

## Matthew 24:29-31

### Introduction

This morning, Jesus brings His disciples—and us—to the end of the age. We've learned about the signs of His coming (the labor pains) which Jesus said would all be present in that first generation of His disciples, *and* in every generation thereafter. We've also learned about the especially severe labor pain (the great tribulation) of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. These things would all be fulfilled, Jesus said, before that first generation had passed away. But then what comes next – *after* the tribulation and the distress of this age? In the midst of this gloomy forecast for the future, is there reason for *hope*? For example, what does Jesus mean when He says that the one who endures to the end will be saved?

Without the ending to the story, there is truly no hope – which begs the question of why we spend so little time thinking about, and longing for the end of the story. Calvin writes of our text this morning: “The principle object of [Jesus] reply was, to confirm his disciples in good hope, that they might not be dismayed on account of the troubles and confusion that would arise... To encourage his followers to patience, he employs this argument, that the *tribulations* will at length have a happy and joyful result.” This morning let's meditate on this happy and joyful result so that we might be full to overflowing with hope.

**I. Matthew 24:29** — Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

There are those who interpret this imagery in a symbolic and figurative way, and there are those who interpret this verse very literally. But we'll see that the main point of both interpretations (whether literal or symbolic) is exactly the same.<sup>1</sup> One thing we know is that Jesus is painting the picture of His return using the very vivid colors and brushstrokes of Old Testament prophetic and apocalyptic language. Listen, for example, to the language that Isaiah used as he prophesied the destruction of the Babylonian world empire in 539 BC:

- ✓ Isaiah 13:1, 3, 5, 9-13, 17-19 — The oracle *concerning Babylon*... “I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, and have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger, my proudly exulting ones [the Medes and Persians]... They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, the LORD and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole land... Behold, ***the day of the LORD*** comes, *cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.* I will punish the world [the Babylonian world empire] for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless. I will make people more rare than fine gold, and mankind than the gold of Ophir. Therefore ***I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place,*** at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in *the day of his fierce anger*... Behold, I

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<sup>1</sup> “Christocentricity can control the interpretation of texts when there are differences of opinion.” (Bruner)

am stirring up the Medes against them... And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them.

As far as we know, when Babylon was destroyed by the Medes and Persians the light of the sun, and moon, and constellations was not literally blotted out. The heavens did not literally tremble, and the earth was not literally shaken out of its place. It is a common device of apocalyptic language to describe catastrophe and upheaval on the *earth* by means of catastrophe and upheaval in the *heavens*.<sup>2</sup> We could say with Bruner that the prophets pictured the heavens as bearing witness to earth's agonies. But the *main point* of this imagery (whether one wants to take it literally or symbolically) is the *terror* of God's *wrath* and the *dread* of His *fierce anger*. Even if these cosmic signs were all fulfilled literally in the destruction of Babylon, we must remember that they were not at all the main cause or reason for fear! The main cause for fear is what these cosmic signs represent, and that is the coming of God's wrath and judgment.

- ✓ Isaiah 34:1–6, 8 — The LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter... ***All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.*** For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction... the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah [a city of Edom], a great slaughter in the land of Edom. For the LORD has ***a day of vengeance***, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion.

In Isaiah 13 it was said that the sun would be dark at its *rising*, but here it is said that all the host of heaven will *fall*, like leaves falling from the fig tree. Apocalyptic imagery does not require perfect harmonization of the details – especially when this same imagery is being used to describe different events. We know there is at least some symbolism here when we hear of the host of heaven *rotting*, and the sky being *rolled* up. In Joel 2:31 the moon is actually “turned to blood,” but there are not many who would take this literally. But the one thing we can all agree on is that the *main point* of this imagery is the terror of God's sword as it descends in rage and fury upon the nation of Edom. This is the *real* reason for fear – and not the cosmic signs themselves.

- ✓ Amos 8:7–9 — The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: “Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who dwells in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt? And ***on that day***,” declares the Lord GOD, ***“I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.”***

In Isaiah 13 it was said that the sun would be dark at its *rising*. In Isaiah 34 it was said that all the host of heaven would *fall*. And now in Amos 8 it is said that the sun will *go down at noon*. Once again, the symbolism of apocalyptic imagery means that these “contradictions” are not really

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<sup>2</sup> “Language about cosmic collapse... is used by the OT prophets to symbolize God's acts of judgment within history, with the emphasis on catastrophic political reversals.” (France) “He does not intend his language to be taken as a literal, scientific description of events but as a vivid metaphor, much as we speak of earth-shaking developments.” (Blomberg)

contradictions at all. The main point is not the literal going down of the sun at 12:00, but rather the trembling and the wailing of the Jewish people who are about to face the vengeance and the judgment of God – this is the *real* terror.

