—**8**for nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there shall be earthquakes in various places; there shall be famines—these things are the beginning of birth pains. **9**But watch out for yourselves; because they will hand you over to councils; and in synagogues you shall be beaten; and you shall stand before governors and kings for my sake, to be a testimony to them. **10**But the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. **11**Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what you will say; rather, speak whatever words are given to you in that hour; for it is not you who are speaking, but the Holy Spirit. **12**Brother will hand over brother to death, and the father [will betray] his child; and children will stand up against parents and cause them to be put to death. **13**You shall be hated by all men for my name's sake; but whoever endures to the end, he shall be saved.

14But when you see “the abomination that causes desolation” standing where it ought not (let him who reads understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. **15**Let him who is on the housetop not go down nor enter [his house] to retrieve anything from his house. **16**Let him who is in the field not return home to get his cloak. **17**How dreadful will it be for those women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing in those days! **18**Pray that these things will not occur in the winter. **19**Those shall be days of tribulation, such as has not occurred from the beginning, when God created the world, until now, and never shall occur again. **20**If the Lord had not shortened those days, no one would survive; but for the elect's sake, whom he chose, he has shortened those days. **21**At that time if anyone shall say to you, Look, here is the Christ! Or, Look, there [he is]! Do not believe him; **22**because false Christs and false prophets shall appear, and shall perform signs and wonders, in order that they might, if possible, lead the elect astray. **23**So beware. Listen, I have told you all these things in advance.

24But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give its light, **25**and the stars shall fall from the heavens, and the heavenly bodies shall be shaken. **26**Then they shall see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory. **27**And then he shall send out the angels, and he shall gather together his elect from the four winds—from the most distant part of the earth to the most distant part of heaven.

28Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that the summer is near. **29**In the same way, when you see these things beginning to happen, realize that it is near—at the door. **30**I tell you the truth,

This generation shall not pass away before all these things have happened. ³¹Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.

³²But no one knows when that day or that hour shall occur, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like when a man travels to another country, leaving his house and giving authority to his servants, assigning to each one his work, and also instructing the doorkeeper to stay alert. ³⁵Stay alert, therefore; because you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether [he will come] in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows at daybreak, or in the morning. ³⁶[Stay alert,] so that when he suddenly comes he will not find you sleeping. ³⁷Now what I say to you, I am saying to everyone, Stay alert. (Mk. 13:1-37)

Introduction

As the world approached the end of the millennium, one writer wrote as follows:

As never before, we see people intent on evil, even from childhood. Men today exhibit an unbelievable arrogance, kicking against the law of God. Never before have there been such base crimes of incest and fornication as are evidenced today. Our way of life has been debased and corrupted by a combination of the frivolous and the infamous; our minds have lost their taste for what is serious and dwell upon the shameful. Look across the land, can justice be found in any court? The moral degeneracy of our nation's men has led to the acceptance and support of homosexuality.

The writer of those words surely knew what he is talking about; he gives a pretty accurate picture of society and the world at the close of the twentieth century, doesn't he?

Actually the answer to that is, "No." That writer was **not** giving an accurate description of our present society and world as we approached the end of the twentieth century and the second millennium. He was giving an accurate description of **his** society as they came to the end of the **first** millennium. The writing that is paraphrased above (removing the original archaic expressions) was written by Ronal Glabber shortly before the year 1000 A.D. At that time in history the expectation among Christians of Christ's immediate return was running high; many Christians were utterly convinced the Lord would return in the year 1000 A.D.

As we enter into the new millennium, may our outlook concerning Christ's return be informed and guided by the words of our Lord Himself as they are recorded in the gospels. In order that we may be adequately prepared for His return, let us give heed to three important "Don'ts" concerning our Lord's return.

I. Don't Be Deceived (Mk. 13:1-23)

As Jesus departs from the temple, one of His disciples calls attention to the splendor and awesomeness of the structure (vs. 1.) The temple in Jerusalem was, indeed, one of the most impressive sights in the ancient world; it was regarded as an architectural wonder, being built of massive white stones. Jesus acknowledges the greatness of the temple complex; but then, to the astonishment of His disciples, He announces that this entire massive structure shall be totally demolished (vs. 2.)

A little while later, as they sit on the slope of the Mount of Olives, gazing down upon this magnificent temple structure, the disciples ask, "When is this demolition going to occur? And what will be the sign that it is about to happen?" Jesus informs them that these things are going to happen within their lifetime (vs. 30;) and He prepares them by describing the circumstances and events leading up to that day of the temple's destruction.

According to verses 5-6, this period of time, leading up to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, will be characterized by the appearance of many false Christs. By way of example, note the comments of the Jewish rabbi, Gamaliel,

Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. ³⁷After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. (Acts 5:36-37)

According to verses 7-8, these false Messiahs would be political and revolutionary figures. As such, they would incur the opposition of Rome and, consequently, embroil Palestine in numerous armed conflicts, which the Jewish historian, Josephus, calls "the Jewish wars." But with the outbreak of these Jewish wars the disciples must not assume that the world is coming to an end. On the contrary, prior to "The End" far greater upheavals will occur throughout the entire world: world wars and natural catastrophes of world-wide proportion and world-wide significance will take place (vs. 8a.) The disciples should view these local Jewish wars as "*the beginning of birth pains,*" not the consummation of all things. Just as birth pains become more severe as the birth approaches, so such events as described in verses 7-8 will become more severe as "The End" of history and of the world approaches.

