

"Christ's Return – The Hope Of The Ages"

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Today I would like to begin a short series focusing on the return of Jesus Christ to this earth. Of one thing I am certain: the problems of this world will not be solved till Jesus comes back. The belief of Jesus' soon coming is central to our belief system, and well it should be. The teaching of the Second Advent is one of the most emphasized doctrines in Scripture; being referred to on average once in every twenty-five verses. We want to let the Bible inform us as to the What, the Why, the How, the Who and the When of this great event. It's important, because Satan will engineer deceptions which will mislead all those who are not grounded in the truths of the Word.

This morning our study is coming from the very powerful thirty-third chapter of Isaiah, whose ministry covered the period of time between 750 and 690 B.C. The message the Lord gave Isaiah contained warnings to Israel and Judah, who had apostatized from their high calling. God had "prepared a place" for them in the land of promise, and had gently led them to Canaan. He had covenanted with them to protect them and bless them, if they would love and obey Him. But, as a whole, the nation had rebelled and often fell into patterns of idolatry. All forms of evil, including unrestrained greed, prolific violence, and sensual immorality characterized the nation which had been called to be holy.

Repeatedly God had counseled them to return to Him, warning them that if they continued to reject Him they would be forfeiting His presence and protection, and they would not be able to stand before their enemies. First the Assyrians came against the northern kingdom of Israel and Samaria fell in 722 B.C. Then Babylon, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, came against Judah, and

Jerusalem succumbed to his war machines. From the Lord's point of view, these measures were meant to be corrective and disciplinary.

To correctly understand the Old Testament, we must see that the attack of the enemy, such as Nebuchadnezzar, in Old Testament vocabulary, was called the "*day of the Lord*." Even though it was a human instrumentality, such as Babylon or Assyria that came against His people, because it was done under the watchful eye and permission of God, the event was called the "*day of the Lord*." In the "big picture" view, it was because their disobedience had driven God and His protecting hand away from them, that the enemy was *allowed* to come. From this perspective, Daniel opens his book by saying "The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand." Daniel 1:2. What theology there is in those words! So these messages given by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos and the other prophets had an *immediate application* to circumstances taking place in their lifetime. There was a "day of the Lord" back then.

But, because the issues involved bear a direct connection with the "day of the Lord" that will bring a climactic end to earthly life on this planet, God has, in His wise providence, preserved these messages down to our day. That is how God's messages are constructed; using real events of the past as illustrations for what is yet to come. We look, according to His promise, for **the** "day of the Lord" to come very soon, which will be the all-encompassing event which will swallow up all other illustrations of His grand return.

With that in mind, let's turn to Isaiah and gain the counsel God has for us today. It's a sobering but encouraging report. "The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness has seized the hypocrites: 'who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?'" Isaiah 33:14.

Our passage opens with a picture of people who are surprised, fearful, and filled with questions. Notice that it is

speaking of those who in "Zion." Back when Isaiah wrote this, the term "Zion" was meant in a literal way. The term means "fortress" and refers to the city of Jerusalem captured by King David, long held by the Jebusites. This message is directed to those who lived in Zion; they were "God's people," at least by name, but who are obviously not prepared for what is happening. They are identified as being "sinners" and "hypocrites."

Isaiah's prophecy pointed forward about a hundred years to the time when Nebuchadnezzar would come and burn the city of Jerusalem to the ground, destroying her beautiful temple and protective walls. The problem was that the people of Isaiah's day had cherished the hope that because they were descendants of Abraham, God would never allow something like this to happen. They believed God would never allow the exquisite temple, toward which David had contributed 75 billion dollars in gold, to fall into the hands of the enemy.

But they failed to realize that the Covenant made by the Lord required their participation. It was a two-way street. There were "if" clauses in the contract. They could not go on in habits of sin and expect His continued protection. Moses' last speech to the people before they entered Canaan emphasized this fact (See Deuteronomy 27-32.) Repeatedly the Lord had graciously sent His messengers to remind them of this principle, but the people had to a large degree either ignored or persecuted His emissaries.

The time had come for their actions to give birth to consequences. Though it would pain Him deeply, He would step back and allow the enemy to enter His beloved city. The "day of the Lord" would come as a shock and surprise to those who had confidently boasted that their heritage would save them. Suddenly they would be confronted with the reality of His pronouncements. Those who had practiced sin, while claiming the "name" would find themselves unprepared for this event. That's what Isaiah was talking about when he predicted, "The sinners *in Zion* are afraid."

Though the prophet laid his pen down more than 25 centuries ago, Isaiah speaks to us today in 2008. God has blessed this planet with material as well as spiritual blessings. How has He been repaid? For the most part, the inhabitants of earth have ignored their Benefactor and have pursued their own pleasures. Our world today has ripened in wickedness. Sinful practices considered "normal" today would cause Isaiah's audience to blush.

