

## AWAITING JESUS' RETURN: HOW WE WATCH

### James 5:7-11

(CSB) Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. <sup>8</sup> You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near. <sup>9</sup> Brothers and sisters, do not complain about one another, so that you will not be judged. Look, the judge stands at the door! <sup>10</sup> Brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name as an example of suffering and patience. <sup>11</sup> See, we count as blessed those who have endured. You have heard of Job's endurance and have seen the outcome that the Lord brought about—the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

### INTRODUCTION

On July 19, 2012, America's grand old man of God, Billy Graham, released a letter, "My Heart Aches for America." He said, "Some years ago, my wife, Ruth, was reading the draft of a book I was writing. When she finished a section describing the terrible downward spiral of our nation's moral standards and the idolatry of worshiping false gods such as technology and sex, she startled me by exclaiming, 'If God doesn't punish America, He'll have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah.'" Dr. Graham exclaimed, "[T]he farther we get from God, the more the world spirals out of control. My heart aches for America and its deceived people." In August, 2013, Dr. Graham began sounding the alarm that the Second Coming of **Jesus Christ** is "near" and signs of the end of the age are "converging now for the first time since Jesus made those predictions."

A survey of April, 2010 by the Pew Research Center, a respected analyst of social, political, and religious trends shaping our nation, found nearly half of Americans, 47%, believed **Jesus** "definitely" or "probably" would return by the year 2050. Only 10% insisted He "definitely" would not return. In 2013, the accurate think tank, *Rasmussen Reports*, found 64% of all American adults—non-Christians and Christians—believe **Jesus Christ** really did rise from the dead as the Bible describes. This number is rising. *Rasmussen* and other credible polls reveal 75-77% of all American adults now affirm Christianity's foremost doctrine, the bodily Resurrection of **Jesus**, which confirmed His identity as the Son of God at His First Coming to Earth 2,000 years ago. **Romans 1:1-4** (NASB) proclaims, "Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, . . . <sup>3</sup>, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, <sup>4</sup> who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord"!

**Jesus'** Resurrection guarantees His Second Coming, when our every hope as Christians—the darkness of sin, death, and disease being destroyed, and our release into the full glory of Heaven's life and health—becomes reality. The Apostle Peter announced in **I Peter 1:3-5**: "Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to His great mercy, He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead <sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that is imperishable, uncorrupted, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. <sup>5</sup> You are being protected by God's power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." Scholar John Blanchard, in his *Bible Studies on the Letter of James*, found 1,845 references to Christ's Second Coming in the Old Testament and 17 books give it prominence. In the 260 chapters of the New Testament, there are 318 references to the Second Coming of Christ—an amazing 1 out of every 25 verses! Twenty-three of the 27 New Testament books refer to this great event. We are probably familiar with Old Testament prophecies foretelling the Son of God's birth and life, such as, **Isaiah 7:14**, "Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel" ["which is translated 'God is with us'" -**Matthew 1:23**]. Yet, for every prophecy in the Bible concerning Christ's First Coming, there are eight that look forward to His Second Coming!

We begin today a three-part series on the theme, Awaiting Jesus' Return. In coming weeks we'll consider How We Are to Wait until His Return and How We Are to Work until His Return. Today we look at How We Are to Watch for His Return. Can we become so focused on Christ's Second Coming that it warps our

relationships and decisions about our future? Herbert Washington's coworkers at Significant Plastics Inc., of Austin, TX, thought he was abnormally focused on Christ's Return. A news article of August 6, 2008, reported he suffered a serious heart attack when coworkers pretended they'd been caught away without him. They laid work outfits on their chairs and hid in a supply room. When Herbert returned from the restroom, he thought the Rapture had occurred, which many believe signals the first stage of Christ's Return. The janitor, an outspoken Muslim, pretended to have witnessed everyone disappear and ran around the office faking panic. Herbert fell to the ground clutching his heart and screamed, "I knew you'd forget me, Jesus! What did I do wrong?" He was taken to a local hospital. His coworkers emerged regretful from the supply room and gathered up their extra clothes. "We didn't mean to scare him to death," said one woman. "He's just always talking about it, so today we decided to turn the tables on him." Washington underwent bypass surgery and was said to be recovering well. His wife reported he's "digging into the Bible like never before."

