

The Return of the King

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if you can turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 25, which if you're using a church Bible is on page 994, we're continuing to follow the Apostles' Creed, the ideas there.

So we have last week thought about Jesus ascending to take the throne of heaven, and now we're thinking about this reality that from there He will come, the return of the King, He will come to judge the living and the dead, something that Jesus taught about, and we find it here a lot in Matthew 24 and 25.

So we're going to look at this central parable here, Matthew chapter 25 verse 14 to verse 30. Let's again hear God's Word.

Again, the kingdom of heaven will be like a man going on a journey who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability.

Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also the one with two bags of gold gained two more.

[1 : 2 6] But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master's money. After a long time, the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them.

The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. Master, he said, you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more. His master replied, well done, good and faithful servant.

You've been faithful with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness. The man with two bags of gold also came.

Master, he said, you entrusted me with two bags of gold. See, I have gained two more. His master replied, well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things.

I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness. Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. Master, he said, I know that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed.

[2 : 3 2] So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you. His master replied, you wicked, lazy servant. So you knew that I harvest what I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed.

Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers so that when I returned, I would have received it back with interest. So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has 10 bags.

For whoever has will be given more and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them and throw that worthless servant outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Amen. So the question is sometimes asked, when will the world end and how will it happen? Often we encounter fear and anxiety about the future of our planet.

There is an organization called the Global Challenges Foundation. It doesn't strike me as a particularly enjoyable place to work because it's their job to try and identify. Here are the main challenges facing humanity, facing the world.

[3 : 50] Here are what could bring the end of the world, according to some of these leading scientists. So they have identified this year the threat of nuclear war, pandemic, perhaps climate change, ecological collapse, the fear of an expanding sun, a massive asteroid.

Even artificial intelligence as the part of the top 10 list of challenges that could bring the destruction of our world.

To read their reports, sometimes you get a sense that there is a hopelessness and a desperation. And to read can even add to anxiety. When will the world end?

How will it happen? The tone is so different from the biblical writers who know key truths. They know that King Jesus right now sits on the throne of heaven, that he is in control.

That he will certainly return to wind up history on God's terms. And when he comes, he will come to judge and destroy evil and death once and for all.

[5 : 06] And he will establish the kingdom of God on this earth. And to be equipped with this answer is to recognize as Christians, we have a source of hope and comfort for ourselves, but also for our world.

It's interesting when you read Christian novelists and they take this theme, the theme of the returning king. Think about it if you've read C.S. Lewis or Tolkien.

When the true king returns, darkness is pushed back. Peace and joy comes to the land when Aslan or Aragorn comes. We have good answers as Christians to the questions that are being asked.

And so it's important for us to recognize that. To think together about what is it that we believe and to think about why it matters. So the first thing that I want us to do before we dive into Matthew 25 is to just see the truth in a variety of different places.

I want to begin with a statistic that fascinated me this week. I discovered, I didn't count, but I'm going to trust the scholar, that there are over 300 references in the New Testament to the return of Christ.

[6 : 18] One in every 13 verses of the New Testament draws our attention to the certain return of the Lord Jesus. And that in itself is enough to say to us that this has always been a truth vital to our faith and our hope and our love.

True for the apostles, true for the early church, and it can be true for us as well. Let me just take us on a quick whistle-stop tour to see some examples.

We'll go to the end of the Bible. We'll go to the book of Revelation. Think about the apostle John as he had that vision of the Lord Jesus unveiling spiritual truths and things to come.

Revelation 1-7, he states, Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him.

So right at the beginning, we're introduced in this vision to the reality of the certain return of Jesus. We get to the close, we get to Revelation 22, we get to verse 20.

[7 : 16] We have Jesus testifying to these things, saying, Yes, I am coming soon. And the response to the soon imminent return of Jesus is, Amen, come, Lord Jesus.

What's the hope of John? What's the hope of the suffering church in the first century? What's the hope of the church in every century? That the Lord Jesus will come. That's the book of Revelation.

Think of another apostle, the apostle Peter, in his first letter. Chapter 1, verse 13, he writes this, Okay, so there's our focus as Christians, the return of Jesus Christ.

And here's our reality. We enjoy grace now, but there is more grace to come when Jesus Christ is revealed. Let's go to the apostle Paul.

