

Be prepared

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[0 : 00] Welcome to the evening service pre-recorded for Sunday the 28th of June 2020. It comes to you from Calvary Evangelical Church.

! If you've not joined us before, we are a group of Bible-believing Christians in the city of Brighton and Hove on the south coast of the United Kingdom, the south coast of England.

My name is Stephen Ellacott and I will be leading our worship this evening. I'm one of the deacons of the church. Let's start our time together by singing a version of Psalm 98, Sing to God New Songs of Worship.

All His deeds are marvelous. He has brought salvation to us with His hand and holy arm. He has shown to all the nations righteousness and saving power. He recalled His truth and mercy to His people Israel.

[1 : 29] Sing to God new songs of worship. Earth has seen His victory. Let the lands of earth be joyful, praising Him with thankfulness.

Sound upon the harp His praises, play to Him with melody. Let the trumpet sound His triumph, show your joy to God the King.

Sing to God new songs of worship. Let the sea now make a noise. All on earth and in the waters, sound your praises to the Lord.

Let the hills rejoice together. Let the rivers clap their hands. For with righteousness and justice, He will come to judge the earth.

Now let's join together in prayer. Heavenly Father, we come to you at a time when our world is in a sorry state.

[2 : 54] Many are still suffering from the pandemic itself. But on top of that, we have all the economic and political chaos unleashed by the lockdown restrictions. And this is on top of the problems and famine and war that were around before the pandemic.

Jesus said, blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Father, make us agents of your peace. We pray that you will restrain those who resort to violence and anarchy, and those who want to restrict open debate by imposing their views on others, the very opposite of tolerance and gentleness.

And Father, we pray that in all this chaos, you may once again be seen to be sovereign, holy, and that your world may be done on earth as it is in heaven. Father, we ask that as your people adjust to the new way of living, we want to confess our failures, our opportunities we missed, our wrong attitudes spoken or held in our hearts, the wrong things we've said at the wrong times, when we should have spoken words of peace and encouragement.

Help us to find ways that we can serve you and our neighbours effectively, that your kingdom will advance as the nations of the earth struggle to remain in control. As we gather round our screens this evening, we're not gathered together as we would like, but we're still able to turn to your word together in your spirit, and we ask that you will speak to us from that word.

We pray that we might find both mourning and encouragement as we look at the eternal words of the Son of Man. As we live in extraordinary times, may we be shown how to live as servants and disciples of the Prince of Peace.

[4 : 37] We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Now we're going to read two passages of Scripture. The first is in Genesis 19, verses 15 to 26.

This is part of a very long story, which explains when an angel came to Abraham to say that the city of Sodom would be destroyed. The angel then came to Abraham's nephew Lot, who was living in Sodom, telling him to flee.

We'll not read the whole story, but just the description in verses 15 to 26 of the flight from Sodom itself.

With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, Hurry, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished.

When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters, and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them. As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, Flee for your lives.

[5 : 51] Don't look back. Don't stop anywhere in the plain. Flee to the mountains, or you will be swept away. But Lot said to them, No, my lords, please. Your servant has found favour in your eyes, and you have shown great kindness to me in sparing my life.

But I can't flee to the mountains. This disaster will overtake me, and I'll die. Look, here is a town near enough to run to, and it is small. Let me flee to it.

It is very small, isn't it? Then my life will be spared. He said to him, Very well, I will grant this request too. I will not overthrow the town you speak of.

But flee there quickly, because I cannot do anything until you reach it. That is why the town was called Zoar. By the time Lot reached Zoar, the sun had risen over the land.

Then the Lord rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the Lord out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities, and also the vegetation in the land.

[6 : 57] But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. Now, in our evening services, we've been working through the book of Matthew, and we've come to chapter 24, which talks of the destruction of Jerusalem, and then of the end of the age.

Our passage for study this evening is actually Matthew 24, verses 36 to 51. But to put it in its context, I'll read the passage from, read the chapter from verse 15.

So this is Matthew 24, starting at verse 15. So when you see standing in the holy place the abomination that causes desolation, spoken of through the prophet Daniel, let the reader understand, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers.

Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath, for then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now, and never to be equaled again.

[8 : 16] If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, those days will be shortened. At that time, if anyone says to you, look, here is the Messiah, or there he is, do not believe it.

For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you in advance.

So if anyone tells you, there he is out in the desert, do not go out, or here he is in the inner rooms, do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather. Immediately after the distress of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light.

The stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven, and then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

[9 : 24] 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. Now learn this lesson from the fig tree.

As soon as its twigs become tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door.

Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

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.

[10:27] 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. 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, would not have let his house be broken into you. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. 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, you 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 when he is not aware of.

[11:45] He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. So we will come shortly to study these passages of Scripture.

But before we do that, let's sing again together. We will sing number 167, A Song Breaks From Our Hearts.

That's 167 in our praise hymn books. Which will be the sign and the song of those who are ready when they see the Lord return. Amen. A Song Breaks From Our Hearts As we see the Saviour's face The griefs of earth are gone forever As we enter in Redeemed and new To the kingdom of God's grace Unnumbered people here Gathered from as far as tens

As we look upon his wounds As we look upon his wounds O heaven falls before As we look upon his wounds As we look upon his wounds O heaven falls before Christ Jesus He who bore the cross of sin and shame To his conqueror of the tomb The Father's plans Now his heart is satisfied Now his heart is satisfied To see his son engulfed To see his son engulfed In praises for his worth To his love The Father's plans fulfilled, now His heart is satisfied.

To see His Son engulfed in praises for His worth, His love, His power, His name can no longer be denied.

[14:27] Unbounded joy has come to those long in sorrow held.

The Savior smiles upon His children and the Spirit reigns, all hurts, all heals, and our grandest dreams excel.

The Father's plans for His love, His love, His love, and our love.

The Father's plans for His love, His love, and our love.

The Father's plans for His love, His love, and His love. The Father's plans for His love, His love, and His love. As Donald Rumsfeld put it, there are knowns and there are known unknowns, but there are also unknown unknowns, and those are the difficult ones.

[16:09] There are known as the people who have been prepared for COVID-19. It seems not. There had been some preparation for a pandemic, but the exact nature of it was unknown. So at the start, we did not have the right test and trace systems in place to fight the infection.

The Germans and the South Koreans seem to have been better prepared, and so far at least, have suffered less damage. There is a spoof of Kipling's poem, If.

The spoof quotes Kipling's line, If you can keep your head when all around are losing theirs. Kipling finishes his poem, You'll be a man, my son. The spoof finishes it very differently.

If you can keep your head when all around are losing theirs, then you probably don't understand the situation. I guess when you think about it, both versions contain some truth, but neither is the whole truth.

On the face of it, Jesus' advice in verses 15 to 18 of our passage seems clear enough. When you see the disaster coming, drop everything and literally run for your life.

[17:23] And indeed, when the Roman armies approached Jerusalem, that was exactly what the Christians did. Forewarned by the prophecy, they left the city and fled to the mountains, and so lived to tell the tale.

But the other Jews in Jerusalem did not have full information. They were under the misapprehension that God would defend the city. So they became trapped, and when the city fell in

AD 70, they were massacred.

The city was completely destroyed, as Jesus had predicted in verse 2. Whether this particular prophecy has another fulfillment is a difficult question, as Ben discussed last week.

But certainly the advice is more general. In Revelation 18:4, we read, Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.

That verse describes the fall of the city described in Revelation as Babylon the Great, of which the immediate interpretation appears to be Rome. But Rome would not fall for several centuries.

[18:28] In any way, it seems likely that Babylon is a cipher for any and all human society that sets itself against God. So on the face of it, Jesus' advice to drop everything and run seems simple enough.

But it isn't always so simple. Both the Bible and secular history give us plenty of examples of those who did not take the advice, and those who did.

The United States has an extremely effective heroic and warning system. Yet people often ignore its advice to evacuate. They just can't bear to abandon their homes.

Right back in Genesis 19, we read the story of the destruction of Sodom. Physically, we don't know exactly what happened to Sodom. It's not a volcanic area, and no one has found an impact crater that seems plausible.

