

Watching For The Hour

When it comes to watching for the return of Jesus Christ, people typically fall into two groups. There are a few people who believe that they can figure out the exact day and hour of the Lord's return. A good example of this is Harold Camping, who predicted that the Lord would return on May 21, 2011. Camping is not the first person to make a prediction like this; a great many people have done the same thing. Wikipedia has a fascinating article entitled “List of dates predicted for apocalyptic events” that has dozens of entries¹. It's really impressive to see just how many people made predictions – and just how wrong they were.

These type of predictions tend to do a tremendous amount of damage, because people take them extremely seriously. Harold Camping persuaded people to quit their jobs, sell their houses, and bet their entire lives on his prediction. When Camping was proven to be wrong, those who believed him found themselves with all kinds of serious problems. Their lives were now in ruins, and on top of everything else they faced the mockery of the world.

Although there are some people who try to pinpoint the exact day and hour, these people are fairly rare. Most Christians either don't think about the Lord's return or they think of it in more general terms. They know that the Lord will return someday but they don't pretend to know when. So they just go about their lives. They know that He might return soon but no one really knows what “soon” means. They're not looking for a specific date, or even a specific year.

This second group seems like it has a lot going for it. After all, they're not making a mockery of the gospel by telling people that the Bible definitely, beyond a doubt foretells a certain date, only to be proven wrong. They're not ruining their lives by betting their entire future on the latest date issued by some date-setter. This second group is just going about their lives and not stirring up any trouble. They seem to have found the right approach – but I think there is a third option that tends to be overlooked.

When the disciples asked Jesus about the events concerning the end of the age, the Lord told them this:

Matthew 24:42: “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.”

Jesus did not tell His disciples when He would return. In fact, He told them that they needed to be alert and watching for His return *precisely because they did not know when He would be coming back*. It was very important for them to be watching so that they wouldn't be caught off-guard. Jesus told them that even He didn't know when it would be:

Matthew 24:36: “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.”

Later, at the ascension of Christ, His disciples asked Him again if this would be the time when He restored the kingdom to Israel. He told them that it wasn't for them to know:

Acts 1:6: “When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?”

7 And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_dates_predicted_for_apocalyptic_events

Father hath put in his own power.”

The disciples were not told when the day or hour would be. In fact, Jesus actually told them that this knowledge would not be given to them. After this discussion the disciples lived out their lives, and all but one of them were martyred for their faith. The only one who wasn't martyred was the apostle John.

That is when something completely unexpected happened. Near the end of John's life Jesus came to John and gave him a really interesting message:

Revelation 1:1: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John:

2 Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw.”

Do not overlook the fact that in verse 1 we are told that God gave this revelation to *Jesus Christ*. The reason God gave this revelation to Jesus was so that Jesus could give it to His servants, so they would know the things that were about to take place.

This is extremely significant. Back in Matthew 24 Jesus told His disciples that even *He* didn't know when these things would happen. In Acts 1 Jesus told His disciples that it was not for them to know these things. But in Revelation 1 we are told that *God gave Jesus a revelation*. Jesus now knew when these things would happen, and He gave John a great deal of detailed information about it. The questions that the disciples asked about the end of the age could now be answered in great detail.

If you think about it, it should be obvious that at some point Jesus would find out when He would be returning. Since Jesus is going to return someday there *had* to come a time when Jesus obtained that information. I believe that moment happened here, at the beginning of Revelation. That is when things changed. Before this revelation all of this information was off-limits, but now Jesus could tell John everything.

This is not the first time that the situation changed during the course of the New Testament. We can see something similar in regard to the gift of healing. At the beginning of Paul's ministry he miraculously healed people in large numbers – in fact, he once even raised someone from the dead. Yet at the end of his ministry he had to leave Epaphroditus sick. Paul could not heal him – and it wasn't because Paul had departed from the faith or somehow become a wicked person. The gift of healing had accomplished its purpose, and it was now gone. The situation had changed.

In fact, Revelation 3 actually says something remarkable:

Revelation 3:3: “Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.”

Revelation 3 tells us that if you do not watch then you will not know the hour the Lord will return. This means that if you *do* watch you *will* know the hour of His return. This is not the only passage in the Bible that teaches this. Paul told the Thessalonians that the return of Christ would catch the world by surprise – but it would *not* be a surprise to the Church:

1 Thessalonians 5:2: “For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh

as a thief in the night.

3 For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.

4 But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.”

The world would not see it coming – but the Church would. It would *not* come as a surprise to them. In fact, the writer of the book of Hebrews actually said that we would be able to see it approaching:

Hebrews 10:25: “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

If we are commanded to watch then there must be something we can be watching for – and if we can see it approaching there must be some sign. There must be some way to tell that the day is drawing near; otherwise how could we see it approaching?

I realize that most people who hold to the pre-millennial position usually teach that the rapture is imminent, by which they mean there are no prophecies that must be fulfilled before it takes place. This is actually incorrect. There *are* prophecies that must be fulfilled before the rapture can happen. For example, in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 the Lord gives seven letters to seven churches. Practically every premillennial teacher I have ever known has taught that these seven letters offer a prophetic look at the entire Church Age, from the days of the apostles to the days of the end. There is nearly universal agreement that today we are in the Age of Laodicea – the last, lukewarm church. But stop and think about that for a minute. If those seven letters really *do* give an overview of the entire Church Age then they have to be fulfilled *before* the rapture. After all, once the rapture happens there will be no more church and there can be no more church history! If the rapture had taken place during the Middle Ages then the blind, lukewarm church of Laodicea would never have existed and those prophecies would never have been fulfilled. Therefore, at a minimum, the rapture could not happen until the last letter of Revelation 3 was fulfilled.

