

The Hour of Christ

“Come Further Up, Come Further In!”

You have likely read, seen the movie version of, or at least heard of “The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe”, a high fantasy novel written for children by British author C.S. Lewis. What you may not appreciate is that it is the third book of a seven-part series called *The Chronicles Of Narnia*, a classic of children’s literature written between 1950-56. For those who read the books, you will notice that despite all the fantastical characters and elements, all the stories contain echoes of biblical themes and stories.

“The Last Battle”, as the name suggests, is the final part of the series. In that novel, the Narnians are tricked into serving a fake Aslan, who is nothing more than a simple donkey disguised with a lion’s skin. Those who question the deception are invited into an empty stable, where the deity is said to reside. Once anyone enters, they are then slain by a soldier on the other side of the door and never seen again.

Everyone is therefore scared into submission because there is danger in the stable.

To cut a long story short, the true Narnians enter the stable to discover it has become the doorway into Aslan’s country and that the world of Narnia has come to an end —echoing the *Book of Revelation*.

There is where we read a famous passage from the book I would like to read for you now. The narrator describes the situation they all find themselves in:

It is as hard to explain how this sunlit land was different from the old Narnia as it would be to tell you how the fruits of that country taste. Perhaps you will get some idea of it if you think like this. You may have been in a room in which there was a window that looked out on a lovely bay of the sea or a green valley that wound away among mountains. And in the wall of that room opposite to the window there may have been a looking-glass. And as you turned away from the window you suddenly caught sight of that sea or that valley, all over again, in the looking-glass. And the sea in the mirror, or the valley in the mirror, were in one sense just the same as the real ones: yet at the same time they were somehow different —deeper, more wonderful, more like places in a story: in a story you have never heard but very much want to know. The difference between the old Narnia was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can’t describe it any better than that: if you ever get there you will know what I mean.

It was [Jewel] the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right forehoof on the ground and neighed, and then cried:

“I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Bree-hee-hee! Come further up, come further in!” (C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*)

C.S. Lewis was a wonderful writer and here captures why we become friends of Jesus: because we have caught a glimpse of the light, life and love of our Creator and want more of that.

However, in the book, not everyone wants more. There is a group of faithless dwarfs found sitting in a circle in Aslan's country. They are sitting in a circle because they believe they are still in the stable. They cannot see the beauty or feel the warmth all around them or taste the air because they refuse to move, choosing instead to remain in fear.

What & Why?

When we read the Bible for the revelation of God contained therein, if our eyes and ears and hearts and minds and spirits are open, we just may catch a glimpse of that country, that country for which we were made and for which we long, though we might not yet have the words to describe it. To begin a life of discipleship to Jesus—which is learning to love God completely, oneself correctly, and others compassionately—is to respond to Jesus' invitation to come further up and further in!

Over this season of Easter, we have explored a number of biblical metaphors in the hope we might get a sense of what Jesus taught the disciples during the 40 days following his resurrection. Now that we have come to the commemoration of his Ascension, this past Thursday, the motif of "hour" becomes prominent.

When the friends of Jesus read the Bible and notice how verses relate to and interpret each other, they are uncovering the riches of God's revelation of his plans and purpose. Let us move beyond looking for verses to back up what we already believe, and to justify how we already behave, so that we might follow God's Way of Love. This is a path for going further up and further in.¹

Explanation

It goes without saying that an "hour" is one twelfth of the period of daylight between sunrise and sunset—the measurement of time during the night is the same, obviously, but not be measured as such because we are supposed to be sleeping!

Measurement of time in biblical days was often approximate, referring most frequently to the broad divisions of time marked by the third, sixth and ninth hours.

In the Bible, the term "hour" also denotes a significant or appointed moment or period of time, especially the hour of Jesus Christ's suffering and his return.² Let us explore the many times he used the motif of "hour", "time", and "day" in his teaching.

Christ's Exhortation

Jesus often spoke of his suffering and future return metaphorically in his teaching, especially in his exhortations, like this one:

Watch! Be alert! For you don't know when the time is coming. (Mark 13:33)³

An "exhortation" is an "argument (Ac 2:40) or advice intended to incite hearers to action. The ability to exhort or encourage to action is a spiritual gift (Rom 12:8) sometimes associated with prophets and preachers (Ac 15:32; 1 Cor 14:3). Elsewhere mutual exhortation is the responsibility of all Christians (Rom 1:12; 1 Thess 5:11, 14; Heb 3:13, 10:24–25)."⁴

In this exhortation, Jesus' call-to-action was that his friends should watch for the time of his future return, when all of God's promises for judgement and renewal will come to pass, a time when

they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.
(Mark 13:26)

“Son of Man” —literally, “the Son of the Man”, from Daniel 7— was Jesus’ favourite title for himself. It denotes his messianic mission AND his full humanity.

