

With Power

Luke 21:25-28 | September 13, 2020 | Bryce Beale

When Christ first came to earth, he emptied himself of his right to fully employ his divine attributes.

As God, he knew and knows all things; but as a man, he chose to know only what the Father revealed to him or wished him to know. Hence he did not know the time of his own return, as a man.

As God, he was and is everywhere present at all times, and not even highest heaven could or can contain him; but as a man, he chose to be confined to one place.

As God, he possessed and possesses all power and infinite authority; but as a man, he chose to conceal his power and instead to walk in weakness like the rest of us. "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him."¹

When the crooked soldiers came at Judas' heels to arrest our innocent Savior on Mt. Olivet, he could at once have summoned more than twelve legions of angels to dispatch them.² When they asked for Jesus of Nazareth and he replied, "I am he," they "drew back and fell to the ground."³ Here were glimpses of his power, as if he only barely unsheathed his omnipotent sword before drawing it back into its scabbard. As God, he could destroy them; but as a man, he chose to be weak, to be taken and bound and beaten by them, and then crucified for sinners.

If Jesus had chosen not to be weak, you and I could never be saved. He alone could be a sufficient sacrifice for us, perfect in his holiness and unerring in his obedience. He was and only he could be the lamb without blemish. And though possessing in his divine nature a limitless power, he cloaked his might and in human weakness was crucified by lawless men. To alter Athanasius' famous phrase, Jesus came down as a man that we might be lifted up to God.

¹ Is. 53:2 (ESV).

² Matt. 26:53.

³ John 18:5-6.

Therefore in his earthly life we behold the power of God in him, but as if it were the light of a lightning bug, flashing only now and then in a dark field.

The same has been true even now, in the church age between his first and second comings. He ascended into the clouds and sits at the Father's right hand, crowned as king of all and possessing all authority in heaven and on earth; and he has sent the Spirit upon the church to manifest the power of God among us. But still we are the church militant, not the church triumphant. Still we see only the fringes of Christ's power. He repels the gates of hell and is putting all his enemies beneath his feet. But it is a process and appears now only in part.

The world has not yet seen the full power of Christ displayed upon it.

But the world will see this power. The climax of history will be the day when Christ finally unveils his full power, when he comes upon the clouds and purges the earth of all evil, and renews it.

This is our hope. Christ came first in weakness, but when he comes again he will come in power.

We are studying the first coming of Jesus in the gospel of Luke, so we have seen him in his weakness. But today, as he continues his Olivet Discourse, he gives us a foretaste of the power he will display in his second coming.

LUKE 21:25-28

Jesus has been answering in this chapter the question "When?" "When will the temple be destroyed, and when will the world be destroyed?" Those two events are as we have seen closely connected, with the temple's fall in A.D. 70 a shadow and picture of the world's end that is yet to come.

And up to this point Jesus has been telling us the things that will transpire between his first and second coming. There will be political and natural disasters which, like birth pangs, will worsen and worsen in the present age. Gentiles will be saved while Israel will be partially hardened. Believers will be persecuted. And, when the end of the world gets very close, there will be seven years of intense tribulation.

But what happens after those seven years? What happens when Jesus does finally return to earth, at the high point of history, the final birth pangs before the world is reborn? That is what Jesus tells us about today.

So we will see the power of Christ fully displayed at his second coming, and we will see how that display of power is our hope in this chaotic world. But before we do, I need to preface this message with a very brief overview of how Christians have, for the last two thousand years, understood the details of Christ's second coming. We all agree he will come! But we do not agree on every detail.

Let us begin then with an overview of eschatology, or our end time views, and then we will look at Christ's power in the text.

End time views

There are three major ways to put together the details of Christ's return that we find in Scripture. When in Revelation we come to the end of the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls of wrath—when in other words we come to the end of the end—we find a final great event in Revelation 20, before the new heaven and earth are described in chapters 21 and 22.

Let me read for you how John describes this concluding event:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection.

Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.⁴

After this thousand years, Satan is released and he gathers the unbelieving world against Christ and his saints. But Christ defeats them, casts the devil into the lake of fire, and sits upon a great white throne judging the living and the dead. Thus ends Revelation, and thus ends the history of this present age.

The three major views of the end understand this last great event, this thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, differently. And since we call a thousand years a “millennium,” the three views have this word in their name.

The first of these views we call “amillennialism”—the “a” at the beginning means “no” or “not.” Amillennialists believe there is no future millennium where Christ reigns on earth, but instead Revelation 20 is talking about the present age. Believers are reigning right now with Christ in heaven, and the thousand years are just a figurative number for a long time. Satan is bound right now because his influence has been constrained. And when this age ends, Christ will return to rescue his people and to judge his enemies. Many of our Presbyterian brothers and sisters are amillennialists.

The second of these views is “postmillennialism.” “Post” means after, so “after the thousand years”—because they do believe in a future millennium, after which Christ will return. Postmillennialists, like amillennialists, may see the thousand years as figurative for a long period of time. But unlike amillennialists, postmillennialists believe that in this present age Christianity will grow and have more and more influence over the world, until finally we transition into a period of time that is the millennium. After that period, Christ will return to rescue believers and judge his enemies. Several of the Puritans were postmillennialists, as was Jonathan Edwards, though there are not a lot of postmillennialists today.

