

*CHRISTMAS... To be continued**Introduction:*

- A. *Illus.*: The Italians have a legend about a woman named **Befana** who lived along the dusty road that led to Bethlehem. She was her village's best housekeeper. Meticulous. No small task with all that dust. Late one night there was a knock at the door and she opened it to find three kings in search of the baby born to be King of the Jews, the Prince of Peace. Frankly, what she saw was all the dust that blew in and the dirt on their boots and clothes.

They asked to rest awhile and invited her to join them on their journey. And she said she'd love to do that but she had to get the house back in order after they left, and there was a load of laundry to be done. "*Let me finish up,*" she said, "*then I'll be right behind you.*" And they told her all she had to do was follow the star.

She worked all night and finally, near dawn, she put on her heavy cloak and took the little straw doll she wanted to give to the baby, and left her house—spic and span. But the sky had clouded over and she couldn't see the star. It began to rain and her little doll was ruined. Finally, she gave up and went home. "*I'm a foolish old woman,*" she said to herself. "*I missed my chance to worship the newborn Prince of Peace. Perhaps I will find him someday.*"

So the legend is that each year she sets out with a bag of toys, leaving some at every house where there is a child, in hopes one of them might be the Child she missed.

- B. It would certainly be a tragedy of the first order to miss the coming of Jesus. One of the themes running through the whole Bible is the importance of watching for the Messiah—of waiting in faith for the King God has promised. **Watching for Christ's coming is not like any other kind of watching.** We who watch for Jesus' second coming can learn from those who watched for his first.

I. NOT MANY WERE WATCHING WHEN JESUS FIRST CAME

- A. The very first watchers were the Bible’s prophets—men like Isaiah, Daniel, Zechariah, Micah and Malachi. Listen to what Peter told us in **1 Pet 1:10-13**... The prophets who knew the Messiah’s virgin birth, his royal lineage, his Bethlehem birthplace, even clues to timing, no matter how they puzzled over the glimpses given them by God’s Spirit, could not “find out the time and circumstances” when the Messiah would come. What they *could* see was God’s certain and detailed promises that the Messiah *would* come, and that he would suffer, and that glories would follow.
- What’s especially important is that their prophecies give confidence to us as we read the specific fulfillments that this was God’s work from start to finish.
 - Their prophecies also help us fully understand the meaning and value of what God was doing through Christ.
- B. The Christmas story in Luke tells us about two exemplary watchers—Simeon and Anna. Turn to **Luke 2:25ff**. Let me highlight a couple things. **V.25:** “*Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was **righteous and devout**. He was **waiting for the consolation of Israel**, and the Holy Spirit was on him.*” Notice his character: *righteous and devout*. And notice what he was waiting for: “*the consolation of Israel*”—that is, the hope of the Messiah that God’s people had clung to through hundreds of years of hardship and silence.

Once Simeon saw the 8-day-old Jesus, God’s Spirit made clear to him *this* was the Messiah and you hear him eloquently express just what the consolation of Israel was, in **vv.30-32:** “*For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.*” He saw in baby Jesus the hope of salvation for all people and what would be Israel’s greatest glory and gift to the world.

Even while this was happening, another watcher came up to Simeon. **V.36** says her name was Anna, and she was a prophet; that is, God spoke to his people through her. She was an 84-year-old widow who “*never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.*” Like Simeon, she was righteous and devout, hungering for God and praying to him constantly. Look at **v.38**: “*Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.*” So they were watchers, too. I imagine a small group of people who knew each other well whom she excitedly called to see this wonderful baby.

Think of what they glimpsed that we see clearly. We know how Jesus lived, that he died for sins and rose from the dead. That he reigns from heaven’s throne. We have seen his salvation come to people of every nation. Gentiles know Jesus better than his own people, the Jews. The descendants of that baby could no more be counted than the stars in the sky.

- C. There were other watchers, too: the mysterious magi—astrologers, seers and seekers, patiently studying scriptures and skies far away in the land where once Jews had been exiled, where Daniel saw and recorded his visions, and dreamed his gospel-glimpsing dreams. It is likely that they knew Daniel’s writings well. They’d read his dreams of strange beasts and the nations and evil powers they represented. They’d read how he saw “*the Ancient of Days take his seat*” attended by thousands upon thousands, and how he saw “*one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven,*” and how “*all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*” [Dan 7:9-14]

They also studied the stars. We don’t know what to make of these astrologers, because the only astrologers we know about spin out horoscopes like fortune cookie messages. When I was young they sang,

*When the moon is in the seventh house
And Jupiter aligns with Mars
And peace will guide the planets
And love will steer the stars*

But it was all baloney! We really don't imagine that the stars above us actually chronicle the movements of history and destiny. **But these men believed—apparently with good reason—that the stars—the constellations and planets and comets—are all shepherded by God Almighty and when calibrated to his written Word, announced to the day the birth of the “son of man” whom all nations would worship.** The way and time the star appeared, its place among the constellations, and the way it moved across the sky was as wonderful and clear to them as the angel's announcement to the shepherds.

