

Waiting and Longing

Being *Ready* for the Return
of Jesus, *Whenever* It Happens

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Dedication

*To Mom and Dad,
who love the Word
and live the Word.*

Acknowledgments

I have discovered that writing a book is both a lonely and a communal task. It is lonely because of the many hours spent in solitude, playing with words and concepts, trying to make the right words express the correct concepts. But it is never *only* a lonely task. Even what happens in solitude is influenced and formed by what happens in community. A large and beloved community of former teachers, pastors, colleagues, and friends has influenced me in the direction of what appears in these pages. They are too numerous to name here, but their imprint on my life is forever appreciated.

There are several, however, who must be named.

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PREFACE

What Do We Watch?

This is a book about watching for the second coming of Christ. Specifically, it is a book about *how to watch* for the return of Christ. Matthew 24 (and the parallel passages of Mark 13 and Luke 21) describe the day when Jesus left the temple grounds for the last time and His disciples came to Him and pointed out the grandeur and splendor of the temple. His response must have stunned them. “ ‘Do you see all these things?’ he asked. ‘Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down’ ” (Matthew 24:2, TNIV). They couldn’t conceive of such a thing! So later, as He sat on the Mount of Olives, they came to Him with the question, “Tell us, . . . when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (verse 3, TNIV). In answering their question, Jesus begins by saying, “Watch out . . .” (verse 4, TNIV). In other words, “Take care! Be careful!” Clearly, in preparation for such a cataclysmic event, He urged His followers toward watchfulness and preparation.

Sobering, isn't it? Little wonder that, throughout time, the followers of Jesus have placed such a decided emphasis on watching for His return. Yet, an understandable question arises, What does it mean to watch? Where do we focus our attention? *What* exactly do we watch? If nothing else, church history has taught us that Christians have watched a variety of different realities as ways to prepare for the coming of Christ.

Many have watched the turbulent, deadly events in nature. After all, in the first part of His answer to the disciples' question, Jesus gives a list of signs of His coming. Included among those signs are events in nature. "There will be famines and earthquakes in various places" (verse 7b, TNIV).

Earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, and a tragically long list of other natural disasters have been the focus of attention for many. Thus, when yet another storm unleashes its fury upon us, many say, "It's just one more sign of the nearness of Christ's coming." And since such events seem to happen with increased frequency and intensity, surely they signify an imminent end. So some think, *If we can just keep their symbolism on our radar screens, watching these events will help us to be ready for the end they portend.*

Others watch the political and international news. After all, when giving the signs of the end, Jesus *also* said, "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. . . . Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (verses 6, 7, TNIV). So we ought to keep a very close eye on international conflict, crisis, and instability. A keen awareness of what happens on that front will help us to be ready.

Along these same lines, many of Christ's followers have kept an eye on religious and political leaders around the globe. What

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are world leaders doing? Is the president of the United States making choices and helping to enact legislation that jeopardizes religious liberty? What about the pope? Is he gaining in strength and prestige? Are leaders in the United Nations and other countries hindering the progress of the gospel and opposing or, on the other hand, contributing to religious intolerance and persecution? There has been a tendency to view all such events through the prism of the last day drama.

Others have watched the state of the Christian church. “It must be close to the end. After all, isn’t the church in a Laodicean condition? And didn’t Jesus say that ‘the love of most will grow cold’?” (verse 12, TNIV). In the same vein, some have constructed elaborate charts that detail the events that will unfold at the end, and have become so familiar with these as to imply that salvation will come through a thorough knowledge of such charts. So they keep an eye on the charts and the news! And some Christians have even said that what we need is to be watchful by working for a generation of perfect (read *sinless*) Christians, as the last generation before His coming (they say) will be a perfect one.

This is not an exhaustive list of the realities that Christians have watched with reference to the coming of Christ. It may, however, suffice to underline that there are many different issues upon which Christians throughout time have focused their attention—many different things we have *watched* in our attempt to be ready for His coming.