The final view is called “premillennialism.” In this view, Christ returns to earth “pre,” or “before,” the millennium. At Faith Bible Church we are premillennialists, and we are also what is called

⁴ Vv. 1-6.

pretribulational premillennialists. In other words, we believe that the current age will get worse and worse until suddenly and unexpectedly Christ will return and snatch up, or “rapture,” his people to himself in the clouds. After this will follow seven years of tribulation, as we have been talking about in Luke 21. Since Christ comes to get us before the tribulation, we are pretribulational. And then after seven devastating years Christ will come back to earth with his people to rule literally and bodily on the earth for a literal thousand years—that is Revelation 20. After that, he will judge unbelievers and renew heaven and earth.

Parts of premillennialism, just like the other views, have been held by believers for the last two thousand years, but many of its details were not commonly held until much more recently, in the 1800’s. But the strength of premillennialism is that it allows for many of the Old Testament prophecies about the end times to be fulfilled literally in a literal earthly rule of Christ. The prophecies speak of the Messiah ruling in Jerusalem and defeating his enemies; the prophecies were to the ethnically Jewish people, and we believe they will be fulfilled to a remnant of ethnically Jewish people, on Jewish land, all as was foretold.

There is much, much more that could be said, but we must move on to our text in Luke or we will run out of time. I have given you this overview of end time views because in our text today Jesus is speaking of his second coming, and how we understand the details of that coming is affected by which end time view we hold. At Faith Bible we are pretribulational premillennialists—that is how we put together the biblical evidence about Christ’s return.

What you think about the end times is very important—but I should also note that those who hold a different view are not your enemies. They are your brothers and sisters in Christ, and they will be your brothers and sisters long after all of these events play out.

The power of Christ

With that background, let us move on now to our text.

We have come to the very end of history. The birth pangs of calamity have intensified. Matthew and Mark both say that these events take place after the tribulation just described. Our Lord at this point has raptured up his church pretribulationally, there have been seven terrible years during which those left behind

hear the gospel and repent and believe. There are new disciples. And then the end comes.

See how this time is described:

And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken.⁵

Two things are mentioned here. First, the power of God displayed in natural turmoil; and second, the terrified response of mankind.

God's power produces the following: signs in sun and moon and stars, roaring of sea and waves, and shaking of the powers of heaven. Since people fear what is coming on the world, we have here sky, earth, and sea, all disrupted.

Luke does not tell us what signs in heaven there will be, but Matthew and Mark do. They both say, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven."⁶ There will be darkness.

This is perfectly in keeping with Old Testament prophecies about the Day of the Lord. Isaiah 13:10, for example, says that "the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light."

In the book of Revelation, when the sixth seal is open, we see these predictions beginning to be fulfilled:

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.⁷

God began his creation of this world with the words, "Let there be light"; he will uncreate the world by snuffing out the lights he created.

⁵ Luke 21:25-26.

⁶ Mark 13:24-25; Matt. 24:29.

⁷ Rev. 6:12-13.

How will people respond to these events at the end of time? Just as you would expect: “on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world.”

The world that knows not Christ nor his salvation will tremble at this display of his power. You may know Christ as a gentle Savior—he is. You may think of him as calm and cool and welcoming—he is. Yet if you refuse him, if you stay stubbornly stuck in the mire of your sins and prefer them to him, he will come into his house with a whip and with righteous anger.

The “people” afraid in this text, and the “they” of verse 27 are unbelievers who do not know Christ.

See what they see in verse 27, when that long awaited event occurs: “And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

If we bring in the parallel accounts we learn that at this point there will be a trumpet blast heard to announce Christ’s return, and he will send out his angels to gather in the elect, those saved during the years of tribulation. The tribes of the earth will mourn at the sight, probably aware that they by their rejection of Christ have earned his wrath, as though they themselves had crucified him and cast him away.

The picture of Christ coming in the clouds was predicted in a remarkable way in Daniel 7:

I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one

that shall not be destroyed.⁸

This is the millennial reign of Christ, the beginning of his unending rule on earth.

This is the power of Christ in his coming, which shakes the heavenly powers and sends the waves tossing and darkens the sun. Do not refuse the gentle Christ who, as a man, cloaked his infinite power. For when he returns, he will summon his legions of angels, and he will display his Godhood.

Conclusion

But there is comfort in this passage too, as we come to its end. There will be wrath for all who disbelieve, but for you here present who have committed your souls to Christ, how should you think of his terrifying power?

See again verse 28: “Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Someone might object to premillennialism by saying, “Why would Jesus tell his disciples that they will begin to see these things, if they have already been raptured before these things take place?” Well, I admit that as a difficulty, but I would answer that, actually, the disciples to whom Jesus spoke these words would never see the events anyways, because they would all die before those events take place, rapture or not. These words Jesus spoke to an original group, but he spoke them not for that group, but for a group to come—why not to a group saved during the tribulation?

Yet regardless the audience, it is clear that there is a principle in these words also for you who are disciples now, in the age of the Gentiles, in the in-between time.

The world must fear the wrath of the Lamb, the power of Christ when it is displayed. That wrath is fierce and furious and destroys.

Yet you who have run to Christ for refuge, when Christ begins to display his divine power against the world, those who are like you need not fear at all. No, on the contrary, they can stand up straight and lift their heads. The power of Christ is their

⁸ Vv. 13-14.

redemption from this cursed world, and it is yours. You will not feel one ounce of that infinite power against your skin.

When life overwhelms you and its torrents reach up to your neck, when justice suffers and evil grows and turmoil develops and nations war and mountains tremble, do not be discouraged. Look up! The world will again be flooded by the powerful wrath of God, as in the days of Noah, but in Christ you shall be as safe as those eight persons in the ark.

For you are not destined to face the wrath of Christ's mighty right arm, but to be held by that arm safely in his bosom through the coming storm.