Let's hear what he writes to the Philippians. Chapter 3, verse 20, he says, Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body.

[8 : 42] So we have this eager anticipation for the return of Christ and the reality that when He comes, His people will enjoy transformed, glorified bodies for all eternity.

So it's just a tiny sample to highlight that the church taught, believed, encouraged a focus upon a physical, visible return of the Lord Jesus, bringing final judgment and salvation.

Why is that focus there? Because they're following the teaching of the Lord Jesus. We could go to lots of places in the Gospels, but we're going to settle in Matthew 24 and 25.

So if you have your Bible there at Matthew chapter 24, some of which we already read, but verse 30 we didn't read. Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven.

Then all the people of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather His elect from the four winds from one end of the heavens to the other.

[9 : 53] So it's clear Jesus is going to come back. This is going to be terrible news for those who have rejected Jesus, glorious hope-filled news for those who are going to be called by the angels to belong to His kingdom.

Verse 36, we did read, About that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. So we get that consistent note.

The timing is uncertain, but the return is absolutely certain. We don't know when, but we know He will. And because that's true, there is a certain spirit that should typify the Christian life.

Verse 42 of chapter 24, Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. Or verse 44, So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him.

He is coming. We don't know when. So we must be watchful and ready. And then Jesus continues that theme in chapter 25 with three parables, each teaching the truth in story form.

[11 : 08] And we're only going to look at the middle parable, but we understand His key theme when He tells the parable of the wise and the foolish virgins. There in chapter 25, verse 13, Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

In verse 21, How shall we live? Who is praised, well done, good and faithful. Servant. We're to be watchful. We're to be faithful.

And then the parable of the sheep and goats. Verse 34, Those who receive their inheritance. The kingdom prepared.

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was ill and you looked after me.

I was in prison and you came to visit me. We are to be watchful and faithful and engaged in loving service, knowing that Jesus will return one day at a time that we don't know, but the Father does.

[12 : 17] So we've just very quickly scanned over the New Testament teaching. J.I. Packard asked the important question. Since the return of Christ is everywhere in the New Testament, and since it's presented as vital for the faith of a believer, when it's presented as good news, he asked the question, why is it that the church has stopped talking about it or stopped thinking about it as much as in past centuries?

He suggested some potential reasons why. Maybe it's a reaction to some of the unhelpful teaching, perhaps unhelpful teaching that we've heard, maybe that focused on trying to figure out, when is Jesus coming back?

Maybe we grew up at a time when the Left Behind series was capturing attention. Maybe we remember people with sandwich boards claiming the end of the world is nigh, and we can have a reaction to that with the extent that we lose sight of the truth that Jesus is returning.

And we're told that so often because it's supposed to give hope to us as his people. Perhaps one of the challenges we face is skepticism.

So many questions swirling around about the birth of Jesus, about the resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps it follows that there are lots of questions about the return of Jesus, maybe especially because it seems to be taking so long.

[13 : 48] That was true even in Peter's day. Perhaps the challenge, maybe for us here as we live when we do, is it's very easy for us to be worldly minded.

We quite enjoy comfort. We're enjoying the good life. Maybe it's hard for us to imagine that life gets any better than this. In our comfort, we can lose a sense of urgency, of waiting for the return of Jesus and wanting to be commended by him.

So one of the things that the New Testament writers do is they use that imagery of an athlete, encouraging us to focus on our goal, to keep our eye on the prize.

And the goal and the prize is the return of the Lord Jesus. So Paul, we heard it in 1 Timothy 6, he used the return of Christ as a motivation for our obedience.

Keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews uses the return of Christ as a means for ongoing encouragement within God's people.

[15 : 00] Hebrews 10, 25, Not giving up the habit of meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another, All that to say we need Christ's return within our good news.

The gospel that we share includes the return of the King. Because when the true King returns, Satan and sin and death and evil and darkness are defeated once and for all.

That the new heavens and the new earth are established. That God and his people dwell together forever. We will be made like Jesus and we will see him face to face.

That's our hope. That's the future for the people of God. That's our good news. So having stated that truth, let's look at this story that Jesus tells in Matthew chapter 25.

Just to very quickly put this parable into context. Hopefully we've already seen this as part of Jesus' extended teaching about his departure and about his return.