Here, however, is what is of *great* interest: none of these—*none of these*—is what Jesus tells us to watch. While some of these matters may play roles in the final denouement of earth’s history, they are not the issues that are central to Him (in Matthew 24 and 25) in terms of watching for His coming. The truth is, in

the context of His final discourse in Matthew, He is very specific about what it means to watch for His coming.

As if to underline the importance of what He says in these two chapters of Matthew, consider a statement recorded in Mark's Gospel from the same incident (see Mark 13). Mark's is a much more abbreviated version of this event, particularly when it comes to the parables that Jesus tells. But there is one line that is particularly noteworthy. It appears right at the end of the incident and is thus the last line of this section. It is the take-home lesson that Jesus gives His disciples. It's almost as though He says, "Now, in light of everything I have said about My coming, about its certainty, about the signs that lead up to it, and about the necessity of always being ready for it, here is the last thing I have to say."

Well, with a lead-in like that, we want to know—*What is the take-home lesson, Jesus?* And He doesn't disappoint us, for here is what He says, "What I say to you, I say to everyone, 'Watch!' " (Mark 13:37, TNIV).

Watch. *Watch!* That has an ominous ring to it, doesn't it? *Stay alert! Pay attention! Keep awake!* If you're anything like me, there is an obvious question that follows: *How? How am I to watch?* What does it mean to watch?

Such is the theme of this book.

Three notes are in order.

First, we certainly ought not to think that other biblical passages dealing with the coming of Christ are secondary. Daniel and Revelation and parts of 2 Thessalonians (to name a few) are of equally valid importance. But none is as succinct and straightforward regarding *what it means to watch* for the coming of Christ as Jesus is here in Matthew's Gospel.

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Second, every so often, another hysteria erupts regarding the end of the world and the coming of Christ. A movement emerges, a religious leader speaks, sometimes a date is set, and everyone's attention is galvanized once again on the theme. Many laugh and taunt the news while others believe it. But some straddle the fence, outwardly denying they believe it and stating they have no concern about it, but inwardly wondering, *If it did happen, would I be ready? Have I done what I need to do in terms of watching so that I can face His coming with a quiet assurance that I will meet Him in peace?* Jesus helps us answer such questions.

And third, it must be underlined and stated time and again: whether the coming of Jesus happens *just around the corner* or whether it happens a thousand years from now, one central reality never changes—*we are saved by Jesus and His righteousness*. The Bible does *not* teach salvation by knowledge. Nor does it teach salvation by charts. Nor does it teach salvation by following the news or by watching the president or the pope or by becoming perfect or by knowing exactly *what* will happen *when* or by any method other than receiving salvation as the free gift that Jesus, by His grace, offers us. The Bible teaches salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. *Period*.

Yet, even those who walk with Jesus in a saving relationship need to hear what He says regarding watching for His coming. After all, it was to His disciples that He said, "So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Matthew 24:44, TNIV).

It is to that end that I offer the re-publication of this book.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Certainty

I grew up certain that I *wouldn't* grow up—Jesus was coming too soon! That reality dominated many aspects of my Christian childhood. I was certain that I would not attend college, would not marry and have children, would not enter professional life, and would not own a home. I was certain that I would not do any of the things that we normally associate with growing up. Jesus would return in the clouds of heaven to take home the redeemed before any of that could happen.

When I was six or seven years old, I attended a week of spiritual emphasis at a college where my father taught theology. Truthfully, there is much about the week that I *don't* remember. I do not recall who the speaker was or what he named his sermon series. I do not remember who participated in the programs or even why I, being only a child, was attending meetings intended for the college students.

But I do remember that the theme of the week was the second coming of Christ—the *soon*, the *imminent* coming of Christ.

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And I remember fear. It scared me! Why was I afraid? Just as sure as I was that the coming would happen soon, I was certain that it would be awful and awesome and that I would not be ready.

In terms of the Second Advent, then, two things characterized my early years: certainty that Jesus would come and would come soon; and fear that I probably would not be ready.

