

“HOPE IN THE SIGNS”
by Rom A. Pegram (12/1/19)

Have you heard the one about the three preachers were discussing the question, “If Jesus Christ came back to earth what church would he go to?”

The Episcopalian said, “He would go to the Episcopal Church because of our line of Apostolic Succession.”

The Baptist said, “He would go to the Baptist Church because of our enthusiasm.”

Then the Methodist said, “Of course, He would go to the Methodist church. *Why should he change after all these years?*”

Evangelist Billy Graham (who was Baptist, by the way) says this of the 2nd Coming of Christ: “One of the best ways to get rid of discouragement is to remember that Christ is coming again. The most thrilling, glorious truth in all the world is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

When we look around and see pessimism on every side, we should remember the Bible is the only Book in the world that predicts the future. The Bible is more modern than tomorrow morning's newspaper.

“The Bible accurately foretells the future, and it says that the consummation of all things shall be the coming again of Jesus Christ to this earth.

If your life is dismal, depressed, and gloomy today, Christ can turn those dark clouds inside out. The sunlight of His love can still shine into the darkest part of your life.”

I love Billy Graham. Don't you? What an eternal optimist ... and for good reason! As we begin this season of Advent, we're entering into what I'm calling THE SEASON OF HOPE. Who doesn't need more HOPE these days, right? And, Jesus knew that as the world progressed, seemingly spinning out of control in a variety of ways, his people would need HOPE! And I want to tell you ... *here's a commodity worthy of investment!* HOPE is what Christ has to offer; HOPE is what you'll receive in *this place* during this season. Listen now to the words of Jesus through the Apostle Mark, as he shares with us HOPE in the SIGNS of the times (Mark 13:24-37, NLT)...

“At that time, after the anguish of those days, the sun will be darkened, the moon will give no light, ²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then everyone will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send out his angels to gather his chosen ones from all over the world—from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven.

²⁸ “Now learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branches bud and its leaves begin to sprout, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ In the same way, when you see all these things taking place, you can know that his return is very near, right at the door. ³⁰ I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass from the scene before all these things take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear.

³² “However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. ³³ And since you don't know when that time will come, be on guard! Stay alert!

³⁴ “The coming of the Son of Man can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. When he left home, he gave each of his slaves instructions about the work they were to do, and he told the gatekeeper to watch for his return. ³⁵ You, too, must keep watch! For you don’t know when the master of the household will return—in the evening, at midnight, before dawn, or at daybreak. ³⁶ Don’t let him find you sleeping when he arrives without warning. ³⁷ I say to you what I say to everyone: Watch for him!”

So, our scripture for today began with these words (v.24a): “At that time, after the anguish of those days...” What *anguish* is Jesus talking about? Well, back up with me for just a moment to verses 21-23 of Mark 13. It says, “Then if anyone tells you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah,’ or ‘There he is,’ don’t believe it. ²² For false messiahs and false prophets will rise up and perform signs and wonders so as to deceive, if possible, even God’s chosen ones. ²³ Watch out! I have warned you about this ahead of time!”

Jesus is going to come again; that’s a fact... And, Jesus is trying to let us in on what’s going to be happening when that time approaches! This is why Jesus gives us ... ‘a heads up,’ as we’d say. He’s given us ‘the gift of signs.’ Folks, don’t kid yourselves; we’re living in such a time. If we’re honest, we no longer know who to trust and who not to ... in this age of endless information.

So, if this is a time of false prophets, what is prophecy? It’s both ‘foretelling’ (i.e. O.T. prophets telling the future) as well as ‘forth-telling’ (i.e. preaching in the current day). And, whether you know it or not, there’s a lot of preaching today that’s *not* God’s word! So, false prophets are in our world today!

That’s why we need to be watchful... We’re in the ‘anguish of those days’ right now ... and so, what comes next? Well, God’s word tells us that we’re going to move from a time of trouble ... to a time of *cosmic chaos*! If you really read today’s scripture carefully, you’ll find that it’s all about the sun eventually burning out. And, when that happens, it’ll send our universe into chaos like it’s never seen before! And then what happens? Another Advent—Jesus’ 2nd Coming... And, when we think of all that’s going on in the world today *that fact should always bring us HOPE! It should pick up our spirits & encourage us...*

When these things happen, we have a way out ... to look forward to! There’s always a better tomorrow! Again, there will be a day when the sun will give out ... the Son of Man will appear ... and angels will be out gathering God’s people. But in the meantime, *here’s what Jesus will assure us of, through SIGNS that he sends...*

THE SIGNS ASSURE US THAT GOD IS IN CONTROL! Verses 26 & 28 again say, “Then everyone will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory. ... Now learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branches bud and its leaves begin to sprout, you know that summer is near.”

Folks, when was the last time you saw a season of the year that didn’t come? God is ultimately in control of everything ... and we are God’s children! 1 John 3:1a reminds us, “See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!” Don’t you ever forget that, O.K.?

Galileo once said, “The sun, with all those planets revolving around it and dependent upon it, can still ripen a bunch of grapes as if it had nothing else in the universe to do.” And, it can ripen the fig tree, too...

I’m not altogether *unfamiliar* with fig trees, as they’re not only native to the middle east, but they’re also native to my family’s native state of North Carolina. The fig ‘tree’ is actually more like a large bush than a typical tree we would think of. In the spring, it throws out green shoots—new shoots to the tree—and it is on those shoots that the fruit of the tree—the figs—will grow. If you’re at all familiar with the fig tree and you’ve seen those green shoots in the spring, then you already know what’s coming next—*FIGS*...

