

JESUS IS COMING AGAIN

Matthew 24:29-31

As we move deeper into the Apostles' Creed, I invite you to open your Bible to **Matthew 24:29-31**.

Norwood Russell Hanson is an **atheist philosopher**. He said, *"I'm not a stubborn guy. I would become a theist, a believer, under some conditions. I'm open-minded."* Then he went on to lay out the conditions under which he would believe:

Suppose next Tuesday morning, just after breakfast, all of us in this one world [are] knocked to our knees by a percussive and ear-shattering thunderclap. Snow swirls, leaves drop from trees, the earth heaves and buckles, buildings topple and towers tumble. The sky is ablaze with an eerie light, and just then, as all the people of this world look up, the heavens open, and clouds pull apart, revealing an unbelievably radiant and immense Zeus-like figure towering over us like a hundred Everests. He frowns darkly as lightning plays over the features of his Michaelangeloid face, and then he points down at me, and explains for every man, woman, and child to hear, *"I've had quite enough of your too-clever logic chopping and word-watching in matters of theology. Be assured, Norwood Russell Hanson, that I most certainly do exist!"*¹

Hanson doesn't realize it, but **that day is coming**. The day of reckoning. The day of judgment. The day when Jesus rends the heavens and comes down. The creed says it this way: *"he will come to judge the living and the dead."* Jesus says the same thing with these words in our text. Hear the word of the Lord ... (***read the text***).

¹Cited by John Ortberg, *Faith & Doubt* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 105.

These words ought to put the fear of God in believer and unbeliever alike. This day is coming. The day of cosmic upheaval that takes place when Jesus finally says, “*Enough!*” to sin and “*Enough!*” to Satan and makes his grand entrance that all the world will see. In 1971, Bill Withers released his famous song, “Ain’t No Sunshine When She’s Gone.” We hear a different song in our text: “Ain’t No Sunshine When He Comes.” Jesus says:

Immediately after the distress of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not shed its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Jesus employs **Old Testament apocalyptic**, Day of the Lord language here—Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Haggai, Zechariah language. This is quite a picture. This is no secret rapture of the church, no secret coming *in* the clouds; this is a very visible coming *on* the clouds. Angels zipping here and there, heaven and earth heaving like a drunk, “*a loud trumpet*” blaring. Nothing quiet or secret about Jesus’ coming. And this is the **one and only second coming** there is—consistent, I believe, with the Old Testament prophets, with 1 Thessalonians, and with Revelation. Though Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem is also part of this chapter in Matthew, these words in *our* text are more than that. Jesus is talking **cosmic upheaval**—as if the universe is a blanket and God picks it up and shakes it out. Uproar in the heavens. Powerful empires thrown into chaos. If you’re scared of thunderstorms now, you better keep an extra pair of pants handy when Jesus comes, because you’re going to need them on this terrifying day. It’s 10 on Richter Scale terrifying. It’s F-5 tornado, Cat-5 hurricane terrifying. It’s 50-foot tsunami terrifying. No wonder Jesus says that when he, the Son of Man, comes amid all this chaos, “*all the peoples of the earth will mourn.*”

A lot of folks are in for a huge surprise when Jesus comes back.

- Those who think there *is no God*: surprise, there is!
- Those who think **Jesus is just another prophet** or just another good teacher: surprise, he’s Lord!

- Those who think that the world as it is and life as it is, will **go on forever**: surprise, it doesn't!
- Those who think they have **all the time** in the world to prepare themselves for the end: surprise, they don't!

