

# The End of the World as We Know It

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**Matthew 24:36-44**  
**Revelation 11:15-19**

There's been some publicity this year about the end of the world happening on Dec. 21, 2012. However, I still think you should complete your Christmas shopping, and we should still keep planning our Christmas Eve services. Evidently the ancient Mayan calendar was cyclical and resets itself every so often, and 2012 is one of those years. Mayan scholars say that the ancient Mayan celebrated the end of a cycle but didn't see it as the end of the world but as a new era. Believe it or not, Advent is a time when we think about the end of the world as we know it, when Christ will return - the Second Advent of our Lord. Let's take a look:

## **Matt. 24:36-44**

*"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, 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 Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner 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. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."*

## **Revelation 11:15-19**

*Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever." Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, singing, "We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth." Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.*

Are you a person of hope? Are you hope-filled? Is your optimism deep down in your core or is it more on the surface and therefore susceptible to the wind and the waves of present circumstances?

I read once of a study done on Octogenarians, folks that live to be 100 yrs. old. One of the common characteristics that they share is hope - optimism, buoyancy, a positive, upbeat spirit and hope-filled attitudes. As a pastor I've spent a great deal of time with Senior Citizens through the years. And I've noticed that, like all ages, some are very positive and hope-filled, and some are not (cynical, negative). And I often wonder how I'll turn out in 30 years. Of course, it's not pre-determined. The habits of my heart will determine that. Yours, too.

And one of the great habits Christians are to cultivate is hope. The great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther, used to say, *"If I knew that the world would end tomorrow, I'd still plant my apple tree today."* I'm not exactly sure what he meant by that, but I know it has something to do with hope.

Umbrella Story. There's a story told about a prayer meeting in the midst of a drought. It occurred in a very small town in the Midwest, an agricultural area, dependent upon rainfall. The crops were dying in the fields because of no rain. So a day of prayer and fasting was declared,

and a town prayer meeting scheduled by the town clergy. Many people brought their Bibles to the meeting, held outside in the town square. Catholics brought their rosaries. Others of various denominations brought crosses. Towards the end of the prayer meeting one of the pastors asked folks to raise their hands to heaven to pray. And as they did you could see the objects people were holding, objects of faith - the Crosses, Bibles, prayer beads. But one symbol of faith stood out among them all. One small boy was holding up an umbrella. That's faith. That's hope. I want to be like that child, don't you?

Years ago I remember being at a Bible Study and someone gave a teaching on the difference between Wishful Thinking and Hope. We sometimes confuse the two, and we sometimes think they're synonymous in our faith, that hope is basically wishful thinking. But hope is much, much stronger. So the illustration I remember was given by a young man who was probably 20 at the time. He had a younger brother who was several years younger. He said this:

*"If I am in the another room making noise, my little brother says, 'I wish he'd stop making so much noise.' That's wishful thinking, because he really can't do anything about it. HOWEVER, if my little brother's in the other room making too much noise, I say, 'I sure hope he stops soon, and he will if he knows what's good for him.'"*

That's hope. Hope is confident. Hope is wishful thinking on steroids. It's hope in the illustration because the older brother can do something about the problem. Christians have hope because we believe that God can and will do something about the problems of this world. And we plant our apple trees today - knowing - hoping - expecting - waiting for the Return of Christ. Christians can be hope-filled people because of the promise of Christ's return.

Now for us Congregationalists, the Second Coming is not something we think about or talk about a lot. It is much more prominent in many Fundamentalist Churches as well as in Eastern Orthodox Churches. Of course it's in the Apostles Creed - *"He will come again to judge the living and the dead."* If you were raised Roman Catholic you said these words each week at Mass: **Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.**

When I went off to Princeton Seminary the first year had some predictable courses. We all took Old Testament 101 in the Fall semester, and New Testament 101 in the Spring. One of the things that was impressed upon us by the New Testament professors who team taught the introductory course was how central the Second Coming is in the New Testament. I always thought of it as a nice happy ending mentioned once or twice, something on the periphery of our faith. They pointed out that it's at the core of our faith, that it was central to the first Christians in their understanding of the person & work of Christ. My professors pointed out how much time we spend on the Sermon on the Mount - Jesus' teachings recorded in 3 chapters of Matthew's gospel - Matthew 5, 6 & 7. -- but how little time we spend focusing on 7 other chapters in Matthew that deal predominantly with the Return of Christ - Matthew - ch. 12, 13, 16, 18, 22, 24 & 25.

The Apostle Paul also had the 2nd coming at the core of his proclamation of the Gospel. In fact the professor who was most noted as a "Pauline" scholar wrote a critically acclaimed book entitled, Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel (by J. Christian Beker). Again and again my professors pointed out that the New Testament sees the Return of Christ as the culmination of his work, the coming of his kingdom, the fulfillment of his prayer, *"Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven."*

They told us that in the New Testament there are over 300 references to the Return of Christ. Out of 27 New Testament books, 23 mention the Second Coming. This was shocking to me - to listen to Ivy League Professors in Tweed Sport Coats with patches on the elbows, talking about the 2nd coming.

The classic illustration of this is the culminating events of W.W.II. D Day as you know was June 6, 1944. That was the decisive battle of the war. After D Day the tide had turned. In the weeks that followed the outcome became certain, it was just a matter of time. And yet the war was not over in Europe until almost a year later. V-E (Europe) day was May 8, 1945. And V-J (Japan) day was not until Aug. of 1945. Much suffering & hardships and death occurred between D-Day and the Victory Days but the decisive battle had been fought and won by the Allies on the shores of Normandy.

Christians look at the life of Christ like D-Day. God landed upon our

shores in Jesus of Bethlehem. His life, death and resurrection are our victory over sin and death and separation from God. Christ won the decisive battle over the Enemy on Easter Sunday. But much suffering, hardships, injustice still occurs in this world. Victory Day has not come yet. The Return of Christ will be the ultimate victory Day, as God's Kingdom comes to earth in all its fullness. "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory!"

He came the first time in humility.  
He will come again in majesty and victory.

He came once to teach us about the kingdom of heaven.  
He will come again to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

So, there within this doctrine of the Return of Christ there is this profound theme of hope.

Alisa & I watched a pretty good movie recently, *"The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel."* The main character is this incredibly optimistic manager of the hotel. He lives by this creed: *"Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end."*

That fits with our creed as well. It also fits with Revelation 11, the end of the world as we know it, the beginning of a new era.

*Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever." Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, singing, "We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty . . . for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. (11:15-17)*

Thanks be to God.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again!

Amen and Amen.