



Back to God Hour

WATCH!

DENOMINATIONAL BROADCAST
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OF AUSTRALIA

WATCH!

"Watch."

Mark 13:37

In 1883, when Mount Krakatoa erupted in Indonesia, 36,000 people died. That eruption was the most calamitous in history. Running a close second was the eruption of Mount Pelée on the West Indian islands of Martinique; 30,000 died when it erupted in this century. There have been other disastrous volcanoes also which have terrified mankind. Mount Saint Helens, in one of the most beautiful regions of North America, though it has not yet begun to kill thousands of people, has put the fear of God into many.

Speaking of this volcano, *Newsweek* magazine concluded a feature article with a curious mixture of old-fashioned modernity and quaint scriptural prose. It said:

[Mount Saint Helens] may lie dormant for centuries, it may erupt again with little warning.

• In either case, what it wrought . . . will not be soon forgotten: a sudden flash of apocalypse now, a humbling reminder that nature's menace can be even greater than man's.

Excuse me for calling modernity "old-fashioned," but given the display of raw power spewing from the center of the earth, the modern, cool, dispassionate description of our Earth seems about to go out of fashion. And the reference to the apocalypse is a reference which some of us still recognize as a reference to the last book of the Bible, usually called *Revelation*, but also called "The Apocalypse." In this book there is a description of the incomprehensible fury of man and God that will sweep over our poor earth when the curtain comes down on human history. And it is a fury that is carefully controlled, even orchestrated, by the Almighty whose patience with mankind's follies finally runs out, and the horror of divine judgment falls like rain on all mankind and upon the demons of the underworld. So the newsmagazine used the word *apocalypse* to describe the scorching fires of Mount Saint Helens, but then it backed away from the Bible's language and spoke

only of "nature's menace" in contrast to man's.

Among the reactions to the volcano's massive display of murderous power, there were many comments suggesting that the encounter with Mount Saint Helens had left no one unmoved. The governor of the volcano state, Dr. Dixy Lee Ray, went so far as to say, "It kind of makes you feel humble. It kind of makes you feel small." That in itself is quite an admission from a woman who was groomed for her job by long association with an agency which has promoted the use of nuclear power.

A mountain climber who observed the side of the mountain blow up from a vantage point that was far too close told how he was reminded of pictures he had seen of the end of the world. David Crockett, a photographer, was reduced to religious language as he was suddenly engulfed by a billowing cloud of mountain ash; he said:

I can hear the mountain rumbling behind me. I feel the ash in my eyes. Oh dear God, this is hell. . . it's a black hell, totally pitchblack . . .

Dear God, help me breathe, I can't see a thing.

Most likely many of those whose bodies were later found covered with ashes cried much the same before they were finished by poison gases or were choked to death by the acrid fumes.

One woman, Linda Belmire, said:

It was like one of those biblical epics. You felt overwhelmed. You felt like falling down on your knees and covering your face.

Indeed, one wonders if it is proper to respond to the volcano's interruption in our lives by speaking simply of "nature's menace." There is something apocalyptic about events such as these, and to say that is to recognize that somehow, somewhere behind all of the rumbling, exploding, and erupting of our Earth's surface, there is the controlling power of Almighty God who uses events such as these to bring judgment. Surely, anyone who is the least bit familiar with the way the Bible talks about things like these would have to recognize that the Bible is very outspoken about the fact that one of these days everything is simply going to blow up. It won't be just a volcano here or there, but it will be a total

devastation of the entire Earth, even of the universe.

Thinking about Mount Saint Helens (and Mount Krakatoa and Mount Pelée) brings into focus some very impressive words found in The Second Letter of Peter in the New Testament. They are words which responded to the fact that followers of Christ were becoming impatient at His not returning sooner, and sometimes they were embarrassed when their friends would ask them what in the world was delaying Him. This is what we read, then, in response to this impatience:

You must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days. . . saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation." They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago, and an earth formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up (2 Peter 3:3-10).

You see, biblical language like that encourages us to move beyond a simple natural explanation for volcanoes, and earthquakes, and other natural disasters to see that with all of these God is telling us something; He is reminding us of something that is going to come. Compared to the great day when the very elements will be dissolved with fire, as the

Apostle Peter says, the natural calamities that occasionally send fire storms swirling through mountain forests are nearly insignificant. Mount Saint Helens is a reminder that the end is surely coming.

What should our reaction be to this awesome fact? Just before Jesus went to the cross, He told His followers exactly how they should react to the fact that the end was coming. The Gospel of Mark, chapter thirteen, contains important information for us in this regard. And I might say that the Gospels of Matthew and of Luke have information on this subject, too; for our purposes now we will briefly review Mark 13 because it contains useful information in somewhat condensed form.