In this exhortation then, Jesus was advising his friends to be actively mindful that the purpose and plan of God WILL come true, headed by Jesus-as-Lord. The truth that hour will come should fill us with comfort, hope, meaning and purpose, so let us be watching for it expectantly.

Jesus made this exhortation to his disciples in the days of his passion week. He wanted his disciples to not be caught unaware of what was coming, to not be distracted by their grief at his suffering, but to instead be on the right side of history (as they say), counted among those who are Jesus’ friends.

Christ’s Prayer

Then, on the night he was betrayed, but before Jesus was arrested, we read,

He went a little farther, fell to the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. (Mark 14:35)

All of Jesus’ earthly life had been leading to this hour, when he would suffer to defeat the power of sin and curse of death. Naturally, his anticipation of this experience filled him with dread, even as he was filled with glorious purpose.

Let us remember it was the love of the triune God that led Jesus to that hour, despite the suffering that led him to it and through it. Even in his prayers then, Jesus used this motif of the hour.

Christ’s Prophecy

Additionally, Jesus prophesied using this motif. In one case, it helped to describe how his friends would suffer along with him, for he stated,

Then he told the disciples, “The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you won’t see it. (Luke 17:22)

As we have noted these past weeks of Easter, the disciples did grieve at the loss of their master and friend, Jesus. They were scattered and confused. They were lost without him. Some of the disciples even returned to fishing —which is not a bad way to make a living— but this must have seemed like a great let-down after the three years of being spectators to and participants in Jesus’ ministry and miracles.

Yet, that the disciples would grieve is merely a sign of their love persisting for their master and friend. When Jesus’ day and hour came, he was correct: they missed him and grieved his absence.

Christ’s Warning

This motif was useful to Jesus for giving warnings as well.

As we have seen throughout history, those that grieve the death of their loved ones are often at risk of charlatans who would manipulate the grief of others to serve their own ends. Jesus therefore warned his disciples,

Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Don't follow them. (Luke 21:8)

The friends of Jesus must understand his suffering was necessary because of human fallenness and sin; yet, his suffering would lead to his return, described as his "time" or his "hour". And his return is not something anyone can manipulate or usher in or take advantage of for their own ends.

The Father's timing is perfect. Let us be ready for it.

Christ's Declaration

While we wait patiently and expectantly for the hour of Christ, Jesus declared,

an hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth. Yes, the Father wants such people to worship him. (John 4:23)

As the hour of Christ was revealed in his suffering, and our hope in him will be fulfilled in the hour of his return, Jesus' ministry and mission was a declaration of God's purpose and plan fulfilled in him. That is a reason to celebrate, to worship the Almighty for what he IS doing, not merely what he did long ago.

Jesus' friends are those that accept this truth and welcome the Spirit into their lives. With the rocks, they cry out they praise, adoration, confession, their worship.

Yet, worshipping the Lord only for the past turns worship into a cold, meaningless recitation of empty words and the performance of empty ritual—all of which the Israelites were warned against:

Do not remember the past events; pay no attention to things of old. (Isaiah 43:18)

Then Samuel said: Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of rams. (1 Samuel 15:22; see also Isa 1:13; Eze 33:31; Hos 6:6; Mt 6:5; 2Ti 3:5.)

Christ's hour is not a past event. It is yet to come! His friends worship in anticipation of that time.

Those who pay attention and respond to what the Holy Spirit is doing now, to the truth about the human condition, and the fulfilment of God's plan and purpose, they are the kind of worshippers Jesus declared would be revealed at the right time.

Christ's Proclamation

Another instance of the use of the "hour" motif was included in Jesus' proclamation,

Truly I tell you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. (John 5:25)

This statement most definitely is hearkening back to the prophecy given to Ezekiel,

The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by his Spirit and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. He led me all

around them. There were a great many of them on the surface of the valley, and they were very dry. Then he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I replied, “Lord GOD, only you know.” (Ezekiel 37:1–3)

The prophet was there instructed to preach to the dry bones, to declare God’s promise to breath life into them, that they might live. And they lived! —in the vision, at least.