Suddenly, like **a thief in the night**, Jesus will come (Mt 24:43). No self-respecting thief in the world is going to call you and say, *"I'm planning my schedule for this week and wanted to check with you. Would robbing your home be more convenient for you on Thursday night or Friday morning?"* Not going to happen. Nor will Jesus call ahead when he comes. He will come suddenly, like a thief in the night when you hear the unsettling sounds of glass shattering or a door creaking open. Jesus says that when he comes, the sun and moon go dark, stars fall, and God will shake heaven and earth like a baby's rattle. **Serious Bible students ask**, *"Is this language literal or metaphorical?"* I like the way Morna Hooker puts it: it is *"more than metaphorical, less than literal."*² It's **theophany language**, apocalyptic language—language we don't take literally but we do take seriously. And it's the language of cosmic upheaval and fruit basket turnover in nature and, as the phrase *"powers of the heavens"* suggests, pagan empires are also thrown into chaos and overturned. It will no longer and never again be business as usual when *"he will come to judge the living and the dead."*

II

Jesus is coming back. Look at the first part of **v. 30** – *"Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then ..."* — *"Then ... and then."* Fred Bruner takes note of the *"Two thens in one verse; the labor contractions are getting closer and closer."*³ This present age is dying fast; the new age is making its way through the birth canal. The **beat of the drum** moves from half-notes to quarter-notes to eighth-notes. Quicker. Faster. Picking up tempo and volume. The clock tick-tick-ticking to zero hour. Jesus is coming back.

²Morna Dorothy Hooker, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 319.

³Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28*, rev. and exp., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 510.

“The sign of the Son of Man” is **Jesus himself**—in person, in his glorified, resurrected body, the Jesus we can see and touch. He said he would come. For centuries we have believed this on his promise. On the great day of his return, the promise is fulfilled, our faith becomes sight, our waiting is over. Jesus’ coming will no longer be a blessed *hope* (Titus 2:13), it will be a present reality. Jesus is coming back.

III

And when Jesus comes, he comes to judge.

Listen to all of **v. 30**:

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the peoples of the earth will mourn; and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

Jesus returns with **“power and great glory.”** No sneaking down the backstairs of Bethlehem this time. No coming to earth as an infant who can’t feed himself, clean himself, or do one thing to take care of himself. Don’t see much power in that coming. And only a handful of shepherds, a few Persian magi, and Mary and Joseph caught any glimpse of glory in Jesus’ birth. But when Jesus comes this second time, he comes *“with power and great glory.”*

And *“all the peoples of the earth will mourn.”* **Sounds like judgment**, doesn’t it? There is some debate among scholars as to whether this mourning is the grief of *regret* or the grief of *repentance*. Does Jesus’ second coming mark the end of *any* chance for people to repent or does it provide a moment for one last chance? God is slow to anger and full of mercy, patient beyond measure, longing for people to repent from their sins, to put their trust in him, and find life and salvation in him. But God’s patience has limits, and sooner or later, chances end and the door to heaven closes.

And it’s safe to say that most anyone on **this side of the second coming** who refuses repent of sin and turn to Christ will probably *not* do so when Jesus comes again. They already

demonstrate they have no heart for God, no desire for repentance, no interest in turning from their sins to Jesus. In Revelation 16, after the angel pours out God's wrath in the fourth and fifth bowls of judgment on earth's inhabitants who don't love God, they still don't repent (16:9, 11). Don't assume you can wait till the last second. If you don't know and love God, repent today. Today is the day of salvation. Today is the one sure thing you have. Repent today!

Because the day is coming when it will be too late to repent. One day the door to salvation and life and heaven will close. **Matthew spends chapter 25** telling Jesus-stories about that.

- There are **10 bridesmaids**: five wise, five foolish. The foolish weren't ready when the bridegroom came to take them to the wedding. They come late, bang on the door, but are shut out altogether (25:10-12).
- There are **three servants**. Before their master left for an indefinite time, he gave the first servant \$5,000, the second \$2000, and the third \$1000. *"Do business with this till I return,"* said the master. The first two servants put the master's money to work and exponentially multiplied his resources. The **third servant** buried his \$1000. When the master unexpectedly shows up, it's judgment time. The servants have to account for what they did with his money. He rewarded the first two servants. He kicked the untrusting, do-nothing servant *"into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"* (25:30).