Another thing to keep in mind is that Jesus was not at all secretive about His first coming, nor about His coming at the end of the Tribulation. In Daniel 9:25-26 an angel said that there would be 69 periods of 7 years each (or 483 years) between the command to rebuild Jerusalem and the death of the Messiah. This meant that once that command was issued, you could start counting down the years until the Messiah was executed. It also meant you could more or less guess when He would be born – probably somewhere between 20 and 50 years before the crucifixion. Although you couldn't know the exact day of His birth, you *could* know when He would die and you could use that information to know when to start looking for His birth. It's worth noting that the Gentile wise men had no problem recognizing the birth of Jesus and showing up to worship Him – and that probably because, as Parthians, they would have had access to the prophecies in Daniel. They knew what to be watching for and they could see the day approaching. Not only did they know the right season, but we are also told they saw a sign in the sky – the famous star of Bethlehem, which led them to the child.

Matthew 24 tells us that the second coming, which will happen at the end of the Tribulation, is not going to be a secret either:

Matthew 24:30: “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”

We know that Jesus will return at the end of the seven-year Tribulation, and we know that before He appears there will be some kind of sign in heaven to announce His arrival (much like how His birth was announced by a different heavenly sign). My point is that in both cases – His birth and His second coming – there was something concrete to be looking for. You could tell when it was drawing near. It was not a mystery that could happen at some completely unexpected time. In fact, it would only be unexpected *if you weren't looking for it*. If, like the wise men, you *were* looking for it then it would not catch you by surprise.

Which brings us back to the date-setters. People have tried really, *really* hard to figure out when the rapture will occur. All sorts of dates have been suggested, and all of them have been wrong. There is a perfect track record of failure – and a lot of ruined lives as well.

But let's step back for a minute. The reason so many lives have been ruined by date-setting is because the date-setters bet literally *everything* on being right. They quit their jobs, sold their homes, and went to go sit on a mountain and wait for the Lord to return. It's true that the Lord told us to watch, but He did *not* tell us to quit our jobs and go sit on a mountaintop. Jesus actually gave us a very different set of instructions:

Luke 12:35: “Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning;
36 And ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord, when he will return from the wedding; that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately.
37 Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.
38 And if he shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants.”

Imagine that the owner of a house has left on a long journey. The servants of that house know that the master will be back at some point, but they don't know exactly when. When the master returns he wants his servants to be watching so that the minute he knocks on the door they will open it immediately. He wants to return to find that his house is in order – the rooms are clean, the grass is mowed, the bills are paid, and everything is exactly as it should be. He does *not* want to catch the servants asleep, with the house trashed and garbage strewn everywhere.

So how do you make sure that the house is in order? How do you make sure you aren't caught being lazy? It's quite simple: by assuming that today may well be the day that the master comes back.

I think that each of us should live with the assumption that today could be our last day. We should spend our time pursuing holiness, preaching the gospel, helping the needy, and living for the Lord. If the Lord *does* come back today then He will find our houses in order. If He does *not* then we have lost nothing – after all, why would we regret living for the Lord and doing what was right?

The Bible says that we should learn to number our days (Psalm 90:12). Suppose that, for whatever reason, we think that the Lord might return on a certain day of a certain year. If we spend that time being faithful – doing what is right, living faithfully, and carrying out our assigned responsibilities – and the Lord doesn't return on that date, we have lost nothing. We haven't sold our homes or moved to a mountaintop or done anything crazy. At the same time, if the Lord *does* return on that date then our lives are in order and we have nothing to be ashamed of.

This matters more than you might think. The book of 1 John says this:

1 John 2:28: “And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming.”

You see, there are going to be some people who will be ashamed when the Lord returns. Some Christians will be caught living terrible lives full of sin and hypocrisy, and will be astonished when the Lord unexpectedly returns. They will be caught with lives in complete disarray and will be greatly ashamed. But it doesn't have to be that way!

I think we might all be better off if we had a *more* date-setting – provided we did it with wisdom. It is indeed a foolish thing to tell the world that Jesus will absolutely return on May 21, 2011. It is madness to quit your job and sell your house based on a date theory. However, I think it's quite wise to think “The Lord may return this year; if He does I had best make sure my life is in order so I am not ashamed at His coming”.

The problem with the first group – the date-setters – is that they bet everything on a date and are ruined when it's wrong. They confidently tell people that the Bible guarantees Christ's return on a certain date, and they bring great harm to the gospel when nothing happens. But the problem with those who *don't* set any dates is that they never really consider the possibility that *time may be short*. Even if the Lord does not return in the near future it's impossible to say how much longer one's life might last. People die unexpectedly all the time. If we *did* learn to number our days we might use them more wisely – and that would be a good thing.

I have no problem with someone who says “There is a chance the Lord might return this year; it is not certain, but I had best live wisely in case He does.” I think that is the way we should all be living. After all, did not the Lord command us to watch?