

Introduction

You may have noticed that Honey Gram and I have our grandchildren with us today at church! Titus is now three and Rebekah is 6 months. Titus talks up a storm and Rebekah tries. The way the human mind works and uses vocal sounds to communicate is something we all probably take for granted. But if you stop and think about it, words and the use of them is an incredible thing. This morning we are going to be considering certainty and uncertainty about the return of Jesus, but keep in mind our consideration has everything to do with words. And be prepared to consider this morning the permanence of Christ's words.

[Read Text and Pray]

Matthew 24 and 25 contain Jesus's reply to the questions put to him by his disciples about the destruction of the temple, the sign of his coming, and the end of the age. In our study, we have seen that this discourse introduces a time of tribulation. In verses 4-14, Jesus warns not to be led astray by false Christs or false prophets. He says there will be wars and famines and earthquakes, but these are just the birth pains. Christ's followers will be hated; they will be delivered up to persecution and martyrdom. Many will fall away and will hate one another. Lawlessness will increase and love will grow cold. But the gospel will be preached throughout the world. These days will continue until Christ comes. It is a time of tribulation.

In the meantime Jesus prophesies a specific event signaled by the abomination of desolation. Jerusalem would be surrounded and invaded, and the city and its temple would be destroyed. It would be characterized by unparalleled tribulation. When it would occur those in the region should flee FROM, not TO, the city. This event took place in AD 70 when the Romans laid siege against Jerusalem, and after 5 months entered it and brought the temple and the city to the ground, killing over a million people. The Jewish historian Josephus describes a ghastly scene validating the accuracy of Jesus' prophecy. This is the substance of verses 15-21. Many believe the event will be repeated in the future with the man of lawlessness spoken of in 2 Thessalonians.

In verses 22-28 Jesus returns to the days of tribulation that transpire until he returns and indicates that if the days had not been shortened no human being would survive, but for the sake of the elect the days would be shortened. He will return, and no one will miss it. And at this point Jesus provides details about his coming. Here is where we are this morning. The focus of the remaining verses is on what is certain and uncertain about the coming of Jesus. The main point is: We can be absolutely certain Jesus will return, we just do not know when. As we focus upon the return of Christ, I want you to see in the text the fact of it, the assurance of it, the timing of it, and the preparation for it.

So first, consider . . .

I. The FACT of Christ's Coming.

A. Signaling that his appearance is at hand, Jesus refers to catastrophic perturbations in the heavens. The sun will be darkened; the moon not give its light; the stars will fall; planets will be shaken. The wording reflects Isaiah 13 and its description of the day of the Lord.

For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for

their iniquity. I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless. . . . I will make the heavens tremble and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

This is the day of reckoning for the world. Do not think the day of Jesus' return is going to escape anyone's notice. Not only is it going to be like a flash of lightning across the sky, it is going to involve the shaking of the universe such as we cannot imagine. Think to the shaking of Mount Sinai when the Lord appeared and delivered the law to the people of Israel and they cowered because they could not bear to hear him speak. That cannot begin to compare with how it will be when the maker of the universe comes to bring humanity to justice.

B. He will appear. He will appear with the clouds of heaven. The clouds are indicative of the presence of God, and indeed he will be present. He will appear with power and great glory and the tribes of the earth will mourn. The mourning here is not a mourning of repentance but of dread and regret. By this time the gospel will have been a witness to the nations. But for the most part they will have rejected it. Now that Christ appears they will realize they believed lies and rejected the truth. It will dawn upon them that all their investments are worthless and emptiness. And their rebellion against this king is now about to be brought down upon them.

C. However, not everyone will be mourning. For Jesus will dispatch his angels with a loud trumpet call. Trumpets summoned the people of God to gather. And this trumpet will call the redeemed of the earth to be gathered unto Christ. His angels will assure that they will be gathered. These redeemed are the elect. They are the ones the Father has chosen out of the world to be his own despite their sin. Theirs was this hope of glory and now the glory has dawned. Christ has come to get his bride. They are people from all over the earth, from every tribe and tongue and people, and nation.

D. The overriding question is, when he comes will Jesus be coming FOR you or AGAINST you? Will you be mourning his appearance or welcoming it? Will you be fleeing from him or be gathered to him? That is what makes all the difference on this fearful day!

Next, notice . . .

II. The ASSURANCE of Christ's Coming.

Jesus not only describes the drama of his return; he provides a solid guarantee that he will. There is nothing else that Jesus ever said about which he was more emphatically certain than this fact. He asserted more times that he would die and rise from the dead but never with more solemn conviction.

