

## Certainty and Uncertainty

Matt. 24:23-39

After giving the sign of the abomination of desolation and warning of a great tribulation that "unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved..." Jesus spoke about the problem of false Christs and of the confusion that they would cause. Jesus lived at a time when there were false Christs, that is men who wanted to claim the mantle of Messiahship. Barabbas, the man who was released by Pilate instead of Jesus is an example. Barabbas led a faction of Jews in a rebellion against the Romans. He was imprisoned for that and for the fact that he and his followers had murdered along the way. He was the kind of Messiah the Jews wanted except that he was evil instead of good. The claim to be the Messiah by Barabbas is demonstrated by his name. Barabbas means "son of the Father." When Pilate gave the choice of the two men to the Jews, he called Jesus the King of the Jews and Barabbas the son of the Father. Reading between the lines Pilate asked the crowd which Messiah do you choose, the one called the King of the Jews or the one called the son of the Father?

For the Jews of Jesus' day, the concept of the Messiah coming was an expectation of a man being the anointed one sent to fulfill the promises of God. This is, in fact, who Jesus was and what He had done. The natural way to understand Jesus' return for the generation who experienced His incarnation was as what they had already seen and experienced. Jesus was revealing to His disciples that His return would not be like His incarnation. His coming would be like lightning that comes from the east and flashes to the west. This would be a sudden, unpredictable and dramatic coming. He is coming in judgment, gathering the elect and confronting the unbelieving. He will return in power and great glory and will be irresistible. He will not come as He did before. He already did that and there is no need for Him to do it again. So any rumors that someone is the Christ or the Messiah is patently false. No matter how attractive or powerful they may seem to be, Jesus is not returning that way. This is non-negotiable.

But this warning about false Christs is set in the context of the great tribulation. For those who do not recognize the real Christ, a coming Christ is again expected to appear as a man anointed to keep the promises of God. Anyone looking for these "signs" will be deceived at the end. The true Christ is not coming in that way. And at the end the great tribulation will conclude with an ecological disaster. The sun will be darkened so that the moon no longer shines and stars will fall from the heavens. Then Jesus will appear in power, glory and judgment gathering the elect and separating them from those who face condemnation.

So Jesus offered three signs in respect to the end. The first is the preaching of the gospel in all the world as a witness to all the nations. The second is the final fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy of the abomination of desolation. The third is the ecological disaster of the darkening of the sun so that the moon no longer shines and of the stars falling out of the heavens. After establishing these three signs Jesus offered a conclusion, an observation, and a caution.

The conclusion was communicated by Jesus by means of a parable. "Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also when you see all these things, know that it is near - at the doors!" For a person who grew up around fig trees, the timing of the coming of summer was no mystery. You could observe the fig trees preparing for its coming. When you saw the new growth and new leaves then you knew that summer was imminent. Jesus was saying that the three signs that He had given were as trustworthy as fig trees. The fulfillment of His prophecy was a certainty which means that at the end, those who know Jesus' teaching will know that it is the end. And, they will know what to do. We could break it down like this: the preaching the gospel stage will be followed by the fleeing from Judea stage which will be followed by the looking up stage.

The observation that Jesus offered was this, "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place." I am describing these words as an observation because this is what Jesus saw as He looked into the future. He was saying that those who see the beginning of the end will also see the end of the end. When I was in high school there was a raised

expectation of Jesus' coming based upon this prophetic word from Jesus. The return of the Jews to the Holy Land and the establishment of the political state of Israel was seen as the key event that triggered the prophetic clock that Jesus had set on Olivet. Since the State of Israel was established in 1948, the generation that witnessed this would also see the end. A generation was thought to be a period of roughly 40 years and so, many in our church believed that Jesus would come no later than sometime in 1988. It is now 2018 and it has not happened yet. Clearly, the folks in my church back in the 70's had gotten it wrong somehow. But notice that Jesus did not say that one of the signs that would start the prophetic clock was the re-establishment of the State of Israel in the Holy Land. He did say that the three prophetic signs were the preaching of the gospel in all the world as a witness to all the nations, the final fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy of the abomination of desolation and third, the darkening of the sun so that the moon no longer shines and the falling of the stars out of the heavens. One conclusion from this experience should be that it is unwise to attach what Jesus did say with something He did not say and on that basis come to a conclusion about the timing of His return.

Finally, Jesus gave a word of caution, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only." The disciples had asked the natural question, "When will these things be?" It is the question that we would all like to have answered for us. We want to know what is going to happen and when. So, while at the same time that Jesus gave us signs that would indicate that the prophetic clock has started and that those who see the beginning of the end will also see the end of the end, He has also cautioned us that no one can know when these things will be, only the Father knows. Some have taken Jesus' words too literally saying something like well, Jesus said that no one can know the day or the hour but that doesn't mean that we can't know the month and the year. What follows such thinking is always a prediction that inevitably turns out to be wrong. If it were important or even helpful for us to have the answer to the question of when, then no doubt, God would have provided that answer. But, He knows better. As you know, Rita has been gone to New York helping Steve and Natalia for these last three weeks. She was supposed to get home yesterday but

she called and they cancelled her flight due to the weather and so she is coming on the same flight today. Either way, I have known the when about Rita's return. Now before she left she gave me some instructions. The bathrooms and the floors were to be cleaned twice a week and since we were low on certain cleaning products, I was to be sure to go down to Smart and Final and replace them so that these important assignments could be completed. But, I have known the date of Rita's planned return for the entire time that she has been gone. Consequently, for the first two weeks that she was gone, cleaning the bathrooms and the floor has not been a priority. I have been certain that we could get these tasks done in the last week before she returns. At the time she left our yard was in a kind of sorry state. I did nothing about it for over two weeks but when it was clear that her return was soon, I said, "Hey Vince, would you have a chance this week to come over and clean up our yard?" When Rita gets home she's going to be amazed by our neat yard and impressed by clean floors and bathrooms and if she wanted me to keep these things up constantly she shouldn't have told me the date of her return ahead of time. God does want us to keep these things up constantly and so He has not told us the date of His return ahead of time. He wants us to be ready at all times for His return. But what does this look like? Come back next week! We'll talk about it.