The years have passed. Now I am an adult. I have graduated from college and earned three advanced degrees. I have worked in three different branches of ministry. I am married. My wife and I have two beautiful children, and we are paying off the mortgage on our home.

And Jesus hasn't come.

Knowing others who share a belief in the coming of Christ has convinced me that I am far from being alone in my experience. Many have lived through similar experiences of certainty and fear. And such experiences can create destabilizing *uncertainty*. Has something gone wrong? What do we do? Do we maintain our confidence? Were we wrong about what we believed and preached? Has the coming been delayed, or was it just never as close as we thought it was?

Most who believe in the second coming of Christ have in some way been affected by such realities, and many have responded in one of two ways to the fact that Christ has not come. The first way is by *relinquishing their beliefs in the Second Advent*. "I don't want to hear it anymore," is a common refrain from those who feel both disappointed at the absence of the Advent and angered by the fire-breathing preachers of yesteryear who both scared them and scarred them in their formative years.

I spoke one day with a friend of mine who is an accomplished professional in his field. The topic turned to sermons.

We conversed for a while about the process by which preachers choose their sermon topics and what leads them to such themes. I asked him what he, as a church member, wanted to hear preached more often and what he wanted to hear less frequently. His answer was swift and unequivocal. "I don't want to hear any more sermons about the soon coming of Christ," he said rather forcefully.

I was taken aback by the heat of his remark. "Really? Why is that?" I asked.

"I grew up hearing that," he said. "We heard over and over again that Christ was coming soon, *very* soon. The time of trouble was just around the corner. It would be a terrible time. And it was about to burst forth upon us. We were scared much of the time. And yet look at me now—almost five decades later, and here I am. Christ hasn't come. And I don't want my children growing up scared like I did. So I don't want to hear any more sermons about the *soon coming* of Christ."

It is a troublesome sentiment, yet my friend is not alone in holding it. Others voice similar concerns. There are even Christian preachers who have decided that they simply will not preach on the topic of the advent of Christ, ever. It has caused so much false anticipation and anxiety and negative sentiment in the past that they do not wish to contribute to such in the present.

It is hard to fault those who make such choices. After all, how many times can the warning, "Wolf!" be sounded before it loses its power to impress? Every parent knows that regularly threatening punishment and never following through will simply assure that their children will soon cease to listen. Should we expect it to be different with the proclamation of the Advent?

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There are Christians, then, who have dealt with the disappointment over the fact that we are still here by *relinquishing their beliefs in an imminent advent*.

The second way we have dealt with the fact that we are still here is by *reaffirming our traditional approach*. We not only affirm the fact that Christ is coming, and coming soon, but we continue to use the tactics of the past in announcing it.

An example of such an approach came across my desk not long ago. A concerned church member shared a copy of a fax with me. The fax announced that a certain well-known Christian organization was in the process of pressuring political figures to push forward their religiously motivated end-time agenda. If the organization succeeded, it would result in a hastening of end-time events in a way consistent with what many believe will happen just before the coming of Christ. The person who gave me the fax had a question: Could what the paper said portend the end? Was the coming of Christ *finally* just around the corner? Was this the beginning of the final, rapid moves? I have to admit, when I first read it, it brought up once again the fear and dread of my youth.

Was there something to it?

I decided not to let the matter rest. I visited the Web site of the Christian organization said to be pushing this agenda. Looking over their homepage, I noticed at the bottom of the page the word, "HOAX." Clicking on it, it opened to a page that explained that without their knowledge or consent a rumor had been making the rounds of the Christian world regarding their involvement in trying to bring about a politically enforced day and way of worship and rest. However, said the Web site, it was, quite simply, *not true*. The organization was asking for

help, urging those who encountered the story to do their best to help kill it.

I wasn't surprised that the story was a hoax. After all, I have encountered many such stories over the years. But I was disturbed by the fact that we are too easily taken in by such stories. While the details and organizations may vary, the message has repeatedly been the same—*something is going on behind the scenes somewhere that portends the end. So get ready, because here it comes.* Time and again these have been false alarms.

