



February 8: The First and Second Coming of Christ

WEEKLY READING - 23-27

TODAY'S PASSAGE - MATTHEW 24:36-44

MAIN POINT

Remembering and celebrating Christ's first coming with devotion and delight helps us ready ourselves for His second coming, which could come at any moment.

BACKGROUND

Matthew 24 opened with the disciples' admiring the buildings of Herod's temple. When Jesus replied that it would be demolished, the disciples asked when that might be and "what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age" (vv. 1-3). Jesus replied that the temple would fall within a generation, by AD 70, and so it was. He also told them how to endure the attending tribulation. But he did not say when he would come or how "this age" would end. As for signs, verse 30 implied that there would be no sign but Christ himself, coming with trumpets and angels to gather his people to himself. Jesus states this explicitly in verse 36: no one knows the day when the Son returns. Because Jesus will come on an unknown day, at an unknown hour, disciples should be ready every hour. So chapter 24 does not say when Jesus returns; rather it describes who will be ready whenever he returns. Thus, according to Jesus' way, he ignores the question put to him and answers the question they should have asked. The person who is awake, watching, and faithful every hour will be ready whenever Jesus returns.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Matthew instructs Christians to stop attempting to discover the year, day, or hour of Jesus' return. Instead, we should stay ready every hour, whatever we do (24:42, 44). Unbelievers should learn from Noah's generation that the time to repent does end and should heed, even today, the offer of God's mercy through Christ.

Jesus' imagery of people working side by side, with one taken and the other left, reminds all believers of the need to present the gospel of Christ to family, friends, and coworkers. In cultures where the gospel seems implausible, the task is harder but no less necessary. The teaching on punishment also demands a response, since contemporary readers object to it. An absolutely literal interpretation of verse 51 is impossible, since the wicked servant is cut in pieces and then placed with hypocrites. Still, orthodox theologians have traditionally understood that Scripture, including chapters 24-25, teaches that judgment day brings positive joys and positive punishments. The Westminster Confession of Faith states that "then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and

receive that fullness of joy” that comes “from the presence of the Lord,” while the wicked, “who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments.”

In recent decades, orthodox theologians have looked to soften 24:51. One view proposes that “cut in pieces” means to cut off or exclude from God’s people. Others, drawing on C. S. Lewis’s musings in *The Great Divorce* and on Jesus’ command “Depart from me” (25:41), interpret hell as nothing but privation. That is, metaphors for punishment represent the loss of God’s presence and blessings but not active punishment. To say this is to stop exegeting the text and to start judging it. As biblical theologians we must follow Scripture whether we particularly like what it says or not. This principle is especially important when biblical teachings run against the grain of culture.

Ultimately, this passage promotes that service to God and neighbor, day by day in every task, is the sure way to stay ready for Jesus.

THE FLOW

- 15 minutes - Conversation and relationship-building
- 5 minutes - Create interest (icebreaker, activity, or quote)
- 10 minutes - Year of Prayer guided prayer time
- 40 minutes - Study and apply the Bible
- 5 minutes - Prayer requests

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use at least one of these questions to introduce the topic of discussion.

- **What does a typical Sunday morning look like for you before you get to church?**
- **Is your typical feeling prepared or rushed when you walk in the doors?**
- **Beyond showing up, do you think it’s important to ready yourself spiritually to gather for worship? Explain. What are some ways you can do that?**

Share information from BACKGROUND and CHRIST CONNECTION to help group members understand the context

Transition/Say - Every season is marked by its own demands on our time, energy, finances, and in the end our hearts. We all know the value in preparing for seasons where the demands are greater and the stakes higher. Spiritually speaking, we must also make preparations that help fix our hearts and minds on Christ, the one who demands the greatest affection and whose stakes are nothing short of eternity. We ought to remember well the first coming of the Son of God each time we gather. But, as we do so our minds and hearts look forward to Christ’s second coming. With both the first and second coming of Christ in our minds and hearts, we experience the satisfaction of expectant joy.

