

Knowing the Times

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Let me ask you a question to begin with. What picture comes to mind when you mention, when I mention the name of Jesus? Now, I think like many people, a picture of gentle Jesus, meek and mild, might be something that comes to your mind.

And that's a pretty common picture, isn't it? Just ask anyone along the street, and they'll think of Jesus as a gentle man. Not gentleman, but gentle man, full of love and peace.

And my hunch was actually confirmed when I googled Jesus on the internet. So on the slide next, there were loads of pictures of Jesus holding a lamb as the shepherd, Jesus sitting among the children, teaching them, and Jesus as the healer.

And if you read the Bible, these images do fit with how the Bible describes him. He's a teacher and healer. He loves children. He's our shepherd and we're his lost sheep.

All these are in the Bible. But then from time to time, another image of Jesus also emerges. And that's the one we find in our passage today.

[1 : 15] One of fire and judgment and of division. And it surprises many people, even Christians. They're not sure how to reconcile this image with the popular ones of Jesus.

And yet, we know that this is the same Jesus. He isn't being double-faced. What we have here is consistent with who he is.

And hopefully, as we look at our passage, that will become clear. Now, those of you here last week would have had a taste of this already. Jesus had warned his disciples about being ready for his second coming.

And he spoke of judgment for those who weren't. Perhaps this took the disciples by surprise.

Perhaps they might be thinking, is this the loving and gracious master that we've come to know? But instead of reassuring them, Jesus, in this next passage, seems only to reinforce what he said.

[2 : 22] So, verse 49, he says, And so, if you look at your outline, Jesus' coming has brought a time of baptism and fire, a reference to God's judgment.

Fire, you see, in the Bible, is a very common image of God's judgment against wickedness and evil. And so, we find a verse like Psalm 97, verse 3, which I've got on the slide, where the psalmist says, Fire goes before him, that is the Lord, and consumes his foes on every side.

His lightning lights up the world. The earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. What burns up the enemies of God is his very nature, his holiness.

He is so pure that any impurity simply melts in his presence. You see, a fire always burns, doesn't it? You put paper close enough, as children like to do, and the paper will go up in flames.

Bring some wax up to it, and it will melt. But that's how fire is. You can't expect otherwise. And that's the same with God.

[3 : 49] God's very nature is against evil and wickedness. Nothing can stand in the way of God's anger against evil or sin. What is wrong in God's eyes is wrong.

He will not just turn a blind eye to it. He cannot. And even us as human beings, imperfect as we are, we're a bit like that, aren't we? We can't help but get angry when we see injustice done.

Like when innocent people are killed. When children are harmed. Even when we're powerless to do anything, we're angry, aren't we? And sometimes when people with good intentions, they tell us, you know, just calm down.

Or worse still, they tell us to look away and pretend that it didn't happen. We don't take kindly to that kind of suggestion, do we? Because we're rightly feeling moral outrage.

There's a righteous anger that wells up from within. So if that's the case with us, how much more God, who is righteous to the very core of his being.

[4 : 58] And so Jesus says he comes to bring that righteous judgment of God. And in the psalm that was read earlier by Steph, we discover that God had always planned to send a Messiah, a human king, to mete out his righteous judgment on his behalf.

So in Psalm 110 verse 1, I'll just recap. We read that God appoints him as his king. The Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.

And then in verse 5 and 6 further down, God is with him, he says, and he defeats the enemies of God. The Lord is at your right hand. He will crush kings on the day of his wrath.

He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth. These are fairly, you know, furious pictures, isn't it, of God's anger.

Nothing gentle about it, is there? And in our passage here, Jesus reveals that's what he's come to do. But then he adds that this fire isn't kindled yet.

[6 : 07] It won't until Jesus himself undergoes his baptism. Until then, he says he's constrained. And so you might ask, what is this baptism?

