

When Will These Things Be?

Malachi 3:16–4:3, Luke 21:1-19 (ESV)

November 27, 2005

As time marches on and our lives hurry to their end, certain very somber questions arise. Who are we? Whose are we? Where are we headed? What does it all mean? Where does it all end? What is there beyond? Who is in control? Why do we die? Shall we meet again? What is real? What is true? What is eternal? What is worthwhile? To what shall we cling? It is clear that this world cannot last forever. The kingdoms of this world totter and fall. Our individual lives likely will endure even much more briefly. We cannot ignore forever these realities that press down upon us.

So it was that the hearers of Jesus Christ, when he was in the temple teaching them about, among other things, the unimaginable destruction of the temple—so it was that his hearers cried out to him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” “When will these things be?” When will the temple be torn down, stone from stone? When will this center of all proper worship be destroyed? When will the symbol and the reality of the presence of God with us be removed? When will the meaning of our lives thus be disrupted if not destroyed? And will it be the Romans who do this? Will it be another as yet unnamed and unknown enemy? Or will it be, perhaps, the very judgment of God Almighty upon us? “When will these things be?”

Their question is not unlike our own questions. So it is that their question becomes our question. When, indeed, will these things be? Sooner or later? How will we know? What shall we do? There is an old saw about the man who said he never worried about those people carrying signs saying “The End Is Near” until he saw two of them synchronizing their watches. That would tend to get your attention. But even apart from those who claim to know too much about the precise timing of the end of time—and the scriptures are clear that it is not up to us to know the precise time—even apart from those who claim to know too much, it is necessarily the case that the more time passes, the closer we are to the end. And even if we deceive ourselves into a false complacency with the assumption that the end continues to lie in the far distant future, having little or nothing to do with us, it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid facing the distinct but not unrelated reality of our own demise. The calendar may run out on that personal reality before it does on the larger reality. We can try to deny our own mortality, but we shall not succeed in that for very long. And, of course, the urgency and the poignancy of the matter are

heightened by the hard reality that death has already come for so many of those whom we love. Thus it would seem to be not only necessary and pertinent but also a good and useful thing to take up as our very own their ancient question with all of its related concerns, “When will these things be?”

And even more important than their question is, of course, the answer which Jesus gave them and which Luke has recorded for us. The answer which Jesus gave includes a major affirmation, a related warning, and then an invitation, in that order. First, the major affirmation is subtle but significant. Within a few days and perhaps even hours of the end of his own earthly life, Jesus addressed the concerns of his hearers by saying, “See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is at hand!’ Do not go after them.” “See that you are not led astray.” If it is possible to be led astray, then it is possible *not* to be led astray. That is to say, there is an order to the world. There is truth. There is discernible reality. There is a way and a path which we are to follow. And one way to express this major affirmation would be by saying that God is in control. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is in control of the universe.

It is possible to put an even finer point on this. “Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is at hand!’ Do not go after them.” Do not follow the false Christs. Do not follow the would-be Christs. Do not fall for the gospel of prosperity. Do not fall for the gospel of political correctness. Do not fall for the gospel of so-called progressive theology. Do not fall for any gospel derived from a selective reading of scripture. Do not fall for the honey of forgiveness apart from the rigor of repentance and renewal. Do not follow the false saviors. Do not follow the ideologues. Do not follow the liars. Follow, instead, the one true Christ. Follow the crucified and risen Christ. Follow Jesus Christ, and you will not go astray. This is part of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This embodies the major affirmation of the teaching of Jesus Christ about the end of time. God is in control. Stay the course with Jesus Christ. Do not be led astray. This is a tremendous comfort in times of distress and confusion. “When will these things be?” Whenever they are to come, follow Jesus Christ, and so “See that you are not led astray.”

Second, following this affirmation there is also a related warning. Jesus continued, “And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.” “Do not be terrified, for these things must take place.” In these in-between times, these ongoing times of advent expectation, between the first and second comings of the Christ, between his earthly life and his return, between the propagation of the gospel and the end of time, it is necessary that great and terrible things will happen. There will be wars and rumors of war. There will be tumults and upheavals. These things will be frightening. They will be confusing. And they have to happen. But do not, Jesus

says, do not be confused or taken in by them, for they do not mean that the end has come. They do not mean that the end is near. They are a part of the ongoing reality of human existence, year after year, millennium after millennium.