- ✓ Ezekiel 32:2–3, 7-8, 11-12 — Son of man, raise a lamentation over Pharaoh king of Egypt and say to him: “Thus says the Lord GOD: I will throw my net over you with a host of many peoples, and they will haul you up in my dragnet... When I blot you out, ***I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land***, declares the Lord GOD... For thus says the Lord GOD: The sword of the king of Babylon shall come upon you... They shall bring to ruin the pride of Egypt, and all its multitude shall perish.”

In Isaiah 13, God used cosmic imagery to describe His judgment on Babylon at the hands of the Persians in 539 B.C. But here in Ezekiel 32, God uses this same cosmic imagery to describe His judgment on Egypt at the hands of the Babylonians in 568 B.C. Once again, the main point of all of this is the dreadfulness of God’s wrath.

- ✓ Joel 2:1–3, 6, 10-17 (cf. 2:28-32) — Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for ***the day of the LORD*** is coming; *it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!* Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations... The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them... Before them peoples are in anguish; all faces grow pale... ***The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining... The day of the LORD*** is great and very awesome; who can endure it? “Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people... let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep and say, “Spare your people, O LORD, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

Whatever this terrifying day of judgment may have been, it was still possible in Joel’s day to avert it. Instead of a desolate wilderness, the Lord may still leave His people with the means to offer grain offerings and drink offerings. But if Judah would not repent, then that day would come – it would seem within Joel’s own day or very soon after. And when that day came, the peoples would be in anguish, and all faces would grow pale. The earth would quake before the invading army, and even the heavens would tremble. That day would be a day of gloom for Israel – the sun and the moon would be darkened, and the stars would withdraw their shining. This we can know for sure: The wrath and the judgment of God always brings with it a very *literal* and overwhelming feeling of terror and despair.

It's in light of these things (along with many other considerations) that I'm inclined to read much of Revelation as a description of this entire "inter-advent" age culminating in the promised return of Christ to judge the world. In other words, Revelation takes the tribulation and distress that Jesus said would characterize this entire age (wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, persecution and martyrdom, apostasy and betrayal, false prophets and lawlessness, and also the continual spread of the Gospel), and then Revelation translates this into the language of "apocalyptic." And part of the beauty of the "apocalyptic" genre (language) is the way that it vividly shows the labor pains of this age as being sovereignly directed by the hand of God. If someone did not have a right understanding of God, He could *wrongly* conclude that the labor pains of this age are all somewhat random – even if they are still generally under God's control. But the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation would very handily refute any such idea! It's not just the wind and the waves that obey God's commands, but also the sun, moon, and stars in the heavens above.

Now in all but one of the Old Testament passages that we've looked at so far there is a reference to "the day of the Lord," or "that day," or even just "a day." The day of the Lord is very simply *whenever* God decisively *intervenes* in the affairs of men and of nations. God is always sovereignly directing and controlling the events of human history, but there are special times when He decisively intervenes to judge the wicked and vindicate His people. So there have been many "days of the Lord" in the past, and we know that there will yet be another, *final* "day of the Lord" sometime in the future when God decisively (and *finally*) intervenes in the affairs of men and of nations.

- ✓ Joel 3:13–16 — Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great. Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the *day of the LORD* is near in the valley of decision. ***The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.*** The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and ***the heavens and the earth quake.***

In this final day of the Lord, the point of the cosmic imagery is the same as in all the other days of the Lord – it is the dread, and terror, and despair that always accompanies the wrath and judgment of God. And so now we read in Matthew 24:29:

- ✓ Matthew 24:29 — Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

What does it all mean? It means that the day of the Lord has come – the day when God finally and ultimately intervenes in the affairs of men and of nations. That day will be a day of darkness and despair for the world. The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Let us never doubt the ultimate point of all this cosmic imagery – which is the abject terror and dread of God's wrath and judgment. As the book of Revelation says, when Jesus comes He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty (19:15).