Then in verses 9-13 the Lord Jesus informs His disciples that they must be prepared for the personal opposition they are going to encounter during this period that lies immediately ahead of them. The church will be persecuted at the hands of the Jews (vs. 9.) The fulfillment of this prediction can be seen in the progressive persecution of the church as recorded in the Book of Acts:

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. ²They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. (Acts 4:1-3)

They [the Jewish leaders] called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. (Acts 5:40)

On that day [the day when Stephen was stoned to death] a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. (Acts 8:1)

Jesus assures His disciples that this persecution at the hands of the Jews will not annihilate the church, because it is imperative (πρωτον δει) that the gospel be preached to all nations, a task that only the church as the people of God can undertake (vs. 10.) Jesus further assures His disciples that the Holy Spirit will give them utterance when they are brought to trial (vs. 11.) An example of this is found in Acts 4:7-8. Peter and John are brought before the religious leaders for questioning. They, being *“filled with the Holy Spirit,”* respond by boldly preaching the gospel. As the Lord indicates in verses 12-13, just as the Jewish wars would be a precursor of greater world-wide upheavals; so, too, the Jewish persecution of the church would be a precursor of greater world-wide persecution of the church: *“you—the church—shall be hated by **all** men for my sake.”*

Having spoken in general terms up to this point, Jesus becomes more specific in verses 14-20. When *“the abomination that causes desolation”* makes its appearance, immediate flight is imperative, because the day of Jerusalem’s destruction is at hand (vs. 14-16.) *“The abomination that causes desolation”* is something so utterly abominable (sacrilegious) that it causes the temple to be left desolate—evacuated by both worshipers and God Himself because it has become utterly polluted. Such an event had occurred previously in Jewish history as Mark’s editorial comment, *“let the reader understand,”* indicates. In 168 B.C. the Syrian ruler erected an altar to the pagan deity, Zeus, sacrificed a pig, and poured its broth throughout the temple. A similar such desecration would occur at the hands of the Romans just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D.

Being sensitive as to the hardship of such a flight from the city, Jesus instructs His disciples to pray for God’s mercy (vs. 17-18.) According to the commentator, William Lane, flight in winter would be almost impossible because the streams swollen by heavy winter rains would become impassable (*The New International Commentary, The Gospel of Mark*, p. 470.)

In verses 19-20 Jesus speaks of both the awful tribulation of that time, as well as the steadfast faithfulness of God to the people of Israel. If the LORD had not shortened those days, *“no one (literally, “no flesh”) would survive”*—none of Israel would have survived, all would have been annihilated by the Roman armies. But God shortened those days for *“the elect’s sake.” “The elect”* here seems to be a reference to Israel as the continuing object of God’s special favor to be brought to saving faith in Jesus the Messiah in the last days, which fact the Apostle Paul addresses in Romans 11:28, *“With regard to the gospel, they are enemies for your sake; but with regard to election, they are loved for the sake of the patriarchs.”* Such is the case even though the majority of individual Jews who presently reject the Savior die in their sins, as the Lord Jesus warns in John 8:24, *“I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.”*

Once again Jesus warns His disciples to be on guard against deception. That time of intense crisis in Israel will also be a time of false hopes; many will eagerly look for the Messiah’s appearance and will rashly seek to identify Him (vs. 21.) In the spiritual and emotional climate of that time many false Christs will appear, and prove to be very seductive (vs. 22.) Referring to all that He has foretold in verses 5-22, Jesus exhorts His disciples to *“beware”* (vs. 23.)

The first lesson for us to learn is, Don’t Be Deceived. We must not be deceived by false Christs, as the Lord Jesus repeatedly emphasizes in verses 5-6,21-23. We must not be deceived by the hope of a “rapture,” as becomes evident from the Lord’s teaching in verses 9-13, especially verse 13, *“You shall be hated by all men for my name’s sake; but whoever endures to the end, he shall be saved.”* The whole thrust of Scripture is that Christians must pass through tribulation, as opposed to being raptured away from it: “[Paul and Barnabas] *returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²²strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. We must go through many tribulations to enter the kingdom of God, they said*” (Acts 14:21-22.) We must not be deceived by the apparent permanence of structures and institutions in this present world. The disciples were very impressed by the massive structure of the temple and were shocked to learn that it all would come to destruction (vs. 1-2.) In a similar manner, we must not assume that the structures, institutions and nations of this present world shall continue indefinitely.