[16 : 16] And then immediately following this, we come to chapter 26 and 27. We have the Lord's Supper followed by Jesus' arrest and trial and execution.

And so Jesus is helping us to see, Matthew is helping us to see that Jesus the King is shortly going to depart, as he prophesied and predicted. And we are invited to trust him, that he will return, as he prophesied and predicted.

That we would keep alert, that we'd be wise and not foolish. That we would keep loving Jesus and his church like the sheep and not the goats of that other parable. And then in the middle, we have this parable, sometimes called the parable of the talents.

Here in this translation, it's the parable of the bags of gold. And in this story, there is enough for us to see essential truths and the significance of the return of Jesus the King.

Just to follow the story quickly, verses 14 and 15. We begin with a master who is distributing wealth to his servants.

[17 : 25] The kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven is like a master who is leaving. And he calls his servants, and he gives out wealth for them to use, that wealth for them to improve upon.

They're given a vast sum. Each bag of gold is the equivalent to 20 years' salary. This master is free to give as he sees fit.

He gives according to abilities. And it's really interesting to think that Jesus is telling this parable shortly before he will return to heaven. And we're being reminded here that the church is to continue his work, and he's going to give his spirit, he's going to give spiritual gifts.

So there's that distribution that happens. And then in verse 16 to 18, we see the action of the servants. There's really two different kinds of servants, aren't there?

There are the first two, the one who receives five bags and the one who receives two bags, and they are active. We see them obedient. We understand that they feel their weight of responsibility.

[18 : 31] They're working hard when the master is absent, and their wealth grows. The wealth of the master grows. But we then have that third servant receive one bag of gold.

He's both unwilling to work, and he's unwilling to risk losing what he's been given. So he digs a hole and sticks it in the ground.

Maybe in past generations, we can think of people keeping their savings under the mattress, keeping it in a big jar somewhere in their home. Well, after a long time, verse 19, that return of the unknown, the timing of Christ's return is there.

There is the return, and there is the reckoning, because the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them.

Now, two servants, they are commended. Why are they commended? Verse 21, well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful.

[19 : 37] The outcome for this servant, faithful with a few things, given greater responsibility, and invited to enter into great joy, to enter into the master's happiness.

Perhaps we're reminded of Jesus' words in John 15, when he says he's come to make our joy complete. So two servants are commended because they're faithful, one servant is condemned.

Why? Verse 24, because the servant has a negative view of his master. I knew that you're a hard man, harvesting where you've not sown, and gathering where you've not scattered seed.

Takes a harsh view, thinks his master is someone who exploits others, so he will neither work for him, nor consider him worth taking risks for.

It shows that this servant fails to see the duty he owes to his master. He's been given a responsibility, he's been given a task, therefore he has a duty, but he's failed to fulfill.

[20 : 50] He fails to understand the real heart of his master. A master who we've just seen is generous, and is joyful, and gives an invitation into joy.

Perhaps in our minds, we might think of the elder brother in the famous prodigal son story. I've been slaving for my father. You haven't given me anything.

He strikes us as someone who is lukewarm, don't care enough to serve, don't care enough to outright reject his master.

And what happens is that he is condemned and judged by his words and his actions. He failed to serve.

His money is taken. Take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten. And when that money is taken, the master-servant relationship is now severed.

[21 : 55] This failure to be faithful is serious, especially as we're reminded at the end that this isn't a morality tale, that servants should work hard and be diligent and respect their masters because they don't know when he's going to come back.

But in verse 30, we're reminded this is a kingdom parable. Verse 30, throw that worthless servant outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This is about eternity. There is heaven and there is hell. There is joy and there is despair within this parable.

And so there are valuable lessons as we apply it to the truth of the return of King Jesus. First to recognize that Jesus has entrusted his church with gold.

We have the gospel. Jesus has left. But he's left the apostles, he's left the church with that precious truth. The way to salvation, the way of life, the way back to God through faith in Jesus.

[23 : 17] We have the gospel. We've got the gold. The story also reminds us, doesn't it, that hearing the message of Jesus the King, hearing about his kingdom, is both a privilege and a responsibility.

This parable, like so many others, calls us to a life of faithfulness and calls us to a life of active obedience. It calls for a response. It calls for a positive response to Jesus the King.