**II. Matthew 24:30** — Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

Whatever this sign of the Son of Man may be (and there have been many suggestions), I like what Blomberg says: “It is probably not important to be able to decide among these [many suggestions], since in any event the sign does not enable anyone to recognize the ‘signs of the times’ until Christ is actually en route to earth.” (Blomberg) When the sign of the Son of Man appears in heaven, it will already be *too late*... and so all the tribes of the earth will mourn. Matthew (but not Mark or Luke) borrows the *language* of Zechariah and apparently gives it a very new and different context. In Zechariah, the mourning is the mourning of true humility and repentance by the tribes of Israel. In Matthew, the mourning appears to be the wailing of terror and despair by all the peoples of the earth.

- ✓ Revelation 1:7 — Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.
- ✓ Revelation 6:12–17 — When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”
- ✓ Luke 21:25–27 — “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth *distress of nations* in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people *fainting with fear and with foreboding* of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

The Bible says that the clouds are God’s chariot, and we probably shouldn’t be thinking of the white fluffy clouds of a peaceful summer afternoon (cf. Job 40:6).

- ✓ Psalms 104:3 — He makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind.
- ✓ Isaiah 19:1 — Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt... and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.
- ✓ Nahum 1:3 — The LORD[’s] way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.
- ✓ Zechariah 9:14 — Then the LORD will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning; the Lord GOD will sound the trumpet and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south.
- ✓ Ezekiel 1:4 — As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire [lightning] flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal.

And so the picture we have is of Jesus returning to this earth (Acts 1:9-11), riding upon the storm clouds of heaven – accompanied by a whirlwind and continual bolts and flashes of lightning. His coming this time is not in weakness and humility, but “in power and great glory.” “He shall come the second time as the King of all the earth, with all royal majesty. The princes and great men of this world shall stand before His throne to receive an eternal sentence. Before him every mouth shall be stopped.” (Ryle)

*So far*, it’s hard to picture this coming as being good news for *anyone*. Even many Christians are more fearful than they are encouraged at this description of the parousia of Jesus. But I love what the Anchor Bible says: “It is important to remember that all these natural portents in the apocalyptic literature are signs of God’s power and *overruling providence*; they are a terror only to the faithless” (quoted in Morris). The faithless will mourn and wail at the coming of Jesus because, in the words of Morris, they will see that His “coming... spells the end of their comfortable securities.” Calvin writes: “It is no slight ground of offence to see the ungodly living without concern, because they think that their mockery of God will remain unpunished; and again, there is nothing to which we are more prone than to be captivated by the allurements of the prosperity which [the ungodly] enjoy, so as to lose the fear of God. That the joy by which they are intoxicated may not excite the envy of believers, Christ declares that it will at length be turned into *mourning* [when the Son of Man returns].” But for those of us who heed this warning and who **cherish** Christ above all earthly pleasures, listen now to what the prophet Joel says:

- ✓ Joel 3:14–16 — The day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth quake. ***But the LORD is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel.***

And now listen to the concluding words of Jesus. These are the words that Jesus ends with, because He wants to leave us with the joyful hope of what His *parousia* will mean for *us*.

**III. Matthew 24:31** — And he [the returning Son of Man] will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Brothers and sisters, *this* is our one great hope. This is our one great comfort and joy in the midst of all the labor pains of this age. Our one great hope, and comfort, and joy, is that immediately after the tribulation and distress of this age Jesus will return, and every eye will see Him. And He will send forth His angels with a loud trumpet call that every ear will hear, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. The Apostle Paul describes the parousia of Jesus like this:

- ✓ 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 — For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, questions about the rapture are not a hobby horse for me. The last time I mentioned the rapture from the pulpit was at least seven years ago. But I would earnestly suggest this morning that we must not transfer our hope to a secret rapture by which we escape tribulation. We must not transfer our hope to a “stage” of the parousia that will be invisible and inaudible to the world. Such a secret coming and parousia of Jesus I personally have not found to be taught anywhere in the pages of Scripture. I do not believe that this is the Christian’s hope. Our one great hope, and comfort, and joy, is that immediately *after* the distress and tribulation of this age, Jesus will return with power and great glory, and every eye will see Him. All the tribes of the earth will be filled with terror and despair at the coming of God’s wrath and judgment. But for us, in that day, there will be no wrath. Jesus will send forth His angels with a loud trumpet call that every ear will hear, and the world will see us gathered together to Jesus from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. And so we shall always be with the Lord. Let us comfort one another with these words!