After all, Jesus, if you read the gospel, had already been baptized earlier. Well, it doesn't refer to that water baptism. Rather, Jesus is talking about his death on the cross.

Baptism, as we are about to witness today, symbolizes death. It's a watery burial where someone goes in and then they come back out again, symbolically, to a new life.

Each of our brothers today, who is putting their trust in Jesus and giving their lives to him, are baptized today as a sign of what God has already done in their lives.

This death, this dying to their old way of living, repenting is what we call it, and then being made a life, new life in Christ. Jesus says this fire of judgment will only be kindled after his death and resurrection, his baptism.

[7 : 12] And if we think about it, that's something we should be thankful for. Because if this fire were kindled before his death, all of us would be consumed. We'll be like wax before God's holiness, unable to stand against his holiness.

But because Jesus has died for us, we can now hide in him. We can take refuge in his death because he's taken the punishment for our sins.

He becomes our shelter. Very much like when there's an air raid shelter and we all run to it before the bombs are about to drop. Or where there's a hurricane or something you've seen in the U.S., people run into their shelters at the bottom of their house.

And that's what being a Christian is all about. We realize that our wrongdoing deserves God's punishment, and yet we're safe, we're forgiven, because we claim Jesus' death for ourselves.

But then, you might ask, now that Jesus has died and risen, how is it that we don't see this fire of judgment kindled yet? I mean, just look outside. As we go on in life, sin seems to keep going.

[8 : 26] People who are doing wrong seems to go unpunished. Where is the judgment, you might ask? Well, the answer is that, again, it's rather like a fire, a campfire perhaps.

When you first start a campfire, it's really only the kindle that's alight, isn't it? It's only after that's burned for a while, whether it's newspaper or whatever fire starter, that the rest of the wood catches fire.

And then you get a full campfire, don't we? Well, the same can be said about God's judgment. One day, we will see God's final campfire judgment in full display.

But at the moment, we see only glimpses of it. We see it at the cross where Jesus died and God pours out His wrath on us, on Him.

And we see it when, from time to time, evil is punished in this life. But where wrongs go unpunished, we mustn't think that we or others have escaped justice.

[9 : 30] Because God will right every wrong one day. Now, a third question might be that you're asking, well, if all this is true, then how can Jesus be the Prince of Peace, as many people call Him?

Well, to answer that, Jesus now goes on to the next few verses. It's in my second point, where He says that His coming has brought not peace, but division.

So in verse 51, He says, Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on, there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two, or two against three.

They will be divided, father against son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

Now, if you're wondering why Jesus is singling out the mother-in-laws and the daughters-in-law, I think it's because as a woman is married, she moves into the house of the man, and so she's living with her mother-in-law.

[10:37] Jesus is not having a go, specifically a daughter-in-law. But, He's not. But, does that mean that Jesus is no longer the Prince of Peace?

Well, no. In one sense, He's still the Prince of Peace, because if we put our trust in Him, then He gives us peace with God, and we have a relationship with His Father. But, in another sense, well, Jesus now says here that it's no.

He doesn't bring peace. Not because He's saying that people should go to war against each other because of Him. The division that He's talking about here is not about family infighting.

And, no, He's talking about crusades, which has happened in the past, where people take up arms and kill others in the name of Jesus. No, no, that's not what Jesus is talking about.

Rather, He's saying that when He comes, He stirs up the status quo. Whereas before He came, we were all united, we were all together, but in despair and without hope, because we couldn't save ourselves, now that He's come, all of us have a choice.

[11:55] There's now a way of escape in Christ, freedom from God's fiery judgment. But the reason why it's divisive is because not everyone will choose it.

Two people in the same family could end up making different choices, which will divide them for all eternity. Most of you watch TV, I'm sure, and you've probably seen the TV ad by the industry super funds, haven't you?

Have you seen that one? I've got a picture of the, yeah? Two people, same age, same income, same starting amount, they still end up with a different amount of super at the end.