Jesus is trying to tell us that ‘the signs of the times’ are what we, too, need to be familiar with. What does the Bible say about what will happen in the end times? Actually, the Gospel of Mark is somewhat light on this information. If you study Matthew & Luke, you’ll find much more ... about what to be looking out for. And, you could always go to Revelation if you want to be really adventurous ... and learn much, much more! The point is, *we need to learn how to recognize the signs of the times* ... and when we do, we’ll know what’s coming next—JESUS. Jesus’ 2nd Coming will be just as plain to those who know the signs of the times & are watching ... and, *God is in control of it all*...

Let me remind you, the fig tree always sends out those new green shoots ... spring after spring after spring. God is in control of the seasons ... and they always come; never have I witnessed a spring, summer, fall or winter that did not come, one right after the other. And, *just like those seasons ... the 2nd Coming of Jesus will come, too!* THE SIGNS ASSURE US THAT GOD IS IN COMPLETE CONTROL... Also...

THE SIGNS ASSURE US THAT OUR FAITH WILL BE REWARDED & THAT WE WILL BE GOING WITH JESUS. Verse 27 reminds us: “And he will send out his angels to gather his chosen ones from all over the world—from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven.” *Our faith in Christ will be rewarded*; that’s one thing the SIGNS assure us of. Through faith in Christ ... *we’ve become God’s ‘chosen people.’* We can bank on what Jesus said here; he will be sending his army of angels out to get us when it’s time. THE SIGNS OF HIS COMING ASSURES US THAT OUR FAITH WILL BE REWARDED ... and then...

WE’LL GO WITH HIM; that’s another thing the SIGNS assure us of... But we *have to be on watch!* Jesus had a word for those who were the ‘chosen people’—those he wanted to make sure were ready to go with him; in Verse 33 he says, “Be on watch, be alert, for you do not know when the time will come.” In other words ... ALWAYS BE READY! Does that mean we should constantly be staring up at the sky? NO! It means ... *we’d better be about his business*...

Someone asked John Wesley once what he would do if he knew his Lord would return at the same time the next day. He said in effect, "I would go to bed and go to sleep; wake up in the morning, and go on with my work, for I would want Him to find me doing what He had appointed."

Besides *being aware* of the ‘signs of the times,’ we should also *be about the business* Jesus left us with—*making disciples for him ... and caring for those entrusted to us!* What would you want Jesus to find you doing ... when he returns?

Here’s what Jesus says to us, again, in Mark 13 (34-37): “The coming of the Son of Man can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. When he left home, he gave each of his slaves instructions about the work they were to do, and he told the gatekeeper to watch for his return. ³⁵ You, too, must keep watch! For you don’t know when the master of the household will return—in the evening, at midnight, before dawn, or at daybreak. ³⁶ Don’t let him find you sleeping when he arrives without warning. ³⁷ I say to you what I say to everyone: Watch for him!”

Folks, *I can tell you what happens when you don’t keep watch!* Do you want to hear about it? When I was in high school, I actually took a couple of semesters of French. My French teacher was Mrs. Oakleaf—also the Superintendent’s wife. In the language room, at my high school, we had these booths you sat in, where you would put on headphones and listen to someone speaking French, and then you were supposed to be speaking it along with them. The teacher had a control panel at her desk and could monitor the class’s progress by punching into your particular booth and listening to how you were doing. Apparently, Mrs. Oakleaf threw the switch for my particular booth one day in class ... and didn’t like what she was hearing...

The first thing I heard was ... the whole class burst out in laughter! I had no idea what was going on ... until I lifted my head and realized that I’d fallen asleep to the ‘beautiful French voice’ ... and Mrs. Oakleaf was standing right behind me!

When I think of Christ’s 2nd Coming, I always think about this experience ... and remember this is NOT how I want Jesus catching me! I don’t want Jesus to ‘catch me snoozin’,’ spiritually or otherwise! We’ve got to be about his business, knowing the signs of the times, and being assured that we’ll be rewarded for our faith ... and will be going with Jesus, as the angels gather us up!

So, if all is uncertain in the days ahead, what in the world can we hang onto? What is it that will never leave us? Yes, by faith, Jesus will never leave us. But, Jesus himself tells us to hang onto ... HIS WORD! V. 31 says, “Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear.” There’s what we can hang onto...

Here are some facts for you to hang onto today, too, as I close: Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with promises of the Second Coming of Christ...

- There are 1,845 references to it in the Old Testament, and a total of seventeen Old Testament books give it prominence.
- Of the 260 chapters in the entire New Testament, there are 318 references to the Second Coming, or one out of 30 verses.
- Twenty-three of the 27 New Testament books refer to this great event. (The four missing books include three which are single-chapter letters written to individual persons on a particular subject, and the fourth is Galatians which does imply Christ’s coming again.) Finally...

- For every prophecy on the First Coming of Christ, there are 8 on Christ's Second Coming.

God gives us SIGNS to give us HOPE, folks! And as we enter into Advent this year, we need to be reminded that it's about the 1st Advent—Christmas, the birth of our Lord. But, it's also about the 2nd Advent... And there's HOPE in both!

This Christmas season, as we remember the 'Silent Night' of Jesus' birth, let's also remember the promise of Jesus coming again. And let's not let Jesus catch *us* snoozin'! Let's be watchful; let's be aware of the *signs* of the times, allowing those signs to give us HOPE ... *all because of Jesus...*