While such stories and incidents will continue to vex us, there is, without a doubt, a positive reason for them. They remind us of the desire—the *legitimate* desire—that believers have to be in the kingdom with Christ soon! They underline the profound longing in the believer's heart for the sinful scene of our sufferings and temptations to come to a glorious end in the coming of Christ. Yet, while we must affirm such desire, we must at the same time resist the temptation to be sensationalistic in our approach. In fact, such stories and incidents suggest that we should answer some questions: Have we learned from the past? Have the false alarms of bygone years taught us any lessons? Is there another way to approach the topic of the second advent of Christ?

Certainly, relinquishing our beliefs of a returning Savior is not a satisfactory approach for the Christian, for it fails to take seriously the Word in which we believe. Christ spoke repeatedly and with unmitigated certainty of the fact that He would return. Several of His parables deal with the coming. Some of His most beloved words promise that He will indeed return. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare

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a place for you, *I will come back* and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:1–3; italics added).

In the book of Acts, Luke tells us that as Christ’s followers stood gazing up at the ascending Christ, the angels spoke to them: “ ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, *will come back* in the same way you have seen him go into heaven’ ” (Acts 1:11; italics added). We can only imagine the preciousness of such a promise to the members of the early church who had known Christ personally. *Their Jesus* would come again! They would be reunited *with Him*! The kingdom would be finally and fully realized.

The apostles affirm and reaffirm the reality of Christ’s promised return. Paul is unequivocal: “For *the Lord himself will come down from heaven*, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:16–18; italics added). Paul also reassures us, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but *we will all be changed*—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, *at the last trumpet*. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:51, 52; italics added). And he tells Titus that how we live matters, since, after all, we are waiting “for the blessed hope—*the glorious appearing* of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13; italics added).

Not to be outdone, James tells his readers to “be patient . . . until the Lord’s coming” (James 5:7). And John, in his first epistle,

tells us in words so simple as to be breathtaking that what Jesus has promised us is nothing less than eternal life (see 1 John 2:25). This eternal life is to be bestowed at the time of the resurrection at the coming of Christ (see John 5:28, 29).

And we would be remiss to overlook that final book of Scripture, the Revelation. This sometimes disturbing, sometimes baffling book brims with the expectation of a Lord who will return to set up a kingdom that (in the words of Daniel, the Old Testament prophet) “will never be destroyed” (2:44). “Look, *he is coming* with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen” (Revelation 1:7; italics added). Also in Revelation we find that most precious of promises, that God “ ‘will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. . . . Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true’ ” (Revelation 21:4, 5).

I have quoted merely a smattering of the words of biblical writers regarding the Second Advent. In the light of such evidence, it is unacceptable for us to approach the theme of the advent of Christ with avoidance or neglect. If we wish to be biblically sound in our theology, we simply cannot relinquish our beliefs in the Advent. Scripture is replete with the doctrine. How then can Christians safely avoid it?

Relinquishing our belief in the Advent fails to take Scripture seriously enough. However, the second approach—*reaffirming our traditional approach*—is unsatisfactory as well, for it fails to take seriously enough the world in which we live.

Believers have at times read into every event of the world—from the most mundane to the most spectacular—a sign of the

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end. A war breaks out, and it is viewed as a sign of the end. Famines, an earthquake, a political upheaval, or a movie with submerged religious themes come along, and they are all taken as signs of the end. In certain extreme examples, any and every random event is understood to foreshadow a swift-coming end. It is true that Christ spoke of such signs, yet the repetitive and seemingly endless nature of such events belies the possibility that each and every one of them, over a long span of time, presages an immediate end. Furthermore, viewing the world in such a way tends to make us less responsive to the needs around us and less responsible for doing what we can to improve the world in which we currently live.

Christians are correct to place strong emphasis on the coming of Christ, the end of the world, and the creation of a new world. However, forgetting that we are yet citizens of *this* world, and that *this* world came from the Creator's hand, and that *this* world, though marred, still retains the fingerprints of its Creator, can cause us to live as mere tenants, unconcerned about the place we inhabit. After all, with such a view, it is not our responsibility to pay for its upkeep.