This chapter contains an extended record of a statement Jesus made to His disciples about two events: the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Earth which would be accompanied by the return of Jesus on the clouds of heaven. Jesus' statements about these terrifying events came as His disciples called His attention to the splendid temple in Jerusalem which loomed over the landscape as Jesus and His followers walked eastward from the city and ascended the slopes of the Mount of Olives. The disciples' comments about the temple were certainly appropriate, for this building which Herod the Great had built for the people was one of the architectural triumphs of that age with gold-covered facades and massive, gleaming, white stone walls. But Jesus, in response to His disciples' comments, announced that the day would soon come when not one stone would be left on another. The temple would be so thoroughly destroyed that its exact location would be lost forever to following generations.

Reacting to Jesus' ominous announcement, the disciples asked Jesus what signs would warn them that this was about to occur. And it was in answer to this question that He spoke to them of the signs that would happen before the temple would be destroyed and the city laid in ruin. As it turned out, this destruction was realized in A.D. 70, when the soldiers of the Roman army carried out Jesus' prophecy. And along with information about the signs of this destruction, Jesus told them, and He now tells us,

about the end of the age—when He is coming back.

Speaking about this end of the age, Jesus used language which is similar in some ways to the language we looked at a few moments ago from the book of Second Peter. Peter spoke of a universe-wide destruction and emphasized the fiery quality of the ordeal that was going to convulse creation in cosmic death throes. Jesus, as He talked with His disciples, said:

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mark 13:24-27).

Now, information like that is startling. And the most natural reaction is, When is this going to happen? Isn't this the question that rises almost automatically in one's mind? If it's going to happen tomorrow, for example, then there is no use finishing the work I have today—tomorrow it will all be destroyed. If it is going to happen before the year is up, I might as well wind up what I am doing, too, and spend what money I have left and enjoy myself somewhat before the stars start falling. This is the question—the question *when*—which came automatically to the disciples' lips when Jesus told them about the destruction of Jerusalem. And this is the question we ask, too, when we learn that Mount Saint Helens is a mini version of what is going to happen when the entire Earth blows up. When, Lord, is all this going to happen?

Jesus concludes Mark 13 by talking about this very matter. This is what He says:

“But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his

work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch” (vv. 32-37).

There is something exasperating about Jesus' statement here. In response to our curiosity about when the end will occur, He places a double fact before us. One half of this fact is the fact that it is impossible for us to know when the end is going to come. He said that the angels of heaven don't know, that He didn't know, that no one knows. No one knows. This is a simple declaration, but it is important for us to pause just a moment to examine it.

No one knows the day or the hour of the end of time, of the coming of the Son of man, of the destruction of the Earth. No one. And this is worth remembering because it often happens that religious leaders will appear on the scene and announce that they know when it is going to be. There have been instances of groups of people gathering on a hilltop to await the return of Jesus Christ because someone told them it had been figured out just exactly when and where He was going to appear. Some of these groups of people have retreated from the hilltop with embarrassment and have recalculated the figures or have reinterpreted them.

Perhaps we should also remind one another that just because the millennium is now drawing to a close (many of us may live to see the year 2,000) does not mean that the world will end when the new millennium will dawn. There was an apocalyptic expectation in the air when this millennium started; there often is when there is a change in the century. And the year 2,000 has a special attractiveness as a good date to end human history. It's a nice round figure, and it is about the same distance this side of Jesus Christ's ministry as Abraham was on the other side of Jesus Christ. Well, these kinds of calculations are beside the point. You may have a feeling in your bones that the world is going to end on January 1, 2000, but that's all it is: a feeling in your bones. No

one knows.

That is one half of the double fact which Jesus announced in connection with the end of time. The second half is that though no one knows, there is One who does. I know this seems contradictory. But Jesus tells us that the Father knows both the day and the hour. He knew these when Jesus talked with His disciples, and He knows them now. I think it is possible that Jesus may know this fact now, too, though He didn't know it when He talked with His disciples.

So there you have it: No one knows when the end is coming, but it is most certainly coming. The very date and the very hour were set already in the mind of the Father when Jesus spoke to His disciples on the mountainside. Sometimes we are given the impression by science that the universe will someday be destroyed by great physical, natural events caused by forces within the universe. Possibly the sun will finally give out, and total darkness will engulf everything; possibly the great explosion that we are told gave birth to the universe will finally lose its outward pushing power, and the universe will fall in upon itself. But we are told that such an end is still a couple of billion years away, so we don't have to worry too much yet. But the Bible talks about this subject differently.

The Bible tells us that the time of the end is set, and it is going to happen within the experience of humankind. God is in control of these matters, not a blind nature that plunges along toward the awesome day of its great self-destruction. The day is coming when the stars are going to fall, as Jesus said, when the fire is going to engulf everything, as Jesus' apostle said. The day is coming when Jesus Christ Himself is going to come back with His glorious angels. It will be a terrifying day; it will be a glorious day.

Now, Jesus is very specific about the way we should react to this great double fact: that no one knows when the end of the age will happen, but it will most surely happen—and the day and hour are already set. Jesus said, "You have to watch." And then He told a very homely, little story about a man who went away on a journey, leaving his home in charge of his servants. He had assigned work to each

and put the doorkeeper at the gate on watch. Just as those servants would naturally keep busy with their assignments because they didn't know when their master was going to come back, so, too, those who believe what Jesus says to them about the coming end must keep busy with their assignments.