One day the door of salvation will be shut tight and locked from the inside, and if you aren't in there when the door closes, **you are left out forever**. Jesus is coming to judge. Repent today or when Jesus comes, he will not come for you as your *Savior*; he will come as your *Judge*. Judgment is on the horizon. It will be here sooner than you think. Repent today. Don't be part of the peoples of earth that *"will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."*

But don't be smug about this, Christian: **Jesus will judge believers too**. But it won't be about our destiny, it will be about our works. Our destiny is settled when we turn from our sins and trust the crucified, resurrected Christ to save us. He *does* save us. He *gladly* saves us. He

wants to save us. I am not making light of Jesus' judgment of our works, but that is a very different judgment from the kind Jesus talks about in our text—the kind of judgment that cause the peoples of the earth to mourn.

Jesus provides a **metaphor of the way God judges works** in Matthew 25:31-46 in his parable about the sheep and the goats. The **sheep** serve Jesus gladly in caring for the least and the lost and are rewarded for their service. They learn that in serving the least they are serving Jesus. The **goats** wouldn't recognize Jesus if he ran into them on the street. Whatever good they do, they do for personal benefit and glory. And Jesus says this of the goats in Matthew 25:45-46 ...

"I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Don't be counted among **the peoples of the earth who mourn** when Jesus appears. You don't have to be. Repent of your sin and put your trust in Jesus. He will save you. He will make you righteous in him. He will give you eternal life.

I sound the alarm this morning: Jesus is coming, and when he does, he comes to judge.

IV

But he also is coming to save:

Listen to **v. 31**:

He will send out his angels with a loud trumpet, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

This term *elect* is a large word that means **God's elect faithful everywhere in all times and generations of history**. And Jesus says that the elect will be gathered "*from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other*"—a colloquialism that means "*from every nook and cranny of*

*the earth.*⁴ Jesus is teaching us about the rapture of his people, the gathering of all God's people of all time—those he brings with him from heaven and those still living upon the earth or buried in the ground or scattered in ashes when he comes. Though some scholars differ, I believe this is all **one movement**, one event. When Jesus comes down, he doesn't snatch his people from the earth to linger with him in the clouds for seven years. There's nothing in this text that indicates that. When Jesus comes down, he comes all the way down and gathers all his people of all time—living and dead—on that great day of *Jesus'* return and *our* resurrection. What a day that will be!

Every believer will be part of this. Is that Abraham and David at Jesus' side? Look, I see Peter and Mary Magdalene and Paul. And there's Jacob and Aleene King and Amy Gammill and Pat Hines and George Higdon and Ella Schmidt and Edie Counts and Larry Stanley and Craig Holmes too. All coming down with Jesus. And **look to your right**—there's James and Amy O'Neal laughing with Anna, Jim and Amanda Morgan embracing Tyler, Paul and Kathrine Russell getting reacquainted with Caroline Grace, and Jan and Tommy White in a group hug with their son Ryan. You'll find your believing loved ones there too.

Jesus is coming to save—coming **to finish what he started and secured** when ...

He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again
He ascended into heaven
He sits at the right hand of the Father
And he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Jesus is coming to **make good on his promises** and to complete his full-scale redemption and remake of his people and his tired, old groaning creation. Jesus is coming to save.

Coming to save, coming to judge, but **don't miss the central truth: Jesus is coming.** It's not so much a matter of *when* or a matter of *what*. It's a matter of *Who*. Jesus is coming again.

⁴Ibid, 515.

V

Does this good news ignite your joy or dampen your spirit?