This parable reminds us that followers of Jesus, we must be using what we've been given, using the gospel message. How do we use the gospel message within the context, even of our church?

We use the gospel, the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus, the good news of who our God is, to encourage one another. We share the truth of God's word to equip one another so that we might persevere in obedience.

We use the gospel so we can evangelize, so we can share our faith with others, that they too might live with a certain hope and promise and anticipation about the return of Jesus.

[24 : 41] Because this parable reminds us that Jesus is returning to bring a final judgment. The Bible, Jesus himself will make clear that as Christians, we will be judged on our faithfulness in service.

Non-Christians will be judged on the rejection of Jesus as King and Master. All of us will know judgment.

But we have promise here in this parable, don't we, that Jesus' return will bring eternal reward for his people. Those who have faith in him, those who are faithful to him.

that we too have this promise that we will share our master's happiness. That heaven is a world of perfect love and perfect joy.

The new heavens and the new earth will be joy that lasts forever. That God's people will share that in the presence of God with our Savior, the Lord Jesus, that is real joy.

[25 : 54] And for disciples then and now, knowing about the return of the King, knowing about the judgment and knowing about the joy was intended as a perspective to fuel obedience, to help us to persevere.

When life is full of challenge and struggle, when we feel tired and weary on the walk of faith, here is something to lift our eyes up to and to focus our gaze on as we keep that goal and Jesus' glory in view.

So let me suggest as we close how this might be significant for us this week. It's not just the Global Challenges Foundation that recognizes the world is an uncertain place.

We recognize that. We live with uncertainty all the time in the world, in our nation, with our own lives. What will tomorrow bring?

What will our future hold? These are real questions, real challenges, but here is certain truth to comfort and sustain us and here is a better story, here is a truer story about how the world will come to an end to share with others that they might share our hope and our joy.

[27 : 26] Because there are realities here that we need in our life. The first reality, I think, that we need and we get from this teaching and from this parable is the idea of purpose.

Our lives need, don't they, a sense of purpose. What am I here for? What am I going to do today? Well, every day for the Christian becomes an opportunity to serve Jesus, our King, wherever we find ourselves.

Every day becomes an opportunity for us to use our gifts for the sake of others. Whether that's publicly, whether that's privately, in our family, in our workplace, in our school, here is an opportunity for us to know that everything matters.

Everything that we do matters. Because Jesus will return and He will reward faithfulness. So, the return of the King one day motivates obedience in this day and the next day.

Verse 21, His master replied, well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things.

[28 : 47] Come and share your master's happiness. The return of the King gives us purpose for every day. The return of the King also gives us hope for every day.

In a world marked by pessimism or cynicism or the fear that the world is spinning out of control, God's word plainly says, it's not going to be disaster or disease or the decision of a dictator that's going to bring world's end.

Our times are in God's hands. It's a supernatural event that will mark the end of history. It's the return of Christ in His glory that will wind up history and usher in the new heavens and the new earth.

After a long time, verse 19 says, the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. Jesus will return.

Could be today, could be in a thousand years. But the certain return of Christ who settle accounts to do all things well, I should shape how we look at the world.

[30 : 03] It should shape how we read our newspaper headlines or how we approach challenging circumstances. It can help us to pray for opportunities to sound a different note when we're in those conversations that seem so fearful and despairing because we have hope because the King is coming.

And the last significance for us to think about is that we're offered joy here. When everybody on this planet is seeking their own happiness, we have the biggest, best, and most enduring happiness and joy of all.

Jesus, our King and our Master invites us today into real and living joy, the joy of knowing life with God through faith in Him.

And King Jesus promises eternal joy in the glory of heaven, in the glory of the new creation. He offers us a joy that can never be lost, that can never be taken away, that never gets sold.

That's why the apostles, why the early church focused so much on Christ's return. Life is hard, suffering is real, but take heart, your King will come to reward His people and to take them home to be with Him forever.

[31 : 33] So the return of the King, that theme comes like light in the darkness for the church. As we fix our eyes and our hope on that, we have comfort, we have purpose, we have joy.

We'll give our last words to Mr. Beaver, the Chronicles of Narnia, speaking of Aslan, the great Lion King, returning to Narnia.

Wrong will be right when Aslan comes in sight. At the sound of his roar, sorrow will be no more. When he bears his teeth, winter meets its death.

And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.