Why? Because one person decided to choose a fund without fees and the other wanted to pay retail fees. Now, I'm not trying to publicize industry super funds here.

It's up to you who invest with. But I'm trying to make the point that God's kingdom is similar. No doubt, like me, you may have people in your family where two people from the same family can grow up in the same environment, can have the same opportunities to hear about Jesus, can go to the same church events, and yet one will respond favorably to God's word, and another won't.

[13:16] And the thing is, many Jews in Jesus' day made the same mistake. They thought that when the Messiah comes, all of them, just because they were Jews, would all be saved.

Because all of them had the law of God. Because all of them made the right sacrifices at the temple, all of them would be saved. But Jesus says, no. The defining difference isn't their heritage, or how well they've kept the law, or how religious they were.

The difference is how they've responded to Him. If they received Him, and welcomed Him, and made Him their master, then they would enter God's kingdom.

But if they didn't, then they were excluded. And this division remains to this day. Everyone is welcome to follow Jesus. So, Jesus is not saying, you're in and you're out.

No. Everyone is welcome. No one is barred from choosing to serve Jesus. But how we choose will divide us. And that's why Jesus' coming brings division.

[14:25] And each of our brothers who are being baptized today have decided to choose Jesus, to follow Him. They're all individuals. Their experiences are unique. But the one common thing that unites them and binds them together is their faith and trust in Jesus.

And so, given this urgent choice that has to be made, Jesus now turns back to the crowd with this warning in verse 54. So, He says to the crowd, if you look with me, when you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, it's going to rain.

And it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, it's going to be hot. And it is. Hypocrites. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky and the earth.

How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? What's been happening is that Jesus has been teaching His disciples over the last two passages.

But the crowd probably overhears. So now He's turning to them, people who haven't yet followed Him, to appeal to them directly. And so, if you're in that position today, you haven't decided to follow Jesus just yet, then Jesus is appealing to you as well.

[15:40] And the main point He makes is this, that we as humans were actually pretty good at reading the signs and knowing the times. So take the weather, where we look up, we see the clouds, and we know it's time to bring in the washing, isn't it?

Likewise, if we take our blood pressure and it's high, it's a sign to cut back on the salt and vinegar chips. Seen the polls lately and thinking there might be signs of a change in government and that when the Labour government comes in, they'll get rid of negative gearing, then it's a sign for you to review your property investments.

I don't have any, but... the examples abound, don't they? And by and large, Jesus is saying we're all very clued in to pick up on the winds of change so that we're not caught out.

And so Jesus wonders, if we're so good at doing that, why aren't we doing the same things with spiritual things? We look at the evil and the injustice around us and we know instinctively, don't we, that a day of reckoning is coming.

It's interesting, actually, that whether, you know, all the major religions were Buddhists or Muslims or Christians, they all have a concept of retribution. That is, instinctively, they know that bad people will have their comeuppance, that's a technical term, one day.

[17:09] Wrongs, they know, must be made right. And even, surprisingly, atheists who don't believe in God, they actually feel strongly about justice as well.

In fact, if you look at some of the causes around, you know, the Me Too movement, trying to pay, you know, shame corporates for underpaying workers, whatever the cause is, a lot of times they're being led by people who are atheists, actually.

They feel strongly about social justice. The only difference with them and us is, of course, they believe that wrongs must be right in this life because in their own belief system, there is no afterlife for justice to be made right.

But all of us, don't we, we know that when there's wrong, we want that to be made right. And Jesus is saying that ever since I've come, ever since you've heard my message and you've seen me down the cross, these are all signs that the day of judgment is coming.

And so in light of this, Jesus asks them, how will you then atone for your own sins? If we want to see evil properly dealt with and we know that it's going to be done, how about us?

[18:29] How about the wrong and the sins that we've done? Every lie we've told and got away with it, every time we've hurt someone and gone unpunished, we're racking up a debt of sin, aren't we?

