



Alert

JESUS IS COMING BACK.

MATTHEW 24:36-51

Many people are curious—and perhaps fearful—about the end of the world. Everyone from the preppers and survivalists to the general skeptic finds the prospect of the end of the world to be a fascinating subject. We read books and watch movies that portray the final days of the planet. Doomsday theories abound. People in general want to know the when, how, who, and what regarding the end of the age. In that, we are not too far removed from Jesus's first disciples.

 **What is it about the end of the world that most fascinates or frightens you?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 24:1-51

After the confrontations in the temple in Matthew 21–23, Jesus left the temple never to return again. As He left, He spoke of the coming destruction of both the temple and Jerusalem (23:37-39).

Chapter 24 begins with the disciples marveling over the magnificence of the temple. Jesus informed them that the temple would be destroyed. His disciples asked when this would happen and what signs would signal His return and the end of the age.

Jesus’s response prompted what is known as the Olivet Discourse, an extended teaching given on the Mount of Olives found in Matthew 24–25. Not every scholar agrees on the meaning of Jesus’s teachings. A good rule of thumb is to always let the context guide the interpretation. With that in mind, consider that the disciples asked two questions of Jesus: when would the temple be destroyed, and what signs will signal His coming and the end of time? A valid approach, then, would be to understand that Jesus was answering these questions.

In verses 4-14, Jesus described events that would occur before His return. These events could be misinterpreted as signs that Jesus’s coming was near. Jesus told the disciples to not be deceived by false messiahs. As a part of this warning, Jesus told them they would suffer persecution “because of my name” (v. 9). He challenged them to stand firm during these days.

Jesus spoke specifically of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (vv. 15-28). Some, however, see these verses as being a prophecy concerning the tribulation or a period of great distress.

In verse 29, the Olivet Discourse shifted to the question regarding Jesus’s return and the end of the age. This discussion continues to the end of the chapter. The bottom line is that the follower of Jesus is to be alert for His coming again. We do not know when. What can be known is that Jesus will return!

 **Read Matthew 24:36-51. Identify words and phrases that challenge us to be ready for Jesus’s return.**

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

AN UNKNOWN HOUR (MATT. 24:36-41)

³⁶ “Now concerning that day and hour no one knows—neither the angels of heaven nor the Son—except the Father alone. ³⁷ As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. ³⁸ For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark. ³⁹ They didn’t know until the flood came and swept them all away. This is the way the coming of the Son of Man will be. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding grain with a hand mill; one will be taken and one left.”

VERSE 36

Implied in the disciples’ question about signs of Jesus’s coming was the question, “When?” The answer, according to Jesus was, ***no one knows—neither the angels*** nor He Himself knew God’s timetable. Philippians 2:6-8 speaks of the Son of God limiting Himself of divine attributes when He came to earth and took on flesh and blood. Here, Jesus spoke of limitations on His omniscience.

Because no one knows the time of Christ’s return, any attempt to speculate and calculate it is a waste of time and energy. Instead, preparedness is the proper response to the fact that Jesus will return. Jesus used the next verses to challenge His followers to be ready because His return could happen at any time.

***Preparedness is the proper response to
the fact that Jesus will return.***

VERSES 37-41

Jesus used the account of ***Noah*** and the flood to point to the need to be ready. When the ***flood*** arrived, the wicked were unprepared. They were engaged in the normal activities of life—***eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage***. Nothing was wrong with these activities. But they had given no thought beyond the immediate. Such will be the coming again of Jesus. Everyone will be impacted, and no one will be exempt from the events surrounding His return.

Noah and his family, just like the others in his day, did not know the exact timing of the flood event. God had warned them the flood judgment was coming. Noah's family heeded the warning and was prepared. Because **Noah boarded the ark** along with his family, they were saved from this judgment event.

The suddenness of the flood served as a warning concerning the suddenness of the day when **the Son of Man** returns. As those in Noah's day, people will ignore warnings and obvious signs of Christ's return and be unprepared to meet Him. Tragically, people dismiss the prospect of standing before God with disdain and indifference. The coming judgment will find people responding in much the same way as they did in the days of Noah.

People dismiss the prospect of standing before God with disdain and indifference.

Jesus further illustrated His point with illustrations from daily life. The pictures are of **two men** working in a **field** and **two women** milling grain. **One will be taken and one left.** Some scholars see the words *be taken* to point to being taken away to judgment when Christ returns. Those *left* will enter the kingdom of God. Other scholars understand the Greek word translated *be taken* to picture a gentle gathering of believers to the Lord. This interpretation also sees the Greek word for *left* to carry the meaning of "abandoned" or "sent away." Regardless of the two interpretations, the point is the same: separation of the wicked from the righteous.



What do we learn about God's plans for Jesus's return in these verses? How do the two illustrations given help us better understand the nature of Jesus's return?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Last Things*

According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. (See 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3; Revelation 1:7.)

BE ALERT (MATT. 24:42-44)

⁴² “Therefore be alert, since you don’t know what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this: If the homeowner had known what time the thief was coming, he would have stayed alert and not let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ This is why you are also to be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

VERSES 42-44

Verse 42 builds on the warning given in the previous verses. Because no one can know the *day* when the *Lord is coming*, Christ’s followers are to stay awake; they are to maintain watchfulness; they are to *be alert*. The verb used here is in the present tense and calls for continuous alertness. Because the moment of Jesus’s return is hidden from everyone but the Father, believers have no idea as to when it will happen. Therefore, we need to live on the alert with the expectation that it could happen at any moment. The identity of the one coming is *your Lord*.