## I. HOW WE WATCH

James penned his letter to believers scattered by persecution in Christianity's early days, 15-17 years after Christ's Resurrection, around A. D. 50. It's striking that when James wrote, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord's coming," he could refer to "the Lord's coming" without giving any further explanation. James had full confidence his readers would understand what he meant because a fervent expectation of **Jesus'** Return and the desire not to be ashamed before Him at His coming were uppermost in the thoughts of first-century Christians. The Apostle John wrote near the close of the first century after Christ's Birth, "And now, dear children, remain in fellowship with Christ so that when He returns, you will be full of courage and not shrink back from Him in shame" (**I John 2:28**, NLT).

The New Testament uses three different words to describe the Second Coming of **Jesus Christ**. The main Greek word is *parousia*, which has now been adopted into the English language. In secular Greek, it could refer to nothing more than someone's presence or arrival. Yet it also was used of the invasion of a country by an army or the visit of a king or governor to a province in his empire. Early Christians understood **Jesus'** "coming" (*parousia*, the word James used in **5:7**) as the final invasion of Earth by the armies of Heaven and the coming of Heaven's King to receive the final submission and adoration of His subjects.

The second Greek word, *epiphaneia*, from which the English word "epiphany" derives (a divine appearance or an illuminating discovery). It's used of the "appearance" of a god to his worshippers or the accession of a divine ruler to a throne. This Greek word is translated "appearing" in **Titus 2:11-13** (NIV): "For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.<sup>12</sup> It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,<sup>13</sup> while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." *Epiphaneia* presents **Jesus'** Second Coming as an event when He returns to assume full authority over and worship of His subjects—those who are waiting expectantly for Him and those now disregarding Him. Harry Ironside (1876-1951), as a guest preacher in Stockton, CA, preached on **Jesus'** Second Coming. In his closing prayer, as he quoted **Revelation 22:20**: "Come, Lord Jesus," a woman's swishing skirt alerted him of her leaving. Afterwards, Ironside went to the door to greet those in attendance. This woman was pacing back and forth in the lobby. As he approached her, she confronted him demanding, "How would you dare to pray like that—'Come, Lord Jesus'? I don't want Him to come. It would break in on all my plans. How dare you!" Harry Ironside calmly replied, "My dear young woman, Jesus is coming whether you want it or not."

The third New Testament word for the Second Coming, *apokalupsis*, from which our word "apocalypse" derives, is the regular Greek word for an "unveiling" or "laying bare." It is translated "revealed" in **I Peter 1:6-7** (NLT): "So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while.<sup>7</sup> These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to

the whole world." Early Christians thus understood, by the combined force of these three Greek words, that the Second Coming of **Jesus** is the arrival of a King; it is God appearing to His people and mounting an eternal throne; and it is **Jesus Christ** unveiling the full blaze of His Heavenly glory upon our world!

How much warning will we receive prior to our Lord's Return, so that we will be ready to meet Him? It depends upon whether we are walking closely with Him in the light of His godly presence or if we have allowed the darkness of sin to blind and envelope us, as **II Peter 3:10-14** (NIV) explains: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. <sup>11</sup> Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives <sup>12</sup> as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. <sup>13</sup> But in keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. <sup>14</sup> So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him."