While both of these approaches to the advent of Christ are unsatisfactory, they are nevertheless understandable. On the one hand, it is not hard to understand why some Christians have grown weary of hearing the same message time and again without the desired result. This is particularly true when the methods by which the coming has been proclaimed have at times been wild-eyed and sensationalistic, leading to fear and dread. This is especially true for those who grew up hearing and rehearsing the message of an imminent advent. Admittedly, if such a message were framed in the context of a fully orbed gospel—relating to

real life with its needs, demands, joys, sorrows, realities, and wants—the ultimate effect is less likely to be negative. If not, it is disturbing to repeatedly consider a reality that (we’re told) should be joyful, and yet causes us to experience great fear. And then, to hear it time and again and yet have it never happen, can ultimately become unbearable. So while the approach of relinquishing our belief in the Advent is misguided, it is not without reason. It makes sense.

On the other hand, for more than two thousand years Christians have longed for Christ to return to finally and fully inaugurate His kingdom. It is the blessed hope that has “beat eternal” in the breast of countless Christian believers. It has sustained them through good times and bad; through trial, persecution, and fire; through dark ages of travail and centuries of neglect by the surrounding society. It has stoked the fires of faith in otherwise cold and clammy cultures. It has given Christians a goal on which to focus. It has assured believers that history is indeed going somewhere, and that God’s ways of love and justice will finally win the day. Because of that, it is no wonder that Christians have been quick—sometimes *too* hasty—to proclaim that the end is just around the corner. It explains why Christians have been repetitive and even relentless in their proclamation that Jesus is coming soon.

So, while some of the methods have been misguided and some of the emphasis misplaced, it is nevertheless understandable. We want to see Jesus! We wish to be with Him! We long for a world where sin is a distant and quickly fading memory. And we wish it to happen soon! It is easy to understand the reason behind the emphasis on the coming. But sometimes it has resulted in misguided methods and views.

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If, then, these two approaches are unsatisfactory, is there another way? Is there a way that allows us to take seriously both the Word in which we believe and the world in which we live?

Maybe there is. And maybe the best way to discover that option comes through scrutinizing a well-known, but not always well-understood, section of Matthew's Gospel. It is only one of the many places where the New Testament speaks of the coming of Christ but is rich in detail. In fact, it is the most complete record of Christ's own teaching regarding His coming and preparation for it.

Matthew's Gospel contains the preaching of Jesus in five discourses. In each discourse, Jesus preaches on themes that will forever after be of vital importance to His followers. The first discourse, Matthew 5:1–7:29, is what we have commonly called The Sermon on the Mount. Its substance is Jesus' theology of the law of the new kingdom. It is among the most well known and loved of Jesus' teachings.

The second discourse, Matthew 10:5–11:1 comes at the time Jesus sends out the apostles on their mission. Its focus is, understandably, on mission and martyrdom. Christ's servants for ages to come would find these words of great value.

The third discourse, Matthew 13:1–53, turns its eye toward a fuller understanding of the kingdom of God. Jesus accomplished this through telling what are often called "the parables of the kingdom." The parables of the sower, the weeds, the mustard seed, and others help Christ's disciples in all ages to understand His kingdom more fully.

The fourth discourse, Matthew 18:1–19:2, considers life under the authority of the kingdom. It deals with themes such as what is most highly valued in the kingdom of God, and how to live as

true disciples of that kingdom.

The final discourse, Matthew 24:1–25:46 will be the focus of our attention in this book. In this discourse Jesus deals with the topic of His return, what will precede it, and how to prepare for it. It is the section of the Gospel containing the most condensed and thorough teachings of Christ on His return and preparation for it.¹

It just may be that in these words and teachings we will discover a meaningful third option, another way of relating to the certainty that the end is near again.

¹ These divisions of Matthew are drawn from D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1984), 8:51–57.