When do you think we'll be called upon to settle those accounts? Or do we think that we're the only ones that will be exempt? That of all the people in the world, somehow God will turn a blind eye to me and to you?

Well, that's why Jesus calls the people hypocrites, because they can see the signs in the sky and yet they're so slow to see the signs in their own lives and to see the day of judgment approaching. Now I have to confess that I'm not a perfect driver. I've had my fair share of traffic fines. However, there was one time when I was fined and I felt really strongly that I was wronged.

If you know this junction, it was actually a red arrow at the Royal Parade Junction. You know the one that goes to the zoo? Three demerit points. But as I got the fine, I knew exactly what happened that day.

[19:48] Now if you know that junction, you would know that the lights are actually very badly positioned. Yeah, there's one right high up and then the one just passed until, it's only until you get to the end of the junction do you see the lights.

And you know that junction had lots of big trucks always coming and going and there's a bend. And so I actually didn't see the red arrow until I was in the junction itself. And so I was really angry that I was fine because I didn't think I deserved it.

I asked for the camera photo to be sent to me and it did prove that I had entered the junction after the arrow turned red. But I was still so angry that I actually wanted to fight it in court.

I wanted to take it all the way. But then in the end after I'd cooled down I knew that my chances were very slim.

The evidence was against me and all I had was my own word that my line of sight was obscured. And I thought you know this judge that I'm going to go before he's probably seen 101 or thousands of traffic fine cases.

[21:00] Why would he believe me? amongst all these cases. I didn't stand a chance did I? And all the time and energy that I was going to put in there was just no guarantee I was going to win.

So I ended up thinking look it's an injustice but better just to pay the fine. And that's the case isn't it? Most of the time it's always better to settle out of court isn't it?

And that's Jesus' last warning in the last two verses. He says why don't you judge for yourself what is right as you are going with your adversary to the magistrate try hard to be reconciled on the way for your adversary may drag you off to the judge and the judge turn you over to the officer and the officer throw you into prison.

I tell you you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. when it comes to settling debts the last thing you want to do is end up in court at the mercy of the judge.

Even if you think you have a fair chance of winning it's much better to settle out of court do a deal with your adversary even if you think you have to just pay more than what you think is fair just get it out of your way it's not worth the stress.

[22 : 26] And if that's true with our physical debts then how much more with our spiritual debts? That is the debt we rack up because of our sins and wrongs. Because for them we actually have no defense have we when we come before God as a judge.

We know we are in the wrong. And the more amazing thing is we have Jesus someone who is actually willing to settle our debt for us pay it for us so we don't have to pay anything.

If you've got someone like that why would you want to take your chance going before the judge?

Now you may be here today thinking that this is all too good to be true.

That's why for instance we are running a course like Christianic Explorer because we want people to come to the Bible and see that that's indeed what God has promised. You're free to come and ask questions but we don't want you to believe because we say so but rather we want you to believe because that's what God says in His Word.

So if that's you then can I urge you to think about coming along. First week is on Sunday 26th of May as Jeff has said. But even if you can't do that why don't you ask a friend or Christian to read the Bible with you so that you can check it out for sure.

[23 : 44] For those of you who have come today to witness Ben, Kevin's or Fred's baptism, I know that for them they don't just want you to celebrate their baptism but their love for you to have the same gift that they have.

That secure relationship with God through Jesus. They want you to be safe with them on the day of judgment. So why don't you consider coming along to that course or talking to them afterwards so that they can share with you truly what it means to them to be safe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well let's pray as we close and we witness the baptism of our brothers. Father thank you for bringing to your kingdom into your kingdom all those who are in Christ and in particular our three brothers Fred, Ben and Kevin.

Father help us to interpret the signs and to know that a time is coming when our debts will need to be repaid. Open our eyes to see the wrongs we've done and that we will have to settle our account with you.

Help us to seek our shelter in Jesus so that we will be safe on the fiery day of judgment. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen.