

To God Alone Be The Glory

I don't blame the advertisers. They have a job to do. They want to convince you: "Time is running out. Get your shopping done early this year or you'll miss out on the hottest items this Christmas." It's their job to make you feel anxious about missing out on something good so you don't think about the fact that they want to separate you from some of your cash in exchange for whatever they are selling. Hopefully we've all learned to deal with the barrage of advertising so that we plan our expenditures for the times when things are on sale, and so we don't spend money before we have it, especially on things we don't need.

In a way the advertisers are like the prophets and the apostles of the Lord. These servants of the Lord popped their heads up in our Scripture lessons at the end of the old church year, and now they are popping their heads up in our Scripture lessons at the beginning of this new church year. They are trying to impress on us: "We are now one year closer to the end of all things earthly. Jesus is coming, and soon. There has never been less time left than now." Our God is not trying to make us feel anxious or separate us from our cash through his prophets and apostles. Quite the contrary! He wants to give us all all of his riches in Christ so that we

have peace and tranquility now and don't miss out on an eternity with him through faith in Christ. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, the time we have left on earth is time we get to spend in God's grace. AS WE BEGIN ANOTHER CHURCH YEAR IN GRACE, our loving Savior would have us do three things: Be Watchful, Be Prayerful, Be Joyful.

Let's be Watchful (25-26,29-31,34,36a). Jesus promised: ²⁵*There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea.* ²⁶*Men [people] will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.* Our Savior wants us to watch for these signs in the heavens. But just what are these signs? I know of two possibilities: a) naturally occurring events such as eclipses of the sun by day or the moon by night, comets, and shooting stars (we get our word asteroids from the Greek word for stars here in the text). Throughout much of history people saw such events as portends of catastrophes, and they became much afraid of what might happen next. If Jesus is referring to these kinds of natural signs, then every time we see an eclipse, comet, or shooting star, we would be wise to think: Jesus is coming back soon. b) The other possibility is that just before

the end of time, special signs will be seen which will go outside the laws of nature. Perhaps the sun, moon, and stars will no longer appear to follow their regular courses. Revelation 6:12 talks about the sun turning black, the moon turning blood red, the stars falling, and the sky receding like a scroll. If the sky started falling, I could see even scientifically minded Americans running around like Chicken Little.

Jesus says, ²⁵*On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea.* Again we should ask: is Jesus talking about natural disasters such as hurricanes, typhoons, monsoons, and tsunamis, which may be getting worse as the climate changes? Such so-called “acts of God” have certainly put people into panic over the years. Christians familiar with this scripture take these signs as reminders that Jesus is coming back. Or is Jesus telling us that just before he comes back, the waters of the oceans will shake and roar in ways which no one has ever seen and heard before? That would surely cause people anguish and perplexity, not knowing where to turn for help, both men and women fainting from terror, because the laws of nature are being broken by Him who established them.

It appears that Jesus is talking about more than just natural disasters. If so, it

will be clear to us that it’s time to stand up and watch closely. But if Jesus is talking about natural disasters, then each of these signs is an invitation from our loving God for us to take inventory of our lives. Have we let the world entice us into attitudes and behaviors which God’s Word declares sinful? Do our anxieties rise when things are not going the way we want? Do we drink more than is proper?

Jesus definitely says, ³⁴*Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation* [the pain and inability to think well during a hangover], *drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap...* ³⁶*Be always on the watch.* As long as we believers in Christ have our sinful flesh, we will frequently be tempted to forget God’s eternal purpose for us. It’s too easy for us to get caught up in a cause, or to get caught up in saving for some nice earthly thing, or in paying off a debt because we bought the nice earthly thing before we had the money for it. This is the kind of situation Jesus is talking about when he uses the phrase “*weighed down.*” I’ve heard people express it this way: “Oh, the pressure of supporting this American lifestyle!” I’ve seen people be anxious, or try alcohol or drugs or food or shopping or hobbies to quiet their anxiety, or get way too wrapped up in this world, or

pursue a dream that will bring them glory. That's not what life is supposed to be about (1 Corinthians 10:31). So in his great love for us Christ calls out at the beginning of another church year: Remain watchful. You are a soldier of Christ. You are stationed at your post in life. Don't fall asleep spiritually or get distracted or go AWOL. Be watchful.