Jesus made the same proclamation to the people of his time. They suffered the angst of the human condition, suffered under the weight of sin and the curse of death. They had longed for a time when a Saviour would come, who would rescue, reconcile and restore.

With Jesus’ ministry and mission, that time has come! To hear that message and to respond appropriately, with faith, is to have the breath of God enter your soul, it is to come to life again!

Christ’s Hour

Ultimately, the purpose of the “hour” motif is to help us understand the purpose of Christ is to glorify God, as it is written,

Jesus spoke these things, looked up to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you (John 17:1)

To “glorify” means to magnify God through praising His name and honouring His commandments (Ps 86:12). Jesus also glorified the Father through His perfect obedience and His sacrificial death on our behalf (Jn 17:1). Yet, Christ’s return will be the crowning moment of glory when all the work of rescue, reconciliation and renewal will be complete.

The motif of the hour of Christ was used in many ways to reveal truths about the human condition, as well as God’s purpose and plan fulfilled in and through Christ Jesus. The hour of Christ is the peak moment of God’s glory revealed. It is therefore a rich motif that deserves our special attention.

Application

Following the Enlightenment, Western people prefer what we might call ‘pure reason’. We want facts, clear and unadulterated. “Give it to me straight, doctor, I can take it!”

When we come to reading the Bible then, we look for facts and rules, helpful wisdom and clear instructions for living. The problem is that is not really how the Bible works.

The Bible is largely composed of stories and poetry. Even the so-called “laws” are not statutory laws at all, but more like illustrations and examples of a common law based on a covenantal relationship.

Despite our modern sensibilities and prideful arrogance, let us move beyond proof-texting, our tendency to look for verses to back up what we already believe and justify how we already behave. Let us not merely fill-in-the-blanks with the singular answers expected by our store-bought Bible study booklets produced by the Christian industrial complex. We will need a better way to read the Bible, so as to find and make sense of God’s Way of Love.

It is likely an advanced technique of Bible study, but the friends of Jesus learn to read the Bible deeply, so they may go further up and further in. They hover over and meditate on the words of our scriptures. They notice how verses relate to and interpret each other.

The many instances describing how the friends of Jesus are comparable to sheep or children, the many descriptions of the hour of Christ, all beg more attention and closer inspection. They are not merely verses to be taken on their own but they are to be compared to other instances. They are not merely metaphors, but are motifs, being recurring themes and images meant to teach us something in the repetition.

When you read a passage referring to the hour of Christ, if you have read the Bible carefully, you will notice you have come across that phrase before. That is no mistake on the part of the writers, nor is it merely coincidence.

Throughout the Bible there are recurring themes, images, and motifs used. When you encounter such it is a cue to pay attention. Note how other instances treat the metaphor so as to discern the motif intended by the Holy Spirit who inspired the writing.

Study as many of those instances as your time allows and compare them. With such careful reading and study, you will uncover the riches of God's revelation of his purpose and plan; you will learn from the positive and negative examples of the people and stories contained in the Bible; and, then you will become equipped to apply the lessons from the past to the circumstances you and we face in the present.

Conclusion

Over these past couple of weeks, we have discovered Jesus used these motifs of sheep, children, and the hour when he met with and taught his disciples during the 40 days between his resurrection and his ascension. As it is written,

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Wasn't it necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted for them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures. (Luke 24:25–27)

While we have not been provided extensive reports of his conversations with his disciples during that time, perhaps these and other motifs are a clue to unravelling and understanding all the scriptures reveal concerning the life and mission and ministry of Christ Jesus. Before his ascension, the disciples needed to understand how all of the scriptures relate to each other. Only with this deeper knowledge would they serve him well as apostles, sharing this knowledge to the ends of the Earth (Ac 1:8).

When we read the Bible, we benefit from the fruit of their labour. Will you too read the Bible better and deeper? Will you look for the recurring themes and images and metaphors? Will these motifs provide for you a glimpse at the greatness and glory of our Creator, of the goodness and graciousness of Christ Jesus, of the beauty and light of that far off country that invites us to come further up and further in?

Let us pray...

Endnotes

- 1 This sermon is based on an outline by Maze Jackson, ed., "Hour of Christ", *Golden Nuggets* 26 (1990).
- 2 Martin H. Manser, *Dictionary of Bible Themes* (London: Martin Manser, 2009).
- 3 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).

- 4 Chad Brand et al., eds., “Exhortation”, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 522.