II. Don’t Set a Date (Mk. 13:24-32)

In verses 21-22 our Lord has warned His disciples of the great messianic expectations and claims that will characterize that period of intense tribulation experienced by Israel. Now to further insure that they be not carried away by the seductive appearance of false Christs, the Lord points them to the future and the time of His Second Coming.

He declares that His return shall be some time in the future, *“after that tribulation”* experienced by the Jews in 70 A.D. When the Roman armies surround Jerusalem, the Jews should not expect a miraculous appearance by the Messiah to deliver them, such as had occurred in the days of the Old Testament king, Hezekiah, when the LORD miraculously delivered Israel from the Assyrian army by slaying 185,000 men in one night (Isa. 37:36-37.) On the contrary, that tribulation will climax with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, which occurred in 70 A.D. The final appearance of the Messiah (the *“Son of Man,”* vs. 26,) will not occur until *“after that tribulation”*—but just how long after that tribulation our Lord does not say.

Jesus further teaches, *“those days”* (i.e.; the time of His Second Coming) will be characterized by cataclysmic events in the heavens (vs. 24-25.) Unlike the signs performed by the false Christs in the days of Jerusalem’s tribulation (vs. 22,) when the Son of man is about to make His return in glory, the whole creation will bear witness to His arrival by its cosmic upheaval. Furthermore, when the Son of man makes His return there will be no need for anyone to point Him out (vs. 26;) this in contrast to those who must point out the false Christs (vs. 21.) The whole world shall witness His coming as He appears *“on the clouds with great power and glory.”*

Then, at His coming, He shall gather unto Himself *“his elect”* from the remotest regions of earth and heaven (vs. 27.) The elect, who are chosen by God and, who consequently receive Jesus as the promised Messiah, shall finally join their Savior in His glory.

Verses 24-27 actually form a parenthesis, projecting forward to the day of Christ’s return; in verses 28-29 Jesus again focuses on the coming of Jerusalem’s tribulation. Jesus now points His disciples to the budding fig tree as an illustration (vs. 28.) In contrast to the other trees (such as the almond,) which blossom very early in spring, the fig tree bears its leaves and blossoms very late. Consequently, when you see the fig tree blooming you know that summer is fast approaching. In verse 29 Jesus applies this illustration (or parable) with the warning: *“When you see these things happening, knows that it [i.e.; the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple] is near—at the very door!”* Note: The phrase, *“these things,”* as used in verse 29 is a reference to the events foretold in verses 5-14, **not** the events foretold in verses 24-27. It is referring to:

- the high messianic expectations and the appearance of messianic pretenders (vs.5-6)
- the outbreak of the Jewish wars (vs. 7)
- the increased persecution of the church, especially at the hands of the Jewish leaders (vs. 9-13)
- the abomination that causes desolation (vs.14)

In verse 30 Jesus solemnly testifies that all these events (the events outlined in verses 5-23,) leading up to and culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem, shall surely be fulfilled within the lifetime of that first century generation. In verse 31 our Lord makes His prophecy even more emphatic: *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”* Our Lord spoke these words in about the year 33 A.D., and they were completely fulfilled by 70 A.D.

Then, in verse 32, in sharp contrast to the certainty that the temple would be destroyed within the lifetime of that generation, our Lord declares that the day or hour of His return is a complete mystery—known only to God the Father.

The second lesson we must learn: Don't set a date for Christ's return. We are not to calculate and conjecture as to the precise time of our Lord's return. Such endeavors are disappointing, even disturbing to those weak in the faith, and are disobedient to our Lord's teaching that no one knows the date of His return.

III. Don't Fall Asleep (Mk. 13:33-37)

The opposite of calculation and pre-occupation is neglect—an equally disobedient response to this whole subject of our Lord's return. So, in verse 33 the Lord issues the counsel and warning: *“Beware; watch and pray.”* We are to be spiritually alert; expecting and anticipating His coming, and being prepared to meet Him.

We are to be in prayer for the coming of that day, even as the Lord Jesus teaches to pray: *“This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”* (Matt. 6:9-10.) The church's response to the Lord's testimony, *“Yes, I am coming swiftly,”* should be, *“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus”* (Rev. 22:20.)

To reinforce this exhortation, the Lord Jesus provides a parable (vs. 34-36.) Household servants, entrusted with the upkeep of the master's property and business, should be found faithfully doing their assigned duties in anticipation of their master's return. The emphasis of the parable is on watchfulness. The doorkeeper is especially assigned the task of watching for his master's return. The Lord Jesus issues the command, *“Stay alert, because you do not know when he is coming”* (vs. 35.) The command is followed by the warning that we must not be caught off guard and be found sleeping (vs. 36.)

This is the third lesson to be learned: Don't fall asleep spiritually.

Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. ³⁵It will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be 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. (Lk. 21:34-36)

Conclusion

As we enter the new millennium—indeed, no matter what may be the year in which we live—may our outlook be informed and guided by the words of our Lord Jesus Himself. With regard to this great matter of Christ's return in glory, let us bear in mind these three don'ts: 1) Don't be deceived; 2) Don't set a date; and 3) Don't fall asleep spiritually.