And **Let's be Prayerful** because Jesus is coming back (36b). When we pray to the God of the Bible, we're saying so much more than the words we use. We're also saying he really exists: otherwise, why would we be talking to him. We are acknowledging that he is pleased to hear from us, especially after we have listened to him in his Word, the one place he for sure talks to us. Such prayer is part of a conversation with God and not just our own personal monologue while we grant God an audience with us. By listening to his Word, we learn his mind and gain insight on what to say in our prayers. That's how we know to confess our sins, and to express our joy for his forgiveness, and to adore him in worship, and to praise him for his grace. Having a thankful heart is like being on a perpetual Easter egg hunt: when you find another treasure hidden in the tall grass of life, you bless the Lord for blessing you. As if that's not enough, you also have the privilege of serving as priests for those around you, taking them to the Lord in prayer. The Advent season is definitely trying to encourage our

prayers. Let's be prayerful because Jesus is coming back.

Jesus mentions something specific he wants us to pray about, something he's dying to help us with—or rather something he died to help us with, and now he's living to help us with it: ³⁶*Pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man..* Do you see how wise Jesus is? He gives us two totally opposite ideas to pray about. ¹You're safe. ²You're not safe. On the one hand he tells us, *"No one can snatch you out of my hand"* (John 10). This gives us confidence and makes us absolutely sure that Satan can't sneak up behind Jesus and separate us from the love of God. On the other hand, Jesus tells us to pray that we may be able to escape the bad that will happen... as if we could lose what he has given us. Well which is it? Are we guaranteed a place in heaven, or are we in danger of losing it? Actually, both are true. If you're getting spiritually lazy, or spiritually distracted by things in this world, you need to be warned, ³⁶*"Pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen."* But as soon as you realize you've let a sin take control of you, and you're not just sorry you got caught but sincerely intend with the help of the Holy Spirit not to repeat the sin, you should be told, *"The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin"* (1 John 1:7) That's why Jesus came the first time.

And that's why the Advent season brings such hope to us believers in Christ. We have not found our chief pleasure in earthly things—godly pleasure, yes, this world is often a grand place to live because God is generous! But our chief pleasure is in knowing our Savior from sin, and as a result, we enjoy being prayerful and wanting what God wants. God wants to deliver us from this world. That's why we are not troubled to know that this world will be destroyed.

Let's be watchful. Let's be prayerful. And as another church year begins in God's grace, **Let's be Joyful** because Jesus is coming back. *²⁸When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.* The Greek word for “stand (straight) up” can also mean “be elated,” be filled up with joy. Let's be joyful.

What do you see when you look up outside? Often clouds. Jesus will come back in a cloud. Think of that whenever you see clouds. But look behind the clouds and someday you also see blue up there. Have you ever heard anyone say, “Yuck, I hate the color of the blue sky.” Most people say things like: “What a glorious day!” It may be from this very passage that the idea arose, “Let's drape our altar in blue during Advent to remind us to look up to the sky with hope and joy for Jesus to return.” We used to use

purple paraments during Advent, another fine color. Purple reminds us to repent, and the best way to prepare our hearts to meet Jesus for any of his advents is to repent. But blue is the color of hope. And when we are joyful in Jesus, we have hope.

A friend of mine was awakened one morning by an earthquake, the first she had ever experienced. She was so joyful and hopeful, she quick opened the window, stuck her head out and looked up in the sky for Jesus and his angels. Now, if you had done that, would you be embarrassed to tell others? She's not. She did exactly what Jesus said to do. She stood up with great joy and lifted up her head because she thought that was the day of final redemption. Let's not misunderstand Jesus: he's not saying we aren't already redeemed (bought back). But if you think about it, all we have is God's promise of redemption. Yes, our redemption is a reality in God's mind and in ours, but we are not yet free from sin and death in all ways. The Last Day will make redemption ours in every possible way. This friend of mine thought that was the day of redemption. What a beautiful expression of her faith! She was being joyful.

Today begins a new church year. Let's be watchful, be prayerful, be joyful. Jesus is coming back soon!