What is the counterpart today for "Zion"? It's the Christian Church, isn't it? It's those who claim to be residing in the "fortress" ("Zion") of Christ. When that Day comes, and Jesus returns to earth, those who have indulged a lifestyle that denies their Creator, while wearing the label of "Christian" will react in the way ancient Judah did when Nebuchadnezzar conquered. The shallowness of a life spent in selfish endeavor will cause guilt and pain to overwhelm them. They have claimed to be Christ's followers, yet have not walked in the path He trod. Their claim to being "Christian" is exposed for the fallacy that it is. They are the "sinners in Zion," the Church of today, who will be surprised and unprepared when Jesus comes back.

In the day of Isaiah (though the final destruction of Jerusalem didn't take place until 586 B.C., about a century after the prophet's death), the question burst from their lips "who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with the everlasting burnings?" Nebuchadnezzar came and put to flame the prized architecture of Jerusalem. The gorgeous cedar paneling in both temple and palace and Solomon's fabled "House of the Forest of Lebanon" (I Kings 7:2) were all kindling for the soldiers' torches. Their question was basically, "Who can survive this? Who can live through this?"

So it will be in the ultimate "Day of the Lord." Revelation presents the question of the unprepared this way. "Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of its place. And the kings of the earth,

the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him Who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and *who is able to stand?*'" Revelation 6:14-17.

Characteristics of the Survivor

Isaiah had an answer to the question, "who would survive?" (Incidentally, Revelation gives the answer to the question in Revelation 7 and 14.) He gives us the encouragement that *it is possible to please God and be ready* when Jesus returns. Do you want to be a "survivor"? It will mean the difference between eternal life and eternal death then.

Here is how the Bible describes what our lives should be like. The answer is given in poetic form, with three sets of couplets.

"He who walks righteously
And speaks uprightly,

He who despises the gain of oppressions,
Who gestures with his hands refusing bribes,

Who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed,
And shuts his eyes from seeing evil." Isaiah 33:15.

Who is the one who would survive the "day of the Lord?" The one who "walks righteously *and* speaks uprightly." That's a very critical "and" in the sentence! What does the Bible mean when it refers to our "walk"? "Walk," in the Scriptures almost always refers to our lifestyle, our behavior, our way of living. Notice that the "survivor" is one whose "walk" is reflected by his or her "talk." The "walk" and the "talk" are complementary, not contradictory. Jesus said that by the mouth of two or three witnesses let all things be confirmed. When the "witness" of the

“talk” and the “walk” agree, then the message will have power. That’s why Jesus’ preaching had so much impact; there was nothing in His life that disagreed with His messages.

When the “talk” is not backed up by the “walk,” then the candle flickers uncertainly. It’s not adhering to that formula that brings hypocrisy. What comes out of the lip should be matched by what is revealed in the life. This was the complaint of our Savior when He was on earth, wasn’t it. The religious leaders of His time “said” but “did not.” Talk is cheap. We need to live out the principles of the Kingdom as well as confess them with our mouth. Someone said, “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day.”

What else can we learn about those who survive? The next couplet discusses the Christian’s life in the business world. “He who despises the gain of oppressions, who gestures with his hands, refusing bribes.” Every business dealing, every interaction must bear the scrutiny of Heaven. Are we employing the golden rule in our transactions? Do we love our brother, our sister as ourselves when we conduct transactions?

Back in Isaiah’s day, “grinding of the poor” was commonplace. If a person, by reason of strategic posturing, could take advantage of his brother in business, he did. Short-changing someone was the rule of the day. The Lord denounced the unjust balance. Amos cried out against all who made “the ephah (a unit of dry measurement) small and the shekel large, falsifying the balances by deceit.” Amos 8:5. All such deception was condemned by God.

Today is no different. You hear the phrase, “Don’t take it personally, it’s just business.” Jesus looks to see if those who bear His name reflect His character in the small details of their lives. Is the error of the cashier pointed out when you’re overpaid? Is a fair and equitable result the objective in your commerce? Do the eight hours you report really contain eight hours of work? Honesty and truth are the foundation of His habitation.

The next couplet reads "Who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed, and shuts his eyes from seeing evil." What is our reaction to someone who wants to share a juicy morsel of gossip? Do we demonstrate that Christ's love is in our hearts, the agape love which "thinks no evil and does not rejoice in iniquity"? Is that what we expect to do in Heaven, gather around the Tree of Life and peddle a tasty tidbit of gossip? Of course not!

This passage also speaks loudly to our current culture which is insatiate with violence. The screens, whether theater, television or computer are stained by the blood of countless heinous crimes.

Do we not know that it was violence like this that brought about the world's destruction by flood in Noah's day? Do we not realize that God is trying to prepare us to live in heaven where there is no bloodshed nor killing, and that by gorging our minds with crimes of blood we are working against God's intent to fit us to live with angels? Do we not know that by feeding the brain with the scenes of evil we are being influenced by these pictures? Do we not know that by allowing our children to nurse on violence (cartoons and video games can be among the most violent portrayals of all) we are desensitizing them to evil, and conditioning them to that way of life as being normal? Do we not see that those who digest such literature often act out those very behaviors in life, where the effects are real and permanent?

