

Be Ready, You Don't Know When the Son will Come

Matthew 24:36 – 25:13

Turn to Matthew 24 please. This is the first Sunday of Advent. That means this is the first Sunday of the Christian year. The ancient church had a yearly cycle of Scripture readings, and the year began with the first Sunday of Advent. In the Christian year, today is new year's day.

Advent means coming, the coming of Christ. The ancient church read about both comings during Advent, his first coming, when he was born to Mary in Bethlehem, and his second coming, when he will come in power and great glory with a loud trumpet call.

Today, his second coming. The beginning of Matthew 24 tells us that Jesus says these things privately to the Twelve. He says that his second coming will be completely unexpected.

1 The Days of Noah, Life as Usual - Matthew 24:36–44

But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

No person knows when the Son of Man will return, but the fact of it is absolutely certain. It will happen, on this earth. It will be real, and everyone will know. Even the Son himself does not know when it will happen, only the Father. Some people think they know. Take it from the Lord: no one knows.

The people in the days of Noah had no idea judgment was coming. They were living ordinary life. It sounds like life was pretty good. Eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. Happy celebrations going on until the last day. No one had any idea until the flood came and took them all away.

Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Is the one taken away taken to judgment or taken to salvation? It's hard to say. In the previous sentence, the flood took people away to judgment. But earlier in chapter 24, the angels gather the elect and bring them to Christ. That would be taken away to salvation. So it is not clear whether it is better to be taken or to be left.

What's clear is that elect people and lost people will be working side by side, ordinary daily tasks, and suddenly one goes to glory and the other to judgement. When the Son of Man returns, that separation happens in a moment.

2 Like A Thief in the Night, So Keep Watch – Matthew 24:42–44

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Verse 42 says, “So keep watch, because you do not know on which day your Lord will return.” In 25:13, after the story of the ten bridesmaids, says almost the same: “So keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” These two lines are a bracket around the three stories in between. The bracket collects them into one unit, the thief in the night, the faithful and evil servants, and the ten bridesmaids. The message of all three is that the Lord's followers should always be ready for him to return.

Jesus now tells a story of how completely unexpected his coming will be: a house owner being robbed. Obviously, if he'd known when the robbers were coming, he'd have been ready. Like the people in the days of Noah, like the men working in the field, the women at the mill – the event is completely unexpected. The house owner was not expecting robbers at all.

There will be no time to prepare. If people are counting on time for last minute preparation, forget it. Completely unexpected. None of the people in in these stories knew in time to prepare.

Not every detail is to teach us. The Lord's coming will be unexpected, like a thief in the night. But Jesus is not coming to steal, and he does not hide, and he's not trying to get into anyone's house. The story just teaches that no one will be expecting him.

3 My Lord Delays, I Can Do what I Want - Matthew 24:45–51

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In the thief in the night story, the return was completely unexpected. In this section, the faithful and wicked servant, the Lord returns sooner than expected. In the last story, the wise and foolish bridesmaids, the Lord returns later than expected. These three need to be taken as a unit. There is no way to know when the Lord is coming back. There is no way to beat the odds. Be ready at all times.

This story teaches that Christ's return could be much sooner than expected. The faithful and wise servant stayed ready. But when the evil servant saw that the coming was not immediate, he assumed he had lots of time. He said to himself, "My master is delayed." It turned out that he had less time than he thought. The master was not delayed as long as he thought.

This section teaches what being ready looks like: ethical behavior. Ready is being faithful to the Lord in daily life.

Two servants who were put in charge of their fellow servants to give them their food at the proper time. These are leaders in the church, those appointed to care for fellow servants. I can feel the Lord speaking to me. When the Lord returns, are his leaders caring for their fellow servants the way they should? Or are they harsh and careless with their fellow servants, and just enjoying themselves?