The most likely explanation seems to be a large meteor that became superheated and exploded before impacting the ground. But while the exact cause is unknown, the effect is similar to what has been found by archaeologists studying the volcanic destruction of Pompeii and nearby Herculaneum.

[19:41] Many people there took warning from the initial eruptions and fled, but many did not and were caught. The Herculaneum remains are particularly illuminating because the people were not buried as at Pompeii.

Neither was there devastating structural damage. They were just skeletons of people who obviously died as they fell. So allow me to give you a little physics lesson as to what happens in such an event.

Based around the description of the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 19. This really reads like an eyewitness description. In verse 17, Lot and his family were told to get off the plane and not to look back.

Exactly the right advice, as we shall see. We read in verse 24 that the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom. The crucial factor here is the heat.

What happens at the epicentre of such an event is that the air in a small area becomes superheated. This then expands with the force of an explosion. Physicists call it a pyroclastic flow.

[20:52] Any living thing caught in that flow of superheated air is instantly desiccated. You can't outrun it. It travels at speeds of 60 miles an hour to as much as 400 miles an hour.

But it's not the force of the explosion itself that is really lethal. It's the heat. This is well described in verse 25. In an open plain there is little to stop the pyroclastic flow.

So the description tells us that the people in the cities died and the vegetation was destroyed.

Victims of the heat flux. Anything alive was desiccated just as in Herculaneum.

But tragically, Lot's wife ignored the advice not to look back. Probably she stopped and climbed a hill to observe what would happen to her home.

And Lot's wife was caught too. Verse 26, she became a pillar of salt. A husk after the flow had sucked all the moisture from her body. She did not fully understand what would happen.

[21:55] And so she didn't take the advice to drop everything and run. Like many in Pompeii and Herculaneum, that unknown unknown cost her life. So after that rather extended introduction, let us turn to our passage in Matthew 24.

To a lesson in how not to be prepared. In verses 30 and 34 we have the knowns.

The Son of Man will come in glory. His words will outlast the very heavens. Without this certainty, the rest of the argument makes no sense. So let us fix this in our minds.

The Lord will return, even if we see little evidence of it. For that is the point of the two parables. In verse 36 we have the known unknown. When will this happen?

All we are told is that it will follow the destruction of Jerusalem. And the preaching of the gospel throughout the world. The first box is ticked. It happened in AD 70.

[23 : 03] But the second is rather open ended. So let us assert what Jesus does. That we don't know when it will happen. And what are the unknown unknowns? Well of course by definition we don't know.

But they probably have something to do with the exact historical processes and events. That will lead to the momentous event. We are told in verse 40 and 44. That some will be taken and others left.

Interpreters have indulged in endless theorizing over the exact meaning of this so-called rapture. And how it relates to the events described in Revelation. Surely it is far better to take verses 40 and 41 in context.

Jesus says, As at the time of Noah, some were prepared for the flood and were saved. Most were not and drowned. This is all part of the warning to be prepared. The coming of the Lord will interrupt everyday life.

Some are prepared. Some are prepared. And some are not. So then Jesus gives us these two parables. To give us insight how people might be unprepared.

[24 : 10] So two everyday examples are given. The first way to be unprepared is to think it will never happen to me. Well, we were like this over this epidemic.

Epidemics happen elsewhere, not in places like Britain with good public health. We know in theory that pandemics can happen. But we think it will never happen to us until it does.

This is just the position of the householder in verse 43. Of course, he knew in theory that there was a risk of burglary. But he assumed that it wouldn't happen to him. So he failed to take proper precautions to keep watch.

And so his house was broken into. He was unprepared. The lesson for us is clear. Keep watch. Be prepared. The second way to be unprepared is more subtle.

We find it set out by the wicked servant of verse 48. My master is away a long time. It's not that the servant denies his master exists.

[25 : 23] Or even denies that he will eventually return. He just doesn't see that as relevant to the way he behaves today. And so he takes advantage of his current situation to beat his fellow servants and raid his master's wine cellar.

But this servant is not just wicked. He is also foolish. His master will return. And he will mete out the just penalty for his wickedness.