Do not fall into the trap of saying, "I'm strong enough so that this will have no influence over me." The brain is not constructed that way! What we allow to enter our heads will have its bearing; the seeds sown will bear fruit. Solomon asked, "Can a man take fire to his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?" Proverbs 6:27. Today he would inquire, "Can you take the pictures of evil into your heart and not be affected?" In God's eyes there is little difference between practicing evil personally and enjoying the portrayal of others doing it. Paul had words of warning for not only those "who practice such things," but also those who "approve of those who practice them." Romans 1:32.

Oh yes, I know that Hollywood hides under the cloak of "free speech" and claims that her images are only reflections of life, but don't be deceived. Those images of carnage bear an influence, and the film makers of today will have an stupendous account to answer for in that Day. They are prostituting themselves by selling filth for a dollar.

The Christian, the survivor, will close his or her ears and eyes from such worthless and damaging material. Our minds are the most precious things we own. It is through the mind that God speaks to our hearts. Let us not barricade the door to our soul by the garbage of the world. Satan has skillfully designed to divert and corrupt the minds of mankind by the splash of bloodshed and cruelty. To his temptations, to the addicting intoxicant of violence, in the words of Nancy Reagan, "Just say no." Who will be the one to survive? It will be the one who "stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed, and shuts his eyes from seeing evil."

How will God care for His faithful child in that time? "He will dwell on high; his place of defense will be the fortress of rocks; bread will be given him, his waters will be sure." God promises to protect and nourish those who put their trust in Him. The day will come when all earthly supports are taken away, but the God of Elijah Who fed him by the stream and at the home of widow, will not leave His faithful ones destitute. It may not be the rich diet we've been accustomed to, but it will be as manna from heaven for the one who has followed Christ at all cost.

Is it a good idea to have a supply of food and water on hand in case of emergency? Yes. But don't think that we will be able to store up food that will accommodate us through the "time of trouble such as never was" (Daniel 12:1). Store up the promises of God in your mind. Learn to lean on Him. What we need most of all is unbreakable confidence in Him that will survive through any circumstance. He has promised, and He will deliver.

The next verse is one of the most striking in the entire Bible. "Your eyes will see the King in his beauty; they will see the land that is very far off." Isaiah 33:17. Job confessed, "This I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, Whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me. Job 19:26, 27.

We have little concept of what it will be like to behold God, for in our mortality and His mercy He has shielded His glory. Jesus became God in the flesh, and His radiance was hidden within His humanity. He didn't come "in His beauty" when He was born in Bethlehem. In fact, this same Isaiah said that during His sojourn on earth, "He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is *no beauty* that we should desire Him." Isaiah 53:2. Those who knew Him then did not see Him in His beauty, with the possible exception of a brief and incomplete example on the Mount of Transfiguration which was observed by a select trio.

If you lived in Jerusalem back then, Jesus could have walked by and you might not have noticed; He would have resembled most any other man. The Lord designed it that way, so that people would be attracted by His character of love, and not the splendor of His appearance. His glory was encrypted; in Him there was "no beauty that we should desire Him" for that reason.

In this life we must grow in faith, and so God has hidden His glory. But such will not be the case then. Then "faith" will become "sight." The curtain that restrains will be removed. Said our brother Paul, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, *but then face to face.*"

I Corinthians 13:12. He will come "to be gloried in His saints and *to be admired* among all those who believe." II Thessalonians 1:10. Said Christ, The Son of man will come "*in His glory.*" Matthew 25:31.

Isaiah wrote that we would see Him "in His beauty." Sometimes there are words in the Bible that, because of context, we are forced to take in a figurative or symbolic way. This is not

one of those. This we can understand at face value. We don't often hear about the "beauty" of God. And it's true; we are attracted to God because of His loving character. But make no mistake about it; to behold His glory, His beauty, His splendor will be an experience that will surmount anything words could describe.

Try to conjure the most beautiful thing you've ever seen in life. Maybe for someone that would a breath-taking snow-capped mountain scene. Maybe some have witnessed the famed *aurora borealis*, the flashing neon of "northern lights." Whatever image you can call to mind that represents



"beauty" will be eclipsed by the beauty of the King on that day! That will be the privilege of the redeemed, to "see His face." Those counted worthy by His grace will bask in the radiance of His brilliance, which outshines the sun. They will see the King *in His beauty*, and "behold the land that is very far off."

Jesus will transport His bride to His Father's house, where He has prepared a home for His beloved. Oh, what a day that will be! Oh, to be sheltered in His arms and know the assurance of His love! Oh, to be among the ones who see Him in His beauty and live eternally with Him! Will you give your life to Him today, and make His coming the focal point of your life?