Jesus used another illustration—the *homeowner* and a *thief*. The idea of Jesus’s return being like a *thief* coming at an unknown time became a common metaphor for the early church as they anticipated Jesus’s coming. It is used in the New Testament seven times to describe this event (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2,4; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15).

The command is not just to be alert or stay awake but to also be ready.

Verse 44 summarizes the entire warning to be ready. No one knows when Jesus will return. The day is not known (v. 42), no one knows during which “watch” He may come (v. 43), and no one knows the hour of His return. Constant watchfulness is essential because Jesus’s return will be *at an hour you do not expect*. The command is not just to be alert or stay awake but to also *be ready*.

While these verses challenge believers to be constantly watching and expecting Christ’s return, they also serve as a strong notice to us not to attempt to pinpoint the date of His return. That is a temptation to which many have succumbed. Jesus said, “No one knows,” and “it will happen when least expected!”



If Jesus said it is not possible to know the time of His coming, why do people keep trying to predict the date of His return?



What does it mean to be ready for Jesus's return? Why is it important to be ready?

BE FAITHFUL (MATT. 24:45-51)

⁴⁵ “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give them food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom the master finds doing his job when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delayed,’ ⁴⁹ and starts to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ that servant’s master will come on a day he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know. ⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

VERSES 45-47

Jesus told a parable contrasting two responses to the absence of the *master* of a *household*. This parable could be featuring two different servants, one who was *faithful and wise* and the other who was *wicked*. Or it is speaking of two alternative scenarios a *servant* might follow.

In the first scenario, the *master* considered him to be trustworthy and sensible. Because of this, he left him in charge of *his household*. The implication based on the second half of the parable is that the master was away for an extended period. This servant was given authority over the household and the responsibility to administer the household.

The *servant* who carried out his assigned task and was found *doing his job* when the master returned was applauded by Jesus. The word *blessed* is a word that can mean “congratulations” or “how fortunate” is this person. It is the same word used in

Matthew 5:3-11 in the Beatitudes. Note that this servant wasn't sitting idly waiting for the master to return. He was busy doing the job he had been given to do. This applies to Christians today. We are not to be idly waiting for Christ's return but are to be engaged in the commission He has given us—to make disciples of the nations.

Jesus emphasized the truth He was teaching with the words ***truly I tell you***. These words mean: pay attention! Because of the loyal servant's continued diligence in carrying out his assignment, the master promoted him out of his temporary assignment into a permanent position of responsibility. That promotion most likely was to the position of "steward" of the household since he was ***put . . . in charge of all*** the master's ***possessions***. He now had the permanent responsibility to watch over and use wisely all that the master possessed. It was a position of great accountability and great prestige.

We are not to be idly waiting for Christ's return but are to be engaged in the commission He has given us.

VERSES 48-51

Next came the contrast. What if the servant did just the opposite? What if he didn't take his responsibility seriously? What might be the outcome?

In this part of the parable, the servant is labeled as ***that wicked servant***. He reasoned in his heart that his ***master*** was ***delayed***. The word *delayed* carries the idea of being away for a long time. Thinking that he had plenty of time, he began to mistreat those under his authority. Not only did he fail to care for those in his charge, but he neglected other duties by partying ***with drunkards***. His attitude was a reckless disdain for the fact that the master could return at any moment.

His carelessness about the return of the master is reminiscent of the words of 2 Peter 3:3-4: "Above all, be aware of this: Scoffers will come in the last days scoffing and following their own evil desires, saying, 'Where is his "coming" that he promised? Ever since our ancestors fell asleep, all things continue as they have been since the beginning of creation.'"

In Jesus's parable, this servant does not represent a follower of Christ. If this parable represents two different servants,

Jesus could well be setting up a contrast between a true follower of Christ who is faithful and alert for the return of his Lord, and an unbeliever who has no saving relationship with Him and scoffs at the idea of His return.

Just like the thief who comes at an hour when he is not expected, so the ***servant's master will come*** when least expected. Again, Jesus spoke of both an unexpected ***day*** and an unexpected ***hour***. This sudden return applies, of course, to the faithful and wise servant, as well as the wicked servant. One was ready for his return, the other was not.

The consequences on the wicked servant for being unprepared were devastating. The word picture is that the master would ***cut him to pieces***. This literally means “to cut in two” or “cut asunder.” The term is used in Scripture for the dismemberment that takes place in animal sacrifices. The picture is that of a terrible end for those who fail to be alert.

Jesus's intent in using such a brutal picture was to shock His hearers into realizing the extreme seriousness of being ready for His return. In addition, the wicked servant will be assigned ***a place with the hypocrites***, that is, those who are not true followers of Christ. Their place will be in hell ***where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth***.



How are you preparing yourself for Jesus's return?





BIBLE SKILL: Use cross references to learn more about a word or phrase.

In Matthew 24:51, Jesus used the expression “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Examine these other passages where Jesus used the phrase: Matthew 8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 25:30; and Luke 13:28. Observe the context and setting of these passages. Write a summary of what the expression refers to and why it should be a warning to all.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We can be certain that Jesus will one day return.
- + Believers should be ready for Christ's return.
- + Believers are to remain faithful while we await Christ's return, stewarding well the resources God has given us.

 **As a group, consider how often we tend to be like the wicked servant as we allow the things of life to distract us from anticipating Christ's return. What are ways that your group can assist each other in staying alert?**

 **Think through your typical day. What activities do you engage in that assist you in remaining faithful as you await Christ's return? How can you enhance those activities in your daily schedule? Are there other actions you can take to stay alert?**

Memorize Matthew 24:44.

Prayer Needs