*Here* we have the final and ultimate fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies about the regathering of God’s people (Isa. 60:4; 27:13; 49:22; Jer. 32:37; Ezek. 34:13; 36:24; cf. Mat. 8:11; 13:30; Jn. 11:52).

- ✓ Deuteronomy 30:4 — If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you.
- ✓ Isaiah 11:12 — He will... assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.
- ✓ Zechariah 2:6 (LXX) — Ho, ho... I will gather you from the four winds of heaven, saith the Lord, even to Zion.<sup>3</sup>

“Jesus brings out the truth that not one of [his saints] will be overlooked; the angels will gather them *from the four winds*, which is expressive enough as a reference to the whole earth, but here it is reinforced with *from one end of the heavens to the other*. Jesus’ followers are encouraged by the certainty that on the last day not one of God’s people will be missing.” (Morris)<sup>4</sup> So wherever we may find ourselves on that day, no matter how far out in the country, or in what remote location of the earth we may live, no matter how lost someone may feel in the masses of the inner city, no matter how insignificant one may feel in comparison to the multitude of the elect throughout all the earth, we can know that not a single one of us will be forgotten or overlooked. In that day, an angel will find *me*, and take *me* to meet the Lord in the air.

“In the day of judgment true Christians shall be perfectly safe. Not a hair of their heads shall fall to the ground... There was an ark for Noah, in the day of the flood. There was a Zoar for Lot, when Sodom was destroyed. There shall be a hiding-place for all believers in Jesus, when the wrath of God at last bursts on this wicked world. Those mighty angels who rejoiced in heaven when each sinner repented, shall gladly catch up the people of Christ to meet their Lord in the air. That day no doubt will be an awful day, but believers may look forward to it without fear.” (Ryle)

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<sup>3</sup> Brenton, L. C. L. (1870). *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament: English Translation* (Zec 2:6–7). London: Samuel Bagster and Sons.

<sup>4</sup> “No spot on the surface of the earth where any of the elect may be will be overlooked” (Swete; quoted in Bruner).

“The invisible kingdom of God and the visible church all over the world and from time immemorial will at last be gathered together to Christ as one body, and the moment they find him they find each other. The joy of this great reunion and its anticipation can ravish believers’ imaginations amid the tribulations that are [the] Christian life.” (Bruner)  
 “For believers this sound [of the trumpet] will be full of cheer. It will announce the coming of the One whom they joyfully hail as ‘King of kings and Lord of lords’ (Rev. 19:16). It will... proclaim liberty throughout the universe for all the children of God, their everlasting jubilee.” (Hendriksen)

## **Conclusion**

Brothers and sisters, this *is* the Christian’s *hope*. It is this coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory for which *we* are *waiting* every day.

- ✓ Titus 2:11–13 — ...*waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.*
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 1:7 — You are not lacking in any gift, as you *wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- ✓ Philippians 3:20 — Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it *we await a Savior*, the Lord Jesus Christ.
- ✓ Hebrews 9:28 (NIV; ESV) — Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are *eagerly waiting for him.*
- ✓ 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 — For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to *wait for his Son from heaven*, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Bruner has rightly said, “A hope that does not have Christ’s coming at its center [is not] the Christian hope.” So then what is *our* true hope? What is it that sustains us and gives us wonderful peace from day to day? What is it that enables us to persevere through the midst of any tribulation and distress? What is it that more than anything else ravishes our imaginations? What is it that more than anything else enraptures our thoughts? What is it that most overcomes us with emotions of ecstatic joy and delight? Is it truly the parousia of Jesus, and our gathering together to Him?

“Christ’s Second Coming *is* the church’s hope, [it is] the ultimate Hallelujah Chorus.” (Bruner)  
 Question 52 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks: “What comfort is it to thee that Christ shall come again to judge the living and the dead?” And we answer: “That in all my sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head, I look for the self-same One who has before offered himself for me to the judgment of God, and removed from me all curse, to come again as Judge from heaven; who shall cast all his and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall take me, with all his chosen ones, to himself, into heavenly joy and glory.”