Near the beginning of the movie, “The Gladiator,” the emperor of the Roman Empire said to his general that he had been emperor for twenty-seven years and that the empire had been at war for twenty-five of those twenty-seven years. War had consumed his entire reign. The movie is fiction, but the point is well made. Our own history consists of one war after another. They are terrible and terrifying things. We can justify them, or we can bemoan them, but they go on. Whatever else they mean, they do not mean that the end of the world has come. It would seem, then, that part of the role of the Christian church would be not to overestimate the wars, not to overinflate them, not to treat them as if they were something more important than they are. Such modesty about the importance of war would be a part of not taking ourselves too seriously. We are not in control of the universe. There is Another who has that responsibility. We are not the ones who will determine when the end of the world will come. There is Another who will make that determination. This warning is part of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are to live in these in-between times without being terrified by the events of these in-between times. In an age of terror, that is a whole lot of gospel.

Third, on the basis of his major affirmation that God is in control and of his related warning for us not to be confused, Jesus also extends to us a strange and wonderful invitation to faithfulness. “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness.” “This will be your opportunity to bear witness.” Wars we know about. Earthquakes we know about. Famines we know about. Pestilences worse than the world has ever before known we now know about. Tsunamis and hurricanes and tornados we know about. Surely the question has been raised, Can this be the end? Are we living in the end times? “But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake.” This brings it close to home. This is different from distant disasters. What in the world is this all about? Who will be laying hands on us? Who will haul us before the authorities? And yet, “This will be your opportunity to bear witness.” In the providence of God and during the upheavals of the world, this is an invitation to, and therefore an opportunity for, us to be faithful.

This invitation suggests that the most significant sign of the end of time will not be war, earthquake, famine, or pestilence. This invitation suggests instead that the most significant sign of the end of time will be massive persecution of the Christian church. “They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake.” This persecution is not something with which we are immediately or personally familiar. And for that I am grateful. And yet, “This will be your opportunity to bear witness.” What appears to be, and what actually will be, persecution of the Christian church, will also be, at the same time and by the same token, an unprecedented opportunity for us to bear witness to the persecuted Christ. It is because of his persecution that we will be persecuted. It is because of his persecution that we will have opportunity to bear witness. It is because of his persecution that we have good hope for the world to come.

So, “When will these things be?” The ancient question seems to have a greater urgency now than when it was first asked. They spoke of the fall of the temple in Jerusalem. But the fallen temple has been replaced by the risen Lord Jesus Christ. So now we ask of the persecution of the church of this same Jesus Christ. And that could have to do with us. “When will these things be?” And yet, “This will be your opportunity to bear witness.” It would seem important to be well prepared for this, But Jesus warns us against being overly prepared. “Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.” Note carefully that such avoidance of preparation has nothing to do with preaching the gospel! There are some who believe that this passage means that preachers should not prepare before they enter the pulpit. But this passage has nothing to do with that, with the regular preaching of the gospel such as we are involved in at this very moment. This passage has to do with testimony at trial. This has to do with defending the faith before a hostile court. Indeed, this very well may have to do with dying at the hands of unbelievers, as did Jesus himself. The Greek word for witness is “martyr.” “Martyr” means witness. But so many early witnesses to the Christian faith were killed for their faith that the word has come to mean someone who dies for his or her faith. We should be prepared to stand up for our faith and even to die for our faith.

“This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.” This invitation is not unlike what the Lord spoke through the prophet Malachi concerning the day of the Lord: “For you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like

calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.” The reason we are not to prepare what we are to say is that it is the Lord who takes action. It is the Lord who gives “mouth and wisdom” to his witnesses. It is the Lord who does battle with the powers that be. Sometimes the witnesses were given beautiful and powerful words with which to tell kings and governors of the providence of God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And sometimes the martyrs were given the wisdom and the courage to speak by their suffering and so to tell again and unmistakably of Jesus Christ who died for the world. God, help us! “You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.” “Some of you they will put to death.” “By your endurance you will gain your lives.” It does not say that we will “save” our lives. It says we will “gain” our lives. That is to say, he is not talking about this life. He is talking about the life to come. God, grant us the grace to endure! “This will be your opportunity to bear witness.” This is part of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that he would deign to use even us, unworthy servants though we are, as his very witnesses. God, grant us the grace to accept and so to fulfill your invitation.

So it is that as time marches on and our lives hurry to their end, certain very somber questions arise. Who are we? Whose are we? Where are we headed? What does it all mean? Where does it all end? What is there beyond? Who is in control? Why do we die? Shall we meet again? What is real? What is true? What is eternal? What is worthwhile? To what shall we cling? It is clear that this world cannot last forever. The kingdoms of this world totter and fall. Our individual lives likely will endure even much more briefly. As we are driven to face the end of time, we ask with the hearers of Christ from of old, “When will these things be?” The answer comes in three parts. First, Jesus gives us a major affirmation: “See that you are not led astray,” for God is in control. Second, Jesus gives us a related warning: “Do not be terrified for these things must take place.” And third, Jesus gives us a strange, wonderful, and gracious invitation: “This will be your opportunity to bear witness.”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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