The master had given the wicked servant a responsible position, and the servant had abandoned it. *The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him, and at an hour he does not know. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

Those are severe consequences, aren't they. And Jesus himself is the master. We tend to go past these hard warnings quickly. Let's not do that. Jesus was not above frightening us. He takes no joy from causing fear in us. But Jesus does not want us to get careless and wander away from what he told us to do.

If he needs to frighten us from time to time, to keep us following his instructions, then he will frighten us. He's talking to the apostles, and he wants them to listen and take this in. Let's not say to ourselves, "Christ won't return for a long time. I can get away with this." Bad idea.

4 Not Ready for a Delayed Return - Matthew 25:1–13

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' "Then all the bridesmaids woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' " 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'

"But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The bridesmaids who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.' "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Here, Jesus warns us that the coming might be later than expected. This parable describes people whose readiness ran out. If the Groom had come sooner, they'd have been ready. Because he came later than they expected, their readiness had run out.

In this story, going to sleep is not a problem. The wise and the foolish both went to sleep. The wise and the foolish both let their lamps go out. In this story that's fine. In this story, the wise women were ready for the coming to be much later than expected, and that's what we need to learn.

People have done many things with the "oil," by way of allegory. Let that go. Oil does not stand for anything, and the lamps don't stand for anything. If oil stands for anything, it is readiness. They ran out of readiness.

Five are wise and five are foolish. Jesus talked about that in one other place, right at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, end of Matthew 7, the wise and foolish builders. The wise builder hears the words of Jesus and does them; the foolish builder hears the words of Jesus but does not do them. Being ready for Jesus to be delayed just means keep doing what he said. It's that simple.

The five foolish bridesmaids who arrived after the door was closed called him, "Lord, Lord!" These five really think he's their Lord, and they have been waiting for his return. But the door stays closed, and he says to them, "Truly I tell you, I don't know you."

In one other place in Matthew, people say "Lord, Lord," to Jesus at final judgement, and it does not go well for them, either. Again, it is at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, just before the wise and foolish builders. To be ready means to keep living as Jesus taught, especially in his basic discipleship teaching, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5–7.

In the kingdom there is a huge amount of forgiveness for followers who struggle to live in the Lord's ways. But the wicked servant who beat his fellow servants was no longer trying to do what the master told him to do. And these five bridesmaids lived in his ways for a while, and then they didn't, and they seem not to have noticed.

The ten bridesmaids story ends with “So keep watch, stay alert, because you do not know the day or the hour.” This is what Jesus said just before the thief in the night. “Keep watch” means “just keep doing what I told you to do. Endure to the end.”

Something happened to me with this message. It has happened before. I pick a text of Scripture because I know what it teaches, and I think I should teach that. And as I spend a week reading it and re-reading and re-reading, I find out that it's saying more than what I thought.

I thought these stories just taught that the second coming would be unexpected. These stories do teach that. But Jesus was also warning us. He was urging us to keep living in his ways, and warning us not to leave that behind, because that would be disastrous.

Jesus knows how prone we are to get sloppy about living in his ways. He so much does not want that to happen. Remember the church in Ephesus, in Revelation 2? They used to love each other, they imitated the church at the end of Acts 2. But by the time John wrote Revelation, they had left that first love. They still did other things well, but they had lost something essential. We can live well, and then lose our way. Jesus warns us to guard us against that.

The believers at Laodicea, in Revelation 3, were so pleased with themselves, so satisfied, that they had basically left Jesus out of the church. He was on the outside, knocking at the door to get back in. We can live well, and then lose our way. Jesus does not want that.

Behind these sober stories is a good shepherd who's doing what he needs to do, to keep us on the right path. Sometimes he needs to prod us, make us uncomfortable, to remind us to stick with what he told us to do. He loves us enough to die for us, and this is all part of him bringing us into his presence, blameless and full of joy. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, we read in Jude that you are able to keep us from falling. We read there that you can bring us into your presence without fault and with great joy. Please keep us from falling, and bring each of us into your presence without fault and with great joy. Thank you for reminding us to stay on your path. Help us with your Holy Spirit. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.