YEAR OF PRAYER - GROUP PRAYER

GUIDE YOUR GROUP TO OFFER THEIR PRAYERS OUT LOUD WITH THE ENTIRE GROUP OR PUT PEOPLE INTO GROUPS OF 3-4 TO PRAY TOGETHER.

Pause and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your time of prayer.

Isaiah 54:5 reminds us of the importance of praising and adoring You, O Lord alone. “The Holy One of Israel is (my) Redeemer; (You are) called the God of the whole earth.” Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort.” 2 Corinthians 1:3.

Share your words of praise now. (pause)

Almighty Father, we ask for boldness in sharing the good news of the gospel. Open our eyes to the daily opportunities You give us to share of Your love and all You’ve done to provide eternal life with You through Your Son Jesus Christ. Forgive us when we fail to share about Your gift of eternal life. Show us Your glory Lord and may we hunger for more of You with each new day Father, we thank you for family and friends—for laughter and sharing—for opportunities to encourage others through our words, and good deeds.

Share your words of thanksgiving now. (pause)

Father, as we acknowledge you as the Great Physician, we pray for those who are sick and in need of healing or those who are grieving the lost of a loved one. Give us hearts who desire to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

Lift your petitions and intercessions to the Father now. (pause)

Father God, continue to unite us in spirit and purpose, causing us to seek Your will above all else. Help us to listen to one another with compassion and to lift each other up in faith believing that You will meet all our needs in Christ Jesus. In Jesus name, Amen

STUDY AND DISCUSS

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic. Commentary is listed below each passage for you to reference.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 24:36

- **24:36.** The disciples were equipped to know, by the signs, the general season of the Messiah’s return. Those signs were as reliable as the word of the One who gave them the signs. But they were not to go so far as to think they could know the exact day or hour of the Christ’s coming. But draws the contrast between what they were able to know and what they were not. Not only were the disciples to remain ignorant of the exact timing of the Christ’s coming, but not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son knew the time. This particular detail belonged to the Father. The contrast between Son and Father draws attention to the Son’s submission to the Father’s will. The Son trusted and obeyed the Father even though there were critical details which God did not reveal to him. That the time of the Christ’s second coming is unknown motivates most of Jesus’ applicational teaching in the remainder of the discourse (24:42-25:46). He used the uncertain timing to challenge his followers to be ready at all times, in case he should return. This teaching is also a warning to those who claim to know the time of Christ’s return. Such claims have been made for centuries, and, as each one passes, the Messiah has still not come. One would think that people would learn from experience, if not from Jesus’ own teaching. These speculations are foolish and disobedient. They ignore Jesus’ teaching to believers to be obedient and ready at all times.

Jesus’ disciples were eager to know when events regarding Jesus’ future reign would occur. After His resurrection, they hoped the time had come for Israel to rise from servitude with Jesus as King (Acts 1:6). Jesus didn’t only want the Twelve to understand what would come in the end of days, He also desires for us to comprehend the serious challenges facing His followers in the future. Since the

days of Christ, people have wanted to know when He would return to earth. Many predictions have been made about the date of His second coming, but those have only proven to be false.

Considering the fact that Jesus told us “no one knows” when He will return, why do you think people still try to figure it out?

Would it change the way you live if you knew exactly when Jesus was returning to earth? Explain.

Is it possible to prepare for and celebrate an event if you don’t know when it will occur? Explain.

Jesus said no one other than the Father knows that day or hour. Interestingly, Jesus included both the angels of heaven and Himself, the Son, as not knowing the time of His coming. Angels are created beings that, while very powerful, are not omniscient. The Father has not revealed to them His plans for Christ’s return. Yet how can the Son, who is God, not know specifics about His own return? The answer is in Jesus’ human nature. He is fully God, but also fully man. Paul’s letter to the Philippians reminds us that although Jesus is completely God, He took on human nature. Jesus humbled Himself and acted within His humanity (Phil. 2:6-8). While Jesus was able to prophesy concerning those events surrounding His return, He refused to predict a specific date.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 24:37-42.