A. Jesus first directs the attention of the disciples to the fig tree. There is a lesson here about his return. The fig tree indicates when summer is near. Whenever the branches become tender and put out leaves, you don't need a calendar, you just know summer is near, right around the corner. In the same way, says Jesus, when you see all these things, you know he is near, at the very gates. What things is Jesus talking about? "All these things" refer to the things he has just mentioned except for the celestial upheaval and his return—wars, famines, earthquakes, false prophets and false messiahs, the falling away of many, lawlessness, etc, and the decimation of Jerusalem. When you see these, know that the coming of Jesus is imminent. Clearly the shaking of the universe and the appearance of the Lord are not included in "all these things" because that combination is what 'all these things' indicate. The certainty of Jesus' coming is expressed in his assurance that 'all these

things' will happen, and not only that but that 'all these things' will happen within the generation alive at that time.

Notice how strongly Jesus asserts it. "Truly I say to you." Stop there. Jesus is not saying that some things he says are true and some are untrue. Everything he ever said is true. But some things bear special and unequivocal attention. And here is one of those things. "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."

Certain skeptics have accused Jesus of error here because he did not return within that generation. Others have said, "well, Jesus wasn't talking about a generation as such but of a kind of people." I think the problem is that readers have included the cosmic perturbations and the coming of Christ in the phrase, "all these things." That is a mistake. It violates the context. According to the context, "all these things" speaks of the things that POINT TO the coming of Christ. So, when Jesus says "all these things will happen in this generation," I am convinced he is referencing those things that he spoke of in verses 4-14—namely, wars, earthquakes, famines, false prophets and false messiahs, many falling away, lawlessness, etc., and the destruction of the temple. And those things DID take place within the lives of that generation. The result of what Jesus said is to make the assertion of his return even more assured. The current generation was not going to have to wait and wonder about the birth pains which were indicators of his coming. No, they would see them and they could be assured that even if Jesus should tarry to return in their generation, he would most certainly not fail to return in due time.

The weight and strength of Jesus's assertion echoes in his statement in verse 35. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." We should be strengthened in our resolve to look with absolute conviction toward, not the probability that Jesus might come again, but the indisputable guarantee Jesus has given us of his imminent return.

Rather than calling Jesus's promise into question, his words reveal the complete assurance that is ours that Christ Jesus WILL return, and that he is near, at the very gates. It is based upon his words. Heaven and earth WILL pass way, but not his words.

Heaven and earth will pass away. It is an unimaginable thought. They seem so permanent. People talk about the possibility of the sun running out of fuel, but we can't imagine it. Think about the things that seem to have permanence in your life. What are they? Mountains? Diamonds? Taxes? The earth? Space? Well, says, Jesus, "They are not permanent." He didn't say heaven and earth MIGHT pass away, but rather that they WOULD pass away. Peter wrote it this way, "the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgement and destruction of the ungodly. ...But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed . . . all these things are thus to be dissolved." Heaven and earth will pass away. Permanent as they seem they are temporary. John emphasized it as well; he wrote, "The world is passing away along with its desires."

How this truth should impact us today! The world and the people in it live like THIS is what is permanent. The psychology and the pursuits and the wisdom and the philosophy of the world tell you and me that this world and its stuff and its desires are where our satisfaction and fulfillment are found. But it is all based on the blind assumption that this is all there is.

Meanwhile, Jesus says, "my words will not pass away." Planets and stars and the heavens will pass away but NOT MY WORDS. His counsel shall stand. His will shall be accomplished. His decrees are steadfast. His promises are eternally unshakable. Isaiah 40:8 asserts, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

Jesus's word is God's word. His word is that by which he created all these things. His word is the power that upholds all things. His assurances are absolute. His law is perfect. His counsel will never fail. His words will NEVER pass away. Rightly does the psalmist cry, "Oh how I love your law; it is my meditation all the day!" (Psalm 119:97) The word of God is more real than our circumstances, desires, and our hopes. The word of God is true, sure, right, clean, and pure, and it endures forever. Listen, why would you follow the advice of the world? Why would you listen to the counsel of your flesh? Why would you be guided by what is passing away? But that is the nature of the world's counsel and advice. "Find your meaning and fulfillment in its pleasures and in its materials and in its prestige. Operate according to its wisdom," but that wisdom is doomed. It is a vapor. It is set for destruction.