Some of you would rather **hang on to this old world**. It's comfortable. It's where most of your investments are. Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home—*this* home, *this* world, *this* earth just as it is with its problems and its sins and its brokenness. Some of us are so attached to this world that we see the second coming of Jesus more like a threat than our blessed hope. In his book, *The Oldest Confederate Widow Tells All*, Allan Gurganus describes through the perspective of a southern confederate widow **Sherman's violent, destructive march** through the South near the end of the war. And for southerners, Sherman's march was more than mere war; it was an apocalyptic nightmare—pretty much burning everything in his path. The people gathered in **the town square** in stunned disbelief. "*The end of the South!*" they mourned. But across town slaves were dancing in the streets.⁵ What does the second coming of Jesus stir in you—mourning, crying, "*The end of the earth*"? Or does it stir a jig of joy that God is bringing down a whole new world? **Be honest**: some of you are just too invested in this doomed planet to embrace the hope and feel the joy. You're content with the status quo.

And that **goes for pastors** too. We pastors can get as co-opted as anyone else into thinking "this world most of all." As a professor friend of mine said, "*Pastors are no longer prophets announcing the advent of a whole new world; we're 'helping professionals' busy trying to fix this one.*"⁶ But **I want to be a prophet today**. Jesus is coming! A new world is coming! Sin and evil will be destroyed forever! Justice will be fully served. And all God's people from every generation of history will live together with him and serve him and worship him forever in happy harmony and unbridled joy! Jesus is coming. A new world is coming.

VI

So be ready.

⁵Cited in a sermon by D. Wayne Stacy, "The Second Coming," First Baptist Church, Raleigh, North Carolina (November 13, 1994).

⁶Ibid.

In the larger apocalyptic sermon from which our text comes, Jesus makes clear in parable and proposition how we can best be ready.

Stick to the mission. Share the gospel. Take it across the street and around the world. Earlier in this chapter, in 24:14, Jesus says, *“This good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed in all the world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”* Stick to the mission. You do your part as an individual. We’ll try to do our part as a church. Stick to the mission.

And **live with anticipation.** Let’s be wise and live with the awareness that the absent Master is coming back. So live in obedience to Jesus. Invest your best time, energy, gifts, and finances in the kingdom that lasts forever. Keep alert for that **great and awesome day** when the sun and moon grow dark, when stars fall, the universe shakes, and Jesus comes down in power and great glory. And live in such hope and anticipation of that day that when Jesus comes, he will find you dancing rather than mourning, reaching your hands toward him rather than clutching this old earth. Live in anticipation.

Be ready.

VII

Are you ... ready?

In 1938, a New England man went to a store and bought a **barometer**. He took it home, put it up in his study window, and set it according to the instructions.

He came back later in the day to check the barometer to see what the weather was going to be that evening. He smiled because the barometer said there was going to be a **hurricane**. He took it off the wall and went back to the store to return it. *“What’s wrong with it?”* the shopkeeper asked.

“This lousy barometer you sold me doesn’t work—says there’s going to be a hurricane.” The shopkeeper looked it over and sure enough, that’s what it said. He apologized to his customer

and offered to **either get it fixed or give him his money back**. The man took the refund and headed home. That evening his home was blown away by the great New England hurricane of 1938.⁷

Have you checked *your* barometer lately? The contractions are intensifying. God's judgments falling on the earth; evil on the throne, good on the gallows; nations in an uproar; war and rumor of war; heat waves and droughts; fires and floods, old line churches in decline; many turning from the faith and giving up on Christ, Jesus' people persecuted by pagan powers, yet all the while the gospel is being preached to most all nations.

In Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, Sheriff Bell says, *"I wake up sometimes way in the night and I know as certain as death that there ain't nothin short of the second comin' of Christ that can slow this train."*⁸

Jesus is **coming to judge the living and the dead**, coming to save his people and bring down the new heaven and the new earth. And it may be here sooner than you think.

So, Church, embrace your blessed hope (Titus 2:13). Set your affections on things above (Col 3:2). Share the gospel (Mt 28:19). And lift up your head—your redemption is drawing near (Lk 21:28).

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⁷I can't verify this story. It's a story I heard some years ago—a piece of folklore that grew out of the devastating 1938 hurricane in New England.

⁸Cited by Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 127.

