

# Give Us Strength!

Isaiah 63:16–64:4, Luke 21:20-38 (ESV)

December 4, 2005

“Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” After everything else that Jesus Christ had to say about the end of time, Jerusalem surrounded by armies, terrors and signs, fear and foreboding, he concluded with this: “Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” We know something today, more than we want to know, about terrors and signs, fear and foreboding. Perhaps that has always been the human condition. But today it is our condition. Today it is our turn to live in the face of uncertainty. So this Christmas, as we look back with great joy to the birth of our Lord and Savior, and as we look forward to his Advent with him as our only confidence, we would do well for the present to remember his teaching: “Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

The good news here is not only that time will have an end but is also, and even more so, that at the end of time we shall meet the Son of Man, none other than Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, born of the Virgin Mary. This is our great hope and our great Christmas joy. It is not only the case that Jesus was born among us as one of us. It is not only the case that he lived as one of us and died as one of us. It is not only the case that God raised him from the dead and that he ascended into heaven. But it is also the case that this very same Jesus Christ who lived and died and lives again for us is also the Lord of the Universe whom we shall meet at the end of time. This is why Christmas is so important. Christmas would be a sad story if it had to do only with the past. The great joy of Christmas is that the goodness of God to us then gives us good hope and confidence that God will yet be good to us in the future. He gave us his only Son! What more could we ask? That is not insignificant. That is not temporary. That is not passing or fleeting or inconsequential. He gave us his only Son! And in that gift, in that birth, the goal of all creation was revealed, and the end of time was made known.

So again, the good news here is that at the end of time we shall meet the Son of Man, none other than Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, born of the Virgin Mary. We shall not come face to face with Moses, as wonderful as that might be. We shall not encounter Mohammed as our judge. It is not the Buddha whom we shall find seated at the right hand of the Father. Nor shall it be Darwin, Freud, or Marx with

whom we have to deal. Neither shall sin, death, or evil have the last word. Instead, the one with whom we have to do, both now and then, the only one with whom we have to do, is none other than God himself, and God has come to us and made himself known to us in Jesus Christ. So the great uncertainty about the end of time has been removed. There is still much that is unknown. But this we do know, that then we shall meet Jesus. And in this we rejoice. As Jesus himself put it, “Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory,” not, that is to say, in the manifest weakness of a preacher in the temple or the shame and humiliation of a criminal hanging on a cross, and not, we should say, coming merely in the heart or even the imagination of the believer, but coming instead in truth and reality. “Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” That is good news! We long for the day of our final redemption.

In the meantime, “Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” There is more for us here. Not only will the Son of Man come at the end of time, but also there is good hope that we shall be there to meet him. That is the goal of this prayer. That is what we are being told to pray for. That does not mean that it is automatic, but it does mean that it is at least possible. Otherwise, we would not be told to pray for it. God does not trifle with us. In that we are being told to pray for this, for strength to stand before the Son of Man, then we have good reason to be of great joy and to turn to God with earnest gratitude, for it is the will of God for us so to meet his Son at the end of time. And if God is for us, who is against us?

What then shall we do? “Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” I do not take this to mean literally that we must “stay awake at all times.” That is not possible. I have already said that God does not trifle with us. Besides, it says in the Psalms that the LORD gives sleep to his beloved (Psalm 127:2). So, “Stay awake at all times” means always to be alert and to be ready at any time for the end of time. But I do take this teaching to mean literally that we are to pray, and pray and pray and pray, that we “may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” We are commanded throughout the scriptures to pray. And for us to be commanded to pray means that we are graciously given permission to pray, to stand before the throne of God Almighty, to pour out our hearts, to sing God’s praises, to give thanks for his blessings, and to ask him, yes, to ask him, for all that he wills to give us.

It is a miracle, really. We can ask for faith. We can ask for grace. We can ask for mercy and forgiveness. We can ask for wisdom. We can ask for renewal. We

can ask for healing. We can ask for guidance. We can ask that our hearts not be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that the day not come upon us suddenly like a trap. And we can ask for strength for the living of our lives. We can ask for strength to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. We can ask for strength to love one another. We can ask for strength to escape the terror that is to come. We can ask for strength to stand before the Son of Man. There is nothing greater that we need to do.

How are we do to this? We can pray when we awake and pray before we go to sleep. We can pray before we eat and pray before our work for the day. And we can pray together here on Sunday mornings as we gather to glorify God, to hear the word of God, and to give thanks to God. We can pray together here where, in just a moment, two young parents will stand before God and before us, profess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and present their infant son for the sacrament of baptism. They are staking their lives and their future on the Christmas goodness and grace of God made known to us in Jesus Christ, and we can reaffirm our faith along with them. “Straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” We can pray together here as we gather around the communion table where we remember that Jesus gave himself for us. We can pray together here, among the gathered people of God at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. “From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.”

Time hurries on. The end necessarily draws nearer. And we know something today, more than we want to know, about terrors and signs, fear and foreboding. Perhaps that has always been the human condition. But today it is our condition. Today it is our turn to live in the face of uncertainty. So this Christmas, as we look back with great joy to the birth of our Lord and Savior, and as we look forward to his Advent with him as our only confidence, we would do well for the present to remember that after everything else Jesus Christ had to say about the end of time, terrors and signs, fear and foreboding, he concluded with this gospel teaching: “Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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