The end of the world is coming, Jesus is coming back; we don't know when, but we do know for certain that these events will happen. Therefore, we must be on watch. And being on watch means keeping at one's work. When I worked on the night shift in the factory, we always kept working because our boss had the habit of coming around at very unexpected times. Only part of the plant was working those nights, and sometimes in the pressroom there would be light only in one corner of the working area. Here and there throughout the plant men were working on special jobs considered important enough to get out during the night. It was a skeleton crew, with one night foreman overseeing the entire plant. He could come at any time; and he did come at any time. He was a very good man, kind and fair and always having a word of encouragement. But the habit he had of coming around at any time was very effective; we kept working.

The great double fact that Jesus revealed concerning the end of the world—that no one knows when it will happen, but that it will surely happen at exactly the appointed time—is a fact that is designed to wake us up and keep us alert. It would be wrong to conclude from what Jesus has said that since we don't know when the end of the world is coming, we might as well forget it. No. The great signs in nature such as the eruption of killer volcanoes remind us that there is a terrible day coming which we must be prepared to experience. We must watch, and watching in this instance means being busy with the work of the Lord. Watching does not mean dropping everything and camping out on a hillside somewhere with one's eyes on the clouds. Watching, according to the brief parable Jesus told, means being active in the work of God.

So then, while the ashes of the great volcanoes drift westward around the world, what should we do

as we wait the final dissolving of the universe? The work of the Lord—what is it? Well, first of all, the work of the Lord is simply believing the gospel which we find in the Bible. Once when Jesus was asked, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:28,29).

As we stand on the slopes of today's volcanoes and feel the straining earth rumble beneath our feet and we remind one another that there is a day coming when everything in the universe will become unstable and dangerous, we had better believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. You must believe that what the Bible tells you about Him is the truth: He is the Son of God, He died for human sin, He rose from the dead and is going to come again. When Jesus comes back those who do not believe in Him will be terrified—Jesus told how they would call for the mountains to fall on them and shield them from the calamity that was coming (Luke 23:30). But for those who believe in Jesus, along with all the terror there will be a brilliant happiness as Jesus comes back and enters into new fellowship with His people.

In Luke 12, we find a description of the joyous celebration which will occur when Christ comes back to His waiting and watching people:

"Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes; truly, I say to you, he will gird himself and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them" (v. 37).

It will be a gloriously happy time for those who believe in Jesus. And if you do not yet believe in Him, you should know that God has given us information about the coming of His Son and the destruction of our world in order to jolt you into realizing that you must believe in Him. You must surrender yourself to Him as He comes to you at this very moment so that when He comes back you will participate in His coming as a believer, not as an unbeliever.

The work of the Lord—what is it? It is believing in Jesus. And it is living in obedience to the will of

Jesus. What does He want you to do? He wants you to live purely. He wants you to live honestly. He wants you to live lovingly.

There is a way of life described in the Bible that is good and wholesome and God-honoring. Christian people express it as they do their ordinary work, in business, in the factory, on the road—whatever they do, they work diligently, conscientiously, and faithfully. The book of Second Thessalonians which is dominated by a vision of Jesus' return talks about the necessity of simply working hard at ordinary tasks and doing a good job. It speaks about the day when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus (1:7,8).

Such language is followed by commanding us to work quietly and to earn our own living (3:12).

Living in a Christian way as a single person—this is what it means to watch for Jesus' return. Living in marriage with your wife or husband as a Christian—this is what it means to watch. Being a Christian father or a Christian mother to your children, bringing them up in the fear of the Lord—this is what it means to watch.

Watching for Jesus' return means working at establishing His rule even now. I know people who are working very hard for Christian education; I know people who are working very hard to establish the claims of Jesus in political life; I know people who are working very hard to establish the claims of Christ in labor and business—all this is watching for the Master's return. Those who know that the world is going to end and that Christ is coming back know that they must be busy at their assignments, doing everything in the name of Jesus.

At this very moment, high, high above you in the rarefied atmosphere of the Earth there floats the fine ash of the volcanoes—of those that have erupted in this century and of those that have erupted centuries ago. Someday everything is going to explode and be destroyed. And then there will be no doubting Jesus anymore. All the words He spoke will be established

before our startled eyes.

Are you ready for that day? True, it might happen after you have died. Even so, you will not escape it. One way or another, God has arranged that every person who has walked the surface of this earth will see it. Believe in Jesus, work for Him, and watch for His coming. If you do that, that terror-filled day will turn out to be the best day of your life.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to listen when you speak to us, in the Bible and also in the earth-shattering power of the volcano. Remove the hardness of our hearts which can so easily make us insensitive to the very obvious message you bring. Fill our souls with fear as we remind one another that there is a great and terrible day coming, and we must now prepare ourselves for it.

Teach us what it means to watch. May we be busy doing the work of the Lord, so that when He comes back, He will find His people doing the work He has given them to do. Use this very message to accomplish your great work by making it an instrument which will convert and change many lives. Prepare us, Lord Jesus, for your certain coming. And please come quickly. Amen.

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