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Luke 17:34–35 ESV

³⁴ I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. ³⁵ There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left.”

The (Spiritual) Second Coming: *Can we overcome the world?*

We recently celebrated the arrival of Jesus on Earth. There is, according to the Bible, a second time that Jesus will appear. We call this the “Second Coming,” when all violence and hatred and suffering will go away for eternity. Here’s something interesting: nowhere in the Bible do we read the actual words “Second Coming”. Nothing even close to this appears in the Bible. The word that is interpreted as referring to the Second Coming in Matthew is the Greek word “*Parousia*”, which simply means “formal arrival” or “official visit” and would have been used to describe a visit by a Roman official, or some other important person, like a king. There are two similar passages in the Gospels, one in Matthew and one in Luke, that describe this *Parousia*, what has traditionally been referred to as a “Second Coming”. The one in Matthew appears near the end of Jesus’ ministry on Earth, just before the plot to kill him. In Chapter 24, we sit with Jesus on the Mount of Olives, as he says:

³⁶ “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

⁴⁵ “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In this passage, the Greek word “*Parousia*” is translated as the word “coming”.

We will look at the Luke version of this shortly. First, though, as a pastor, as a chaplain, as a guy who wears a big cross around his neck and likes to talk about the Bible, I have been asked multiple times what good faith or Christianity is, given that the world is such a mess. One time this was particularly chilling. It was someone who had had a tough life, who had been violently abused and was very depressed about the state of the world today, with wars strewn around the planet and so many people filled with anger and hatred. We’ll call her Ruby. She

was about thirty-five. She said that all Christians could offer was the promise that Jesus would come back again someday and rapture all the good people to Heaven and leave the rest to suffer in the sewage of Earth. I'll get back to this.

Let's consider a version of the Matthew passage in the Gospel of Luke. It is common for the same story to appear in two different Gospels but in somewhat different forms. Remember that the Gospel authors were trying to give a feel for what Jesus said and did - and were not trying to capture speeches word for word. They had no cameras, no microphones. But with respect to these two passages, as is always the case, the two biblical versions convey a common, consistent message. Both Matthew and Luke compare the great flood of the Old Testament with the ultimate arrival of Jesus at the end of time. Just as no one was ready for the great flood, no one will be ready for the grand arrival, or Parousia, of Jesus. Indeed, the neighbors of Noah were having a great time, eating, drinking, marrying each other, doing all the things they did in normal life, while Noah built his boat and warned everyone else that a vast flood was coming. They didn't listen and so they died. This biblical ignorance, as we would interpret it today, doesn't represent physical death: it represents spiritual death. When Jesus arrives – and I will avoid saying “when he comes a second time” because that is not what this passage literally says – *“two men will be in the field; one will be*

taken and one left” and *“two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left”*. Just as those who did not listen to Noah, and were not prepared, disappeared in the flood, those who are not prepared for the royal arrival of Jesus will lose out. The usual reading of this is that those who are prepared will be saved and will go to Heaven, while the unprepared will remain on Earth. But there are scholars, who when they read this story, think that the parallel with the story of Noah is exact: they say that it is the ones who are *not* prepared who will go away when Jesus arrives, while the prepared ones remain on Earth.

These Bible verses deliberately portray people doing simple chores at the time Jesus was living on the earth; the idea is that folks will be going about their daily business, oblivious to the imminent royal arrival of Jesus, just as people at the time of Noah were doing what they did during the course of an average day instead of preparing for another sort of flood. It’s not that they will be sitting around actively laughing at the idea of Jesus coming back. It’s that they will not care or they will be preoccupied by buying and selling, by planting and building. What might we be doing today if Jesus were to arrive? Watching TV? Answering email at work? Defrosting something for dinner? But just as it was disastrous for people to not realize that a gigantic flood was coming, it will be horrendous for those who miss the chance to see Jesus arrive for his official visit.

Here is the version from Luke, Chapter 17. Unlike Matthew, Luke does not use the Greek word Parousia. Instead, he talks of the “*days of the Son of Man*” and Jesus being “revealed”:

²⁶ Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man.

²⁷ They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.

²⁸ Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, ²⁹ but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all— ³⁰ so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. ³¹ On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. ³² Remember Lot’s wife.

³³ Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. ³⁴ I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. ³⁵ There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left.”

In Luke’s version, there is a chilling line: “*there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left*”. This drives home just how individualized salvation will be. There will be married couples, where one person is prepared and the other is not.