- **24:37-39.** As an illustration further clarifying the inability of anyone to know the time of the coming of the Son of Man, Jesus drew upon history—the time of Noah. The sinful people of that day were unprepared for God’s judgment. They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. Their worldly lifestyle was an ongoing pattern. It would have gone on without interruption if God had not brought the Flood. The people continued in their self-indulgence up to the day Noah entered the ark. They had an entire century to observe Noah and his sons building the ark and to hear Noah’s testimony concerning God’s anger at their sin and the coming judgment. But they did not recognize the warning until it was too late. The judgment of the Flood took them all away, because they remained stubborn and ignorant of their coming doom. Echoing the opening phrase of 24:37, Jesus closed with, That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Those who heeded Jesus’ warnings and watched for the signs would be saved. Those who ignored them would find sudden judgment coming upon them before they could realize what was happening or why. Notice that this verse has nothing to do with the rapture of the church. The ones taken are not the believers but the unbelievers, as was true in Noah’s day.
- **24:40-41.** By way of specific illustration and application, Jesus gave two examples from the contemporary lifestyle of his day. The two men working in the field and the two women grinding grain at the mill represented the average citizen. The message of this was, “Everyone needs to heed these warnings.” One of each pair was prepared because he or she knew Jesus’ teachings, had watched for the signs, and had remained obedient. The other in each pair was unprepared, because he or she had either been ignorant of Jesus’ teaching or else simply ignored them and not lived according to the righteous standards of the king and his kingdom. Such people were taken from the scene when the king returned to rule. Jesus’ point was: be prepared. His arrival will be sudden and unpredictable. The use of the present tense of “to take” (paralambano), “and “to leave” (aphiemi), was purposeful in order to convey the suddenness and unpredictability of the action, even though the context makes it clear the actions will happen in the future. With this statement, Jesus completed the prophetic portion of the Olivet Discourse. He then moved into the preparation part of his teaching to help people get ready for these future events by living correctly in the present. Here we come to another unfortunate decision on the part of the scholars who chose the chapter and verse divisions in our Bibles. It would have been better to start Matthew 25 here. This is where Jesus transitioned from prophecy to practical preparation in our daily living. Matthew 24:42-51 includes a practical command and the first two of a series of five illustrative parables that

teach us how to live today in light of the future. Watchfulness, coupled with faithful service, is the key principle.

- **24:42.** Therefore means, “because the time of my return will be sudden and unpredictable.” This is the central turning point in the discourse. As Noah spent time and energy preparing for the Flood, so people living prior to Christ’s return must spend themselves in being alert and ready for his coming. The command is, Keep watch (cf. 1 Cor. 16:13; 1 Thess. 5:6; 1 Pet. 5:8; Rev. 3:2-3; 16:15). The reason for this exhortation to continual diligence was in the preceding teaching (24:36-41), which Jesus summarized in the next clause, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. “Your Lord” is significant, drawing attention to the fact that we do not belong to ourselves. Rather, it is our master and creator who will return. He will call us to account.

What three scenes did Jesus describe to express what we can know about Christ’s second coming? How do these three pictures inform you?

What is your initial reaction to these verses? Do you find them comforting, encouraging, frightening, worrisome, confusing, other? Explain.

Knowing that Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), how do you think He felt as He described the two scenes in verses 40-41? How does this idea help you understand why He has still not yet returned?

The specific days Jesus referenced likely included the years from God’s command to build the ark until the actual flood that engulfed the earth, about 100 years. Jesus likened this period of time with the day of His return. The similarity between the two periods lay not in the condition of the earth, but in the condition of the hearts and habits of the earth’s population. Jesus expanded His analogy by describing the normality of daily life prior to the flood. As Noah built the ark, he also preached, calling people to repentance and righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5). His faith in God and fear of God contrasted with the people around him who disregarded his message (Heb. 11:7).

