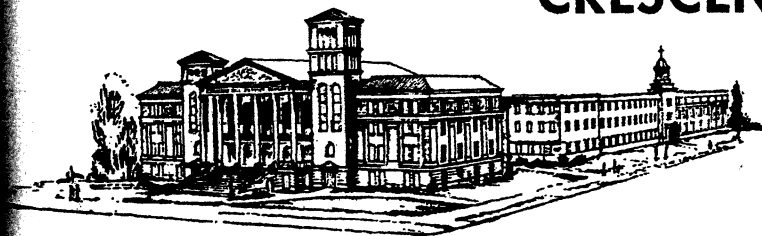


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS"

Sunday Evening - May 7, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
John R. Claypool

On the night of March 21st, 1843, a most unusual drama was being played out. A sizable crowd had gathered in Low Hampton, New York, for this was the time that Jesus was supposed to return. At the center of the activity was a preacher named William Miller. He was the one who had made the prediction, and it was through his zealous efforts that this movement began. Some of the people had given their property away. Some of them were dressed in flowing white robes. Others climbed on the roofs of barns that they might sooner meet their Lord as He returned in the air. The appointed hour was midnight, and as it approached, excitement reached a fine pitch. But it came and went, as did the early morning hours, and by the time the sun rose, the disillusioned crowd scattered amid the jeers of a drunkard to go home to a late breakfast.

This is not the only example of an attempted prediction of the end of the world. Men have always seemed vulnerable to this temptation, and it would take many volumes to record all the efforts in this regard. And I expect this kind of extremism partly accounts for our modern neglect of the subject. How long has it been since you heard a sermon on the second coming? When the Beams came out this week, a good friend saw the sermon topic for tonight and expressed great surprise. And I reflected back through my experience and realized I had heard virtually nothing on this subject. I think we have allowed one extreme to drive us to the other. Martin Luther once observed that humanity is like a drunkard who falls off his horse on the left side; remounts, and then falls off on the right side. So we have let a few extremists scare us out of a sane consideration of the matter. Despite the "modern silence," this tenet is an obvious part of the Biblical record, and thus I feel we have a double constraint to interpret this doctrine.

As I consider all the maze of material that pertains to the second coming of Christ, there are three certainties which clearly emerge. These are by no means original with me; these are the conclusions I feel any fair-minded student would reach.

The first certainty is the fact of His return. This promise is found repeatedly on the lips of Jesus. He told the high priest: "Hereafter shall you see the Son of Man....coming in the clouds of heaven" (Acts 1:11). This strain of belief runs throughout the New Testament, and is adjudged part of the "pillar" passages even by the Form Critics.

Now the language here is admittedly apocalyptic. The images and terminology are drawn from a certain class of writings that are at times quite far-fetched. And this is perhaps the source of our problem. We no longer think in apocalyptic terms, nor do we live in a "three-story universe." However, to throw out a whole

truth just because the form of expression has changed is quite dangerous. I feel that in these images we have a basic truth that transcends any particular vehicle of expression. We are dealing here with God's control of history, and the doctrine of the second coming means that He who began this whole process is going to bring it to an end. All of the images of cosmic catastrophes are a way of saying that man is not the sole actor in history. The end will come as a mighty inbreak from above. All the powers under God's control will participate in this final act. Thus, this doctrine is not just a relic of antiquated eschatology - current in the first century but irrelevant for today. It is the medium by which we are told that God will complete His purpose on the stage of history.

In our wholesale neglect of this matter, I feel we have demonstrated some "fuzzy thinking." A story with a plot has to have an ending. If something is begun for a purpose, then it must reach some climax. We have believed in divine creation, acknowledged God's activity in history, but ignored the necessary corollary that a fitting ending must follow. Those of you who are familiar with drama know that it is not at all unusual for the author to appear on the stage at the end of his play. This is precisely the meaning of the second coming. We are dealing here basically, not with outdated images, but a concept of God. If He is truly the Sovereign of history, then the fact to which this doctrine points is a logical necessity. That Jesus will come again means that God will finish what He has started.

The second certainty is equally clear: Man cannot know when this will take place. Jesus Himself professed ignorance: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matthew 24:36). Here, then, is the certainty of uncertainty; we cannot possibly predict the schedule of this happening.

I have already alluded to ill-fated attempts in this regard, and confess that this is the point where the greatest problems arise. It is frankly quite puzzling to me how people who profess to believe the Bible are so blind to this teaching. They will accept on the authority of the written word the fact of Jesus' coming. And then they will turn right around and contradict its clear warning by trying to speculate on chronology. I heard Hyman Appleman preach a scorching sermon on the return of Christ and predict absolutely that it would happen within five years; that was in 1951. I guess he is still using the same approach, and doing so in the context of Biblical authority. But this is in error. The idea of uncertainty is both explicit and implicit in the New Testament. It is clearly stated by Jesus, and used as a motif for any number of parables. Thus, beware of anyone who claims to have pinpointed the date, or who is obsessed with charts and calendars. Most of the millennial programs are the work of men's fertile imagination, and simply distract men from the main stream of the Gospel. I frankly suspect those whose sole interest is in the future. As G. K. Chesterton said so well: "Some who are so familiar with the 'last things' are oblivious to the 'first things.' They know the 'last word' about everything and the 'first word' about nothing." It was not intended for us to spend all our time in idle speculation about the unknown future. Paul wrote scathing words to those in Thessalonica who let their interest in the future undermine their present activity. Therefore, beware of the "predictors." Alongside the certainty that Jesus will return is the certainty that we cannot know when. Both are clearly taught in the New Testament, so in accepting one accept the other.

The third certainty follows as a logical conclusion: We must be constantly alert. Jesus always admonished His disciples to "watch and pray." He told innumerable parables, the moral of which was: "Be prepared." He warned that the End would come in the midst of the normal pattern: "war and rumors of war, eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage." He said plainly it will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night.

I heard once of some Scottish ministers who were eating supper together. One of them began to poll the group with this question: "Do you honestly think Jesus will come tonight?" As they went around the room, each one answered in the negative. And then the questioner said: "You know, He just might, for He said He would come when you think not." There will be no obvious warning. It will come as an unanticipated inbreak.

This uncertainty has great moral significance. It calls for "eternal vigilance." All seminary students are acquainted with "the power of the pop test." The twin facts that it will happen and that you do not know just when create a certain necessity: that you be ready every day. And this is the tension in which the Church must live.

I do not conceive of this stimulation solely in terms of fear. I know it is sometimes used in this way, but I question its value. Rather, I think of it as an abiding certainty with which I must reckon. An eighty-year-old man may not fear death in the sense of living on the edge of constant fright; yet he would be unwise not to consider its possibility and order his affairs accordingly. He would be foolish to buy a house with a thirty-year mortgage or otherwise involve himself for the distant future. This is not the emotion of fear as much as living in the presence of Reality. And foolish is the person of any age who does not set his life in this context. We know not what tomorrow brings. Therefore, each day should be lived as if it could be the last, and no significant decision put off that can be made today. What death will be for the individual, the second coming will be for the race, and all of our lives are bounded by "the uncertainty" of one or the other.

There is much more that can be said about this great subject. We can argue for a long time on many details of this problem, and I hope you will make a thorough study of it. But in the midst of all the neglect and misunderstanding, at least three certainties emerge for me: One, Jesus will come again and the story of this planet will be brought to a climax by its Author; two, the exact time of this event is not and cannot be known; three, we must be eternally vigilant, for it could be ten thousand years from now, or next month, or tomorrow, or tonight, before you get home! Thus, not in fear but in realism, I suggest you get and stay prepared!