I don’t believe that Jesus’ point is as negative as we have interpreted these passages in the past. Keep in mind that the Bible does not talk about a “Second Coming”. The “*Parousia*”, to use the Greek word, isn’t going to be an event where Jesus comes in a wildly wrathful state to condemn and punish those who “remain behind”, while all the good people go flying up into the clouds. No, the

word *Parousia* refers to a grand visit, something meant to grace us, to bestow on us something beautiful. The emphasis is on those who are prepared, those who are ready for the official visit of Jesus. The others, since they did not get themselves prepared, will simply be forgotten. They will be the ones who disappear, in that they will just slip away. And I believe that they will slip away spiritually, not physically. I think that the Book of Revelation, with its modern literal interpretation taken by many Christians, has led us to focus on the creation of a new Earth, a new Jerusalem for the part of humanity that has been saved. Do note the phrase that appears multiple times: *“one will be taken and one left”*. This doesn’t say that the good ones are taken, and the bad ones are left; it could be that the good ones are left, and the bad ones are taken. Maybe there is no new home for the saved. Maybe the righteous will be on Earth, and will save our home, will turn our civilization into something nonviolent, loving, and peaceful. It does seem clear from our two Gospel passages that Jesus will come back to us right here. He won’t be up in the sky somewhere. That’s why there are scholars who believe that the ones who will be left will be the ones who are aware that Jesus is coming. They will stay with their savior and transform humanity spiritually. The others will be forgotten because they are no longer part of our culture. Perhaps the biblical message is that our two passages give us a spiritual

statement, not a literal one. These two Gospels describe the beauty of what we will be able to do when enough people on this planet are spiritually prepared for Jesus. We will as a people welcome God back to Earth and with God's help, transform the Earth. It's not that some people will rapture into the sky while others are stuck in New Jersey forever; it's that some will lose out while others will be ready to spend their time with the Messiah creating a new existence right here. Perhaps we don't have to experience this only at the end of time, when the universe implodes at the completion of the cosmic cycle that physicists say will happen in 33 billion years. We can experience the *Parousia*, the coming of Jesus spiritually and use this experience to rebuild our world.

Our Christian response to this story from the two Gospels isn't that we need to be in a constant state of paranoiac repentance. Our response is that we should live in a way that mimics the values taught to us by Jesus, and that we should live this way every minute of our lives. That's how we keep God within us always. That's how we prepare for the *Parousia*. We remember that Jesus cared for those who had the least, for children, for the poor, for the sick, for those with no power in this world. Jesus taught us that all human life is equally valuable in the eyes of God. He taught us to forgive, to be generous, to bless others in the same way that God blesses us. And we are to be in prayer always. As Christians,

we are called upon to live in a different way than those who paid no attention to Noah as he was building his ark – and that is how we will be transformed spiritually. We don't live in constant fear if we live constantly connected to God via the grace delivered by the Holy Spirit. We live in hope that it won't take Jesus coming at the end of the universe, at the end of time, to snatch all the good people to a better place. It will only take the actions of a reformed humanity.

If we look at our passage from Matthew more closely, we see some suggestions about how we can create a better world. This passage comes near the end of Chapter 24. But right in the middle of it is where Jesus, who is speaking here, on the Mount of Olives, switches from prophesy to giving a bit of practical advice. The switch-over happens on verse 42. Some say that the people who broke the Bible up into Chapters and verses hundreds of years after it was written should have begun Chapter 25 right there, as a way of separating these two kinds of material, instead of putting the verses from 42 onward in Chapter 24.

⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

⁴⁵ "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks

with drunkards, ⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This says that the ones who aren't ready for the coming of our Lord will be sent off to be with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Everyone else, those who are prepared, will be affirmed by their savior. They will do this by taking care of other people in the name of God.

So, what about Ruby, the young woman who was so jaded about the state of humanity and the impotency of Christianity? I suggested that we need enough people on this planet to truly embrace the teachings of Jesus, that this is what the Second Coming is. I said that Judaism teaches us to live in peace, that Buddhism focuses on compassion and harmony. Hinduism teaches the absence of conflict. I told her that Jesus, early in his ministry, in the Gospel of Matthew, at the beginning of his lengthy Sermon on the Mount, tells us exactly what sort of behavior on our part will bring about a proper world:

⁵ Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹ *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

¹⁰ *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

I suggested to Ruby that we’ve been told what will bring about a new Earth, a new humanity, and that is for us to be poor in spirit, in other words to recognize that on our own, we are empty spiritually, that we need God; and to feel a deep sense of mourning for our failings; to be gentle; to fight for righteousness; to be merciful toward those who wrong us; to be sincere and not hypocritical believers; to be proactive peacemakers; and to be willing to be persecuted for standing up for what is right. That’s what those Beatitudes mean. Ruby asked me if I truly thought the day could come when people would behave this way. I said yes. Then she told me about the things that had happened to her in her life, her father abandoning her and her mother when Ruby was three years-old, being assaulted by a boyfriend, having a younger brother paralyzed in a motorcycle accident caused by road rage, and all the while watching news reports and social media posts filled with vicious anger. I told her that even though she is half my age, she has a much better excuse than me for having a defeatist view of humanity. I said, however, that Jesus tells us this in the Gospel of John: *In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*” She thought for a moment and then shrugged and said, well, maybe if we all truly lived like Jesus we could overcome the world.