Verses 40-41 form a type of Hebrew parallelism. Jewish writers often used two similar statements to emphasize their point. Jesus used these examples to demonstrate that people will be going about their regular activities. The message for us today is the same. The cultures are different, but the conditions will be the same. Unrepentant people will continue to refuse God’s call to repentance. They will go about their daily routines without concern until it is too late.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 24:43-44.

- **24:43-44.** Verse 43 is a brief parable illustrating the importance of readiness at all times. Jesus emphasized its importance with the introductory But understand this. Each of us is like an owner of the house who is about to be robbed. Not only is he unaware of the time of the robber’s coming, but he does not even know he is a target. If the ignorance persists, it represents the ignorance of a person who fails to heed Jesus’ warning about the future. Now the head of the house, if he is informed, will be aware of the likelihood of being robbed, just as we know that Jesus is returning and that judgment will accompany his coming. But he does not know the time a robber might come, just as we do not know the time of Christ’s return. So you also must be ready (24:44). Not only is the Son of Man coming at an unknown hour, but even at a time that would seem least likely to us (when you do not expect him). If we are taken by surprise, it is not because God is out to trick us but because of our own apathetic self-deception or negligence.

In the sense of Christ’s second coming, what does it mean to “stay awake” and be ready?

Would you say you give more preparation to remembering Christ's first coming or preparing for His second coming? What is the relationship between the two?

Can a person be rightly prepared for Christ's second coming if he or she does not delight in His first coming?

Christ's followers should be alert, which means both to wake up and to watch out. One way to do that is to regularly remember and rejoice in Christ's first coming. When we do not remember what Christ has done on our behalf, what He promises, and worship Him for it, we can be lulled into a sense of complacency as Jesus' return is delayed. Peter wrote that God is giving people the opportunity to repent, but God will not delay Christ's return forever (2 Peter 3:9). The Day of Judgment will arrive. The only question is when it will happen.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What would you do differently today if you knew Christ was returning tomorrow?

As a group, how can we help each other live with greater spiritual expectancy and delight?

How does anticipating the second coming of Christ increase our motivation for spreading the gospel?

Who could you share the gospel with this week with the urgency of Christ's second coming on your heart and mind?

OPTIONAL GROUP ACTIVITY

Activity: "Living in Light of His Return"

Focus: How the promise of Jesus' return shapes daily life

Step 1: Anchor Reading (2 minutes)

Read Revelation 22:12-13 aloud.

Frame it with this sentence: "The Bible talks about Jesus' return not to satisfy curiosity, but to shape how we live now."

Ask participants to listen for what we are called to do, not when it will happen.

Step 2: Sorting Statements (3 minutes)

Read the following statements aloud and ask the group to respond call out whether they match more with "Hope," "Readiness," or "Distraction."

- "Trying to calculate dates and signs"
- "Encouraging one another to remain faithful"
- "Living as if Jesus will return, but not today"
- "Serving others quietly and consistently"
- "studying Scripture to understand what happens when we die"

Briefly discuss why they chose each category.

Step 3: Small-Group Reflection (3 minutes)

Break into pairs or groups of three and ask:

- Which part of the teaching on Jesus' return brings you the most hope?
- Which part most challenges your daily priorities?
- How might believing Jesus could return at any time change the way you treat people?

Invite 1–2 groups to share a key insight.

Step 4: Personal Readiness Question (1–2 minutes)

Ask participants to complete this sentence silently or aloud: "If Jesus returned this week, one area of my life I'd want to be more faithful in is..."

Reinforce grace—not fear.

Closing Reflection (30 seconds)

Read Revelation 22:20: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

Close with a prayer for hope, endurance, and faithful obedience.

PRAYER

Prayer Requests of Group Members (be sure to share these with the group and check in on relevant requests)

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Those we are Asking God to Save

Friends -

Family -

Co-workers -

Others -

As a group, pray the following prayer: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which Your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility. We pray that in the last day, when He shall come again in His glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through Him who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.