But the point of Matthew's story is not the wonder of the star but that these magi themselves fulfilled Daniel's prophecy that “*all nations and peoples of every language worshiped*” the Son of Man from Daniel's dream. Simeon had praised God that his salvation would be “*a light for revelation to the Gentiles,*” and here they were—the first of millions of Gentiles who would worship Jesus.

- D. To the surprise of the magi, they came to the Jerusalem to find no one else was watching. Jesus' birth was announced in Jerusalem by the Gentile magi. That's astonishing. When asked, the Jewish teachers knew that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, some seven miles away. They *knew* what the prophets said, they just weren't watching.

What's more, with the power-hungry Herod on the throne, word of a baby born to be King of the Jews *disturbed* them all. There is no record of joy. No record of anyone walking the seven miles to Bethlehem to see for themselves. **In effect, the City of David was populated by non-watchers—not just oblivious to the baby's birth, but disturbed at the possibility.** So God hid the baby from Jerusalem's non-watchers by warning the magi to return home by another route, and by sending Joseph, Mary and Jesus off to safety in Egypt.

So you see what I mean: **watching for Christ's coming is not like other kinds of watching. Bear that in mind as we wait and watch for Jesus to come again.** *Illus.:* When I was a kid I picked up this fear of being surprised by Jesus' return. It was part of our church life in those days. When I was 16, for example, I worked in a small corner grocery store. People could actually call in and place their grocery order and I'd deliver it to their homes. One day a man wanted some chewing tobacco with his order, which we didn't carry. So Lutz, the owner, told me to go three doors down to the Dew Drop Inn and buy some there. Now chewing tobacco was on the list of 'banned substances' in the church I grew up in. And no good Christian would ever darken the door of a bar. I'd never been in a bar, and I still remember walking in there, the smell of beer heavy in the air, asking for a can of snooze, and thinking, *What if Jesus comes back right now and finds me here!*

I had one thing right:

II. NO ONE WILL SEE CHRIST'S SECOND COMING COMING

A. Just before his crucifixion Jesus told his disciples in **Matt 24:36**, "*But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" He said his return would be like a thief coming in the night—that he'd come when people least expect him, and that just as in the days of Noah, people will be going about their ordinary lives. "*Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left,*" Jesus said. "*Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.*"

B. But Jesus also said that there would be signs we could watch for, just like when you see trees budding you know summer is near. Among the signs will be the increased, terrible suffering of Christians. Also, there will be an increase in false messiahs and false prophets who even perform signs and wonders, "*to deceive, if possible, the elect,*" Jesus said. "*See, I have told you ahead of time.*"

One very important sign is described in 2 Thess. 2. Paul addressed the concern some believers had that Jesus had already returned. **2 Thess 2:3-4, 9-10...** So Jesus will not

return until this “man of lawlessness” has been clearly revealed. Believers will recognize him tho’ all the world will be deceived. Look at **v.8...**

Another sign will be turmoil in the heavens. Jesus said in **Luke 21:25-27...**

- C. Jesus told his disciples that there would be one sign no one would miss: **Matt 24:30-31...** Paul repeated that picture in 1 Thess 4 and then he said in **1 Thess 5:1-6...** **“Be awake and sober.”** In other words, don’t be spiritually dopey and tipsy, bleary-eyed and brain-dead. **We have a big day ahead!** We, of all people, see what is happening around us and see the gathering signs. We make ourselves ready for a better home, and for everlasting life in Christ’s kingdom.

Vv.7-8... We need to be well-protected to be well-prepared. We need **armor!** Which says that waiting for Jesus to come is *spiritually* dangerous business.

Our breastplate, protecting our heart, is a sacred alloy of faith and love. That is, what protects us is our faith in God’s word—the gospel which we believe, obedience to God’s commands, reliance on the promises he gives us. We believe those things and that’s what guards our hearts.

Also, love for Christ and for others prepares our hearts for Jesus to return. Loving one another produces holiness in us, and has a way of stirring our longing for Jesus and making us homesick for heaven.

Our helmet is our “*hope of salvation,*” protecting our minds and our wills in this dangerous world. **Vv.9-10** says, *“He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.”* That’s our hope. There’s the second coming of Christ—what we are waiting and watching for. *“Therefore,”* James says in **v.11,** *“encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.”* That is how we watch for Jesus. We encourage one another in our faith and love and hope, and we make it our business to build each other up, which in fact, you are doing. So when we suddenly hear the archangel’s command and the trumpet call of God, we will be prepared.

Conclusion

No one will see Christ's Second Coming coming. But we must be prepared—protected by our faith, love and hope, and watching for the signs that it is at hand. Jesus said, "*When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*"

There is God's word for us as we stand on the threshold of another year, shrouded in darkness. Jesus is coming again. Maybe this year.

Illus.: I love the story **Joe Stowell** tells about the problem they have at a Christian home for mentally impaired children. The kids are taught about Jesus, and they're taught that he can come back at any time. The problem is that each day the children run to the window to see if this is the day Jesus will return. **They just can't keep their windows clean!** [#3542]