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ALARMED OR ALERT ABOUT CHRIST'S RETURN?

Today's Text: Matt. 24: 1- 51

Extracts:

Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, *when these things will be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?*" And Jesus answered and said to them, "*Take heed that no one deceives you. ... This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come. ... Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, 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.... But of that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only*" [Matt. 24: 3-4, 14, 30,36].

On Tuesday, 24 November 2009, US President Barack Obama hosted a State dinner in honour of the visiting Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh.¹ It was his first such function since coming to office in January 2009. On such occasions, security in the White House (US President's official residence) is at maximum alert. You must be invited and prescreened for security clearance. On arrival, you are expected to pass through multiple security check points before you can be allowed in. However, on that fateful day, Tareq and Michaele Salahi, an uninvited attention-seeking couple, found their way in, took pictures with the Vice-President and other dignitaries and shook hands with President Obama! No one might have known about it if they had not published the pictures of their escapades on their web site. Reactions were swift but mixed. The US Secret Service admitted fault and promised to review and tighten its surveillance. Congressmen, on the other hand, expressed horror because the Salahis could easily have been terrorists.

One of these days, Jesus is going to 'gate crash' into this world to judge it. Like the White House gatecrashers, He will not be invited even though He has publicly announced in advance that He is coming! How are you preparing for that inevitable encounter? Will you be alert like the US Security Service or alarmed like members of Congress? This week's study will assist you to audit your preparation.

¹ Story based on the following sources: "Panel: Party could have been 'night of horror,'" NBC News and news services, Thurs, Dec. 3, 2009; : http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34257345/ns/politics-white_house/ and "Rep: Glad U.S. Avoided 'Night of Horror,'" CBS/AP Dec. 3, 2009; http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/12/02/politics/main5871663.shtml?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+CBSNewsPolitics+%28CBS+News%3A+Politics%29

1. How do you react to an alarm clock?

Most of us are familiar with the alarm clock; whether it is linked to grandfather's wall clock, the little radio by your bed side, your wrist watch or the cell phone. You are the one who sets the time when the alarm should go off. For example, you may set it to wake you up for work or travel or some other event. When the alarm goes off, how do you respond to it?

You may jump up from your bed and go ahead to fulfill the purpose for which the alarm was set. Or you may simply turn off the alarm, turn over on your bed and continue to sleep! Whatever you choose to do depends on your perception of the sanctions that could await you. For example, you could miss your flight if you do not wake up and get ready. If it is a work day, you could be late for work and repeated lateness could cost you your job, especially in these times of economic downturn. However, if it is a Sunday morning, it is likely that you could choose to ignore the alarm. After all, how many people do you know that have been punished for coming late to church on Sunday? Therefore, *your reaction to the alarm clock depends on your perception of the cost of disobedience.*

Now, let us assume that you did not set the alarm. Somebody else did. For example, it could be a mother for her children, the military sergeant-major for new recruits or a teacher to mark the end of a class test. In such cases, you have no control. You either do it their way or you face the consequences of your choice. If Mummy does not spank you, she can lash you into alertness with her sharp tongue! However, you have one assurance: you know the exact time of the alarm and your ordeal will last for as long as you are under the control of the person in charge of the alarm. For example, the herald that announced to all the nations under Nebuchadnezzar's control the worship of the gold image that the king had set up said, "*At the time you hear the sound of the horn, . . . you shall fall down and worship the gold image . . . and whoever does not [do so] shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace*" [Dan. 3: 4-6].

Let us raise the bar a little higher. This time, the alarm is set by somebody else that does not tell you when it will go off. You are given hints but none of them can answer the question of the exact day or hour that it will ring. If you are not ready when it does, you are going to lose everything that you have worked for in life. This is the situation posed in this week's Bible text. The voice of an archangel will herald the second coming of Jesus Christ. He is returning to judge the world and to determine who enters God's kingdom or who goes to hell. No one knows the day or the hour, "not even the angels of heaven, but [God the Father] only" [Matt. 24: 30]. What are you going to do while awaiting that alarm? Will the uncertainty make you panicky and restless (that is, alarmed) or provide an opportunity for you to develop a sustainable coping strategy (that is, alert)? It is a serious matter!

2. The coming of Jesus at the end of the age

As His disciples pointed out to Him the magnificence of the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus told them to pay more attention to its future destruction, when not one stone would be left upon another unturned. As He sat on Mount Olives, the disciples came secretly to Him and requested Him to tell them when those things would happen and what would be the signs of His coming and of the end of the age [vv. 1-3].

For the avoidance of doubt, the end of the age is certainly not the end of the world because the world is without end, as confirmed by the Scriptures and as we say in our prayers. For example, the flood in Noah's time destroyed everything on earth outside of the ark but did not destroy the earth itself [Gen. 8: 11]. The Psalmist adds that Mount Zion cannot be moved but "abides forever" [Ps. 125: 1]. In the dream that God revealed to Nebuchadnezzar (which Daniel interpreted for him), the last kingdom on earth to be set up by God Himself "shall break in pieces and consume all (earlier human) kingdoms, and *it shall stand forever*" [Dan. 2: 44]. When archangel Gabriel announced to Mary the conception and birth of Jesus, he told her that the Lord God would give Him the throne of His father, David, "and He will reign over the house of Jacob *forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end*" [Lk 1: 31-33]. Therefore, the end of the age refers to *the end of the age of grace*, following the rapture of the saints to be with Christ in the air [Matt. 24: 31; 1 Cor. 15: 51- 52; 1 Thes. 4: 13-17].

That is good news for us because those who are truly prepared for Christ's coming will be spared the tribulations that will follow. That is why we need to pay attention to the telltale signs of His return, a loud alarm clock that He has revealed to us through His disciples on the Mount of Olives. These are the key milestones to note:

a) *Only the Father knows the day and hour of Christ's return*

It may surprise some believers that Jesus that knows all things does not know the day and hour of His return except His Father only [Matt. 24: 36]. It is not ignorance but division of responsibilities among the Three Persons in one God. For example, you can only come to the Father through His only begotten Son, Jesus, or pray to the Father in Jesus' name [Jn 14: 6, 13; Jn 15: 16]. It is Jesus that will judge the world, not His Father or the Holy Spirit [Jn 5: 22]. Sins against the Father and Son will be forgiven but those against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this world or in the world to come [Matt. 12: 32]. This division of labour confirms a well-known management principle that power is limited by authority!

If it is only the Father that knows the exact day and hour, it means that all the dates that are being thrown around by astrologers and diviners as the end of the age (2012, for example) cannot be true. That was why Jesus

warned His disciples, that *the day will come unexpectedly* “for as in the day before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away” [Matt. 24: 36-39]. When Noah and his family entered the ark, symbolic of the rapture of the saints on Christ’s return, the media of the day might have declared them missing persons and paid no attention to the coming tribulation of the floods. We are today busy pursuing worldly careers or pleasures. We are laughing at preachers warning us of the coming judgment, calling them intolerant or conservative fringes of society. But, one of these days, the sky will split open Jesus will appear, and we will not have the time to repent. That was why Jesus warned His disciples to watch “for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming” [v. 42].

b) *But the telltale signs of His coming are everywhere already!*

Even though the exact moment may be unknown, Jesus unveiled inevitable signs that will point to His imminent return. They can be grouped as follows:

(i) Ecological disasters

There will be “famines, pestilences and earthquakes in various places” [v. 7]. Since Jesus spoke two thousand years ago, the world has experienced natural disasters and pestilences that have decimated world population. For example, the so-called “Black Death” caused by a pandemic of bubonic plague cut the population of Europe by 30%- 60% during the 14th Century.² In recent times, we have heard of extensive drought and famine in Ethiopia, *tsunamis* in Asia and *Hurricane Katrina* in the United States. HIV/AIDS has depleted the youth population of Central and Southern Africa. Today, the new medical worry for almost every nation on earth is the swine flu (H1N1) pandemic. In deed, there are already new pestilences but we have yet to find names for them!

In man’s quest for economic development, we have (through deforestation and mining, for example) rabidly depleted natural resources and polluted the environment without any or sufficient concern for ecological balance. As a result, global warming has become a major crisis that threatens the future of flora (plant life) and fauna (animal life). The problem is of so much concern that a United Nations Climate Change Conference is scheduled to hold in Copenhagen, Denmark, December 7-18, 2009 to attempt to agree a global strategy on climate change.³ They might reach an agreement but they might not be able to implement it because of human and national greed. The end of the age is near!

² “Black Death,” From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_death

³ <http://en.cop15.dk>

(ii) Growing conflicts and intolerance

Jesus told His disciples that “there will be wars and rumours of wars; nations will rise against nations, and kingdom against kingdom.” [vv. 6, 7]. In the last (20th) century alone, with the introduction of sophisticated weapons into the technology of warfare , we have seen more wars (and war casualties) than in the rest of human history put together. We have seen two World Wars within a time span of less than 35 years. There have been foreign interventions/interference in civil wars in Korea and Vietnam and the Congo. The Middle-East is a permanent theatre of wars, from the Crusades to the Arab-Israeli conflicts to the recent Gulf Wars. Yet, peace is not in sight.

Jesus also talked of a steep rise in persecution, distrust, lawlessness and wickedness [vv. 9-12]. We heard of the ruthlessness of Communism in Eastern Europe during the cold war years until the 1990’s. The *pogrom* against the Jews under Hitler’s Aryan race agenda during the Second World War, the oppression of black people under the Apartheid regime in South Africa and racial discrimination in America are still fresh in our memories. Military dictatorships in Latin America and Africa took away human liberties and innocent lives. Have past horrors dampened recent ethnic cleansing in Ruanda (Africa) and Bosnia (Europe)? Not at all! Under the guise of religion; we are currently facing Islamic terrorists using suicide bombers to kill thousands of innocent people all over the world. In deed, ethnic and/or racial prejudices, sexual perversity and wickedness are growing, not diminishing. The end of the age is quite near!

(iii) The gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world

A definite sign of the nearness of the time is that “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached *in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come*” [v. 14]. According to a *UBS World Report* (2002), the Bible has been translated (in part or in full) to 2,287 languages and dialects in all the continents of the world.⁴ Even in Muslim countries that have made Islam the state religion, cable television and Internet links have opened them up to the gospel beamed into private homes. Just as there were secret disciples of Christ in His days on earth, such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea [Jn 19: 38, 39], there are today people of other faiths who have secretly given their lives to Christ. The end of the age is near!

There are many other signs that Jesus revealed to His disciples that we need not cover here. What is more important is our response. How do we respond to the warnings that we have received?

⁴ <http://biblica.com/bibles/about/19.php>

3. Conclusion: How are you awaiting Christ's return?

The alarm clock of Christ's return has been set. The signs of the time it will sound off are everywhere. The only uncertainty is the day and the hour. So, how are you preparing for that great day of your life? *It could come before you die or you could die before it comes.* You face uncertainty both ways! So it may be a good idea to use one stone to kill two birds. That is, prepare for Christ's coming the same way you are preparing for heaven before your death.

The following options are available to you:

- You may choose to *doubt or down play the coming* of Jesus. After all, we have seen disasters and extreme wickedness all through history and yet He has not come back. It has been over two thousand years He spoke and He has not shown up. Where is the guarantee that He will come at all or in your life time? Peter faced similar skeptics who challenged him to show them the promise of Christ's return. In response, he reminded them of a similar attitude in Noah's time before the floods. With God, a day and a thousand years are one and the same [2 Pet. 3: 4-9]. Therefore, doubt would be a dangerous response.
- On the other hand, you may choose to *fret about it* and overemphasize Christ's return to the extent that you begin to speculate and gamble about it. That can open you up to the manipulations of false prophets and false christs that will show signs and wonders with which they may even deceive the elect [Matt. 24: 5, 11, 22-24; 2 Jn 7]. Christ's arrival will be a world-wide event for "*all the tribes of the earth ... will see [Him] coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory*" [Matt. 24: 30]. Therefore, He is yet to come!
- **The best attitude is to have a sense of balance.** You recognize that Christ can return anytime but you are not scared because you are ready! Paul calls that *a life of walking by faith* where you make it your "aim, whether present or absent [from your body], to be well pleasing to Him" [2 Cor. 5: 6-9]. Instead of hoping to cross the bridge when you get there, prepare for a situation where you can cross with or without a bridge!

If you choose to doubt or downplay or overemphasize His return, you are alarmed. You are most likely to fall into traps set by deceivers; traps that will prevent you from being with the Lord when He returns. But if you prepare for His coming within the context of preparing for eternity in heaven, you are alert. No matter what comes first (your death or His return), you are ready!

Be alert, not alarmed!