James wrote with a pastor's heart to believers who'd lost homes, jobs, families, or even seen loved ones martyred, due to persecution launched by the Jewish religious leaders against the followers of **Jesus Christ**. James' main purpose in **vs. 7, 10-11** is to keep us in an attitude of watchful expectation that our lives will be so revived by the compassion and mercy of our Lord at His Return that our every body ache, our every soul ache, and our every heartache suffered due to the darkness of sin, disease, or death in this life will be healed, restored, and made right by the glory of our Savior's love for us! "Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord's coming. <sup>10</sup> . . . [T]ake the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name as an example of suffering and patience. <sup>11</sup> See, we count as blessed those who have endured. You have heard of Job's endurance and have seen the outcome that the Lord brought about—the Lord is compassionate and merciful."

But James warned **Jesus** will return to Earth not only as our Savior but also as our judge. "Look," he wrote in **vs. 9**, "the judge stands at the door!" James addressed these words to Christians guilty of being unChristlike in how we "complain about one another" in a judgmental way. Our main responsibility in "How We Watch" for Him while we "Await Jesus' Return" is to avoid or quickly repent of any action of which we would be ashamed if that was our last act prior to His Coming. An unwritten saying of Christ preserved by Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165), one of early Christianity's best defenders before the Roman authorities, is, "In whatsoever employment I may surprise you, therein also will I judge you." Dr. J. C. Masee (1871-1965) enjoyed a long and fruitful ministry as a Baptist pastor in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and served the Northern Baptist Convention well in many leadership roles. As a young man he once was persuaded to attend a theater much against his will. After being seated and noticing the unChristlike values promoted by the performance, he quickly got up. "Where are you going?" his friends asked, "you just came in." "I know it," replied the young Masee. "I'm a Christian. I believe the Bible, and my Bible tells me that Jesus, my Lord, is coming back to this earth, and that He may come at any time. I don't want Him to catch me here!"

## CONCLUSION

I was privileged to be a Bible teacher at a Christian high school in Tulsa for three years. The day before the first day of class, I hovered over each desk with prayers and tears for the students; somewhat terrified at the prospect of maintaining order in a roomful of modern American teenagers! I read books by Christian psychologist James Dobson for tips on child guidance and prayed for God's wisdom. By a combination of clear, printed expectations of the students (which parents acknowledged and signed) that were consistently upheld, multiple incentives and awards rewarding their cooperation, and naming each student in prayer and love before the Lord each morning, students generally appreciated and benefitted from our time in class and respected my authority. Some who were discipline problems in other classes did not want to let me down.

Two classes of 9<sup>th</sup> graders in my first year of teaching provided sharp contrasts in behavior. About a third of the students in 5<sup>th</sup> period took **Jesus** and our class studying the Life of Christ seriously. I often needed to reshuffle the seating chart to separate the biggest goofballs (one of whom was the Superintendent's son), who tried to get by with as much as they could beneath my watchful eye. Then they figured out their best chance for antics was when my eyes were closed in prayer. I began leading our classroom prayer with eyes fully open. I did not dare to leave them alone in the room for long. Because their actions often delayed their lessons being completed on schedule with the other three 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes studying the Life of Christ, they often missed out on movies and other fun, bonus activities the other classes earned by their cooperation.

Students in 1<sup>st</sup> period closely resembled those in 5<sup>th</sup> period. Their parents were equally dedicated to the Lord and to them, the students were nearly equal in previous knowledge of the Bible and Christianity, and they nearly all had made a commitment to **Jesus** as their Savior at some time in their lives. But students in 1<sup>st</sup> period had a much greater desire to please the Lord **Jesus**, to return His love for them, and to honor Him with their lives. One morning while this class worked on an assignment, a student's personal emergency forced me to escort the student to the office. When returning to my second-floor classroom that was close to the head of the stairs, I purposely tiptoed up the stairs to approach the classroom as quietly as possible. The seating arrangement faced all desks away from the doorway, allowing me to see into the room and hear them before they were aware I'd returned. Not one student was talking; not one was out of their seats; all were at work diligently upon their assignment. I still recall the smile this brought to my face and to my heart!

Will our actions at the moment of the return of our Savior, the Lord **Jesus**, reveal the depths of our love for Him, or expose the coldness of hearts that often seek opportunity to escape obedience toward Christ?