"Words that last forever" includes the counsel of the Lord but also the promises of the Lord. They include in particular the assurance of Jesus that he will return. This truth is an anchor for the soul. Most clearly Jesus is saying that we can absolutely be assured that he will return as he has said. And this is the reason we have hope. Consider it this way. We live every day on a sinking ship. It is going down. This is not heaven. It is not our eternal home. We are guaranteed to have trouble here. Our hope is not for now. It is not that our circumstances during these days will be ideal, will be what we want. But the hope of those who belong to Jesus focuses ahead to then, when our fellowship with him will be full and eternal, when we will dwell in a new heaven and earth where righteousness dwells. That hope will sustain us now and remind us not to pursue the things that are sinking and passing away.

The fact that Christ's words are forever also relates to how we handle matters of daily living. Like...let's say someone offends you, treats you viciously. How do you respond? Well there is counsel that comes from the world. It says retaliate. It certainly says, "look out for yourself!" But the counsel from God whose words never fail is "No, leave it to me. Bless your persecutors." Listen, the counsel of the world leads to death as it did in the Garden of Eden. Follow the words that last forever. If you build your life on Jesus's words, you will stand, but if you build your life on the words of the world, you will surely fall. Everyone who hears the words of Jesus and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. Everyone, however, who does not do the words of Christ is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.

Thus far in this text, we have certainty. We turn now to uncertainty.

Third, consider . . .

III. The Timing of Christ's Coming.

To put it straightforwardly, the timing of Jesus' return is unknown to everyone except the Father. Jesus is no less God than the Father, but in the mystery of the relations of the Trinity and in the fact that Jesus is the God/man, the precise timing is unknown to the Son. The timing is not uncertain to the Father. He has his plan. But it is uncertain to everyone else—not whether, but when. For that reason the coming of Christ will be surprising. Everyone will be preoccupied with life as they have known it.

Despite the warnings, we have no choice really but to be engaged in daily life as we have known it up to that point. Since we do not know the day, we will go to work as usual, make plans as usual, do the daily routine. That's how it was in the days of Noah. There had never been rain. There had never

been a flood. Everyone was involved in life as they knew it, but when the rains and the floods came they were swept away suddenly and surprisingly. Jesus says two men will be in a field and one will be taken. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken but the other left. The elect and the world will be intermingled, both going about daily life as usual. And as though out of nowhere, suddenly and surprisingly Jesus will come and dispatch his angels and his people will be gathered to him out of the world.

Finally, we turn to . . .

IV. The Preparation for Christ's Coming.

There are two keys to being prepared for the surprising timing of the return of Jesus. Stay awake and be faithful.

A. To stress the importance of staying awake, Jesus speaks of a master of a house and a thief. "If the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into." I heard that a man in Oconomowoc went out the other morning at 4 am and started his car to let it warm up. When he returned a few minutes later, the car was gone. Thieves look for opportunity and the best opportunity is when you do not expect them. The only way to be ready is to expect them at all times. This is also the way to be prepared for the return of Jesus. Live in expectancy! Always be ready.

B. Next, Jesus stresses faithfulness. "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly he will set him over all his possessions."

God will greatly reward those who are faithful to the end. He will increase their responsibility and opportunity. He will abundantly reward their faithfulness. But on the other hand . . .

"If that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

God will greatly punish those who are unfaithful. They do not really love him but are hypocrites. They will be sentenced with all of the wicked to hell. Jesus comes around to the thing he had said in verse 13—but the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Jonathan Edwards is known for his many resolutions. Several of them reflect what it means to be awake and faithful to the coming of Jesus.

Resolution #7 is this. Resolved, never to do any thing which I should be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life.

Resolution #17. Resolved, that I will live so as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.

#19. Resolved, never to do any thing which I should be afraid to do if I expected it would not be [more than] an hour before I should hear the last trump.

Those would be fitting resolutions for anyone who wants to stay awake and be found faithful when Jesus returns. The reward could not be greater and the consequences of unfaithfulness could not be worse.

Conclusion

Here we have the words of Jesus, but they are not mere words. They are not the ramblings of a lunatic the rantings of a madman or the empty promises of a hypocrite. These are the words of God the Son. Heaven and earth WILL pass away but his words remain forever.

There is one thing of which I am more sure than anything else about the future. More than anything I am sure that Jesus Christ will return. This is my hope. Like the Thessalonians, all who come to faith in Christ turn to God from our idols "to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." I yearn to know that the return of Christ is your hope as well.

There is a second thing of which I am also sure. As sure as I am that Christ is returning, I am also sure that his coming will be surprising, indeed shocking to most. It will surprise us all, and it is my hope that it will be shocking to none in this room, but that we all will be found alert and faithful—believing, thinking, and obeying his words. Heaven and earth will pass away, but not his words. The words of Jesus will last forever. Do you believe that? Do you truly believe that? Because if you do, you will put your hope in them and you will let your life be guided by them.