The servant is wicked and foolish. And foolish. So Jesus sets out two ways to be unprepared. To think the Lord's return will never happen. Or just to see it is irrelevant to everyday life.

But he also tells us here the way that we should be prepared. And we note it's most definitely not to sit around and do nothing, waiting for the end. Christians have sometimes taken this attitude.

There seem to be some in Thessalonica. In two Thessalonians we read. But even when we were with you, we gave you this rule. If a man will not work, he shall not eat.

[26 : 29] We hear that some among you are idle. They are busy bodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.

A simple rule there. If you want to eat, work for a living. And yet there are more subtle forms of this attitude. Some have argued this age is destined to pass.

Some have said, why polish the brass on a sinking ship? But this is not the attitude Jesus commends. Instead we read of that wise and faithful servant.

Who then is the faithful and wise servant who the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food in the proper time. It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.

It is precisely because the master is going to return that we live by kingdom values today. While the master is away in that sense, it's business as usual. The house is not mothball awaiting the return of its occupants.

[27 : 40] Instead, the faithful servant carries on his master's business just as if the master were present. In the following chapter we meet another parable, the parable of the talents. The master gives money to his servants and tells them to get on and use it.

It is not the lazy servant who buries the money and gives it back for this commended. Rather the one who has diligently been at work with the resources entrusted to him. Returning to Matthew 24, what do we read happens to the faithful servant when he has his assessment interview when the master has returned.

We read, it will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

So let's summarise Jesus' message to those who want to follow him. It is be prepared.

When the end comes, we should not be so attached to the things of this world that they hinder us from dropping them and fleeing for safety. We must not think it will never happen to us or that it's just not relevant to everyday life so we can just do what we like.

[28 : 56] The Lord will demand an account from us. To be prepared until that time comes, we are involved in the affairs of this world exactly because the Lord will return and review what we have done.

We live as though the master was present because in spirit he is present. The way to be prepared is to live like that faithful and wise servant who is concerned with his master's business.

That is the servant the Lord commends. We don't know when the Lord will return. That is exactly the reason to live by the kingdom values now. Be prepared for there is much we do not know and cannot know.

Don't pretend to understand it all. Wisdom acknowledges that much is mysterious. The wise servant does not second guess his master. It goes faithfully about his business.

William Fullerton wrote these wise words. I cannot tell how he will win the nations, how he will claim his earthly heritage, how satisfy the needs and aspirations of East and West, of sinner and of sage.

[30 : 12] For this I know. All flesh shall see his glory. And he shall reap the harvest he has sown. And some glad day his sun shall shine in splendor.

When he, the Saviour, Saviour of the world is known. This is Jesus' message for us now. Be prepared. I cannot tell why he whom angels worship should set his love upon the sons of men.

O why as shepherd he should seek the wanderers.

To bring them back they know not how or when. But this I know.

But this I know. That he was born of Mary. When Bethlehem's manger was his only home.

[31 : 52] And that he lived at Nazareth and laboured.

And so the Saviour, Saviour of the world has come. I cannot tell how silently he suffered.

As with his peace he graced this place of tears.

And how his heart upon the cross was broken.

The crown of pain to three and thirty years.

[33 : 08] But this I know, he heals the broken hearted And stays our sin and calms our lurking fear And lifts the burden from the heavy laden For still the Saviour, Saviour of the world is here I cannot tell how he will win the nations

Or how we'll claim his earthly heritage Or satisfy the needs and aspirations Of east and west, of sinner and of sage But this I know, all flesh shall see his glory And he shall reap the harvest he has sown And some glad day his sun will shine in splendor

When he, the Saviour, Saviour of the world is known I cannot tell how all the lands will worship When at his bidding, every storm is stilled For who can say, how great the jubilation When all our hearts with love for him are filled

But this I know, the skies will sound his praises Ten thousand thousand human voices sing And earth to heaven and them to earth will answer At last the Saviour, Saviour of the world is king So, living as we do at this troubled time Let's finish our time together this evening By reading Aaron's blessing The Lord bless you and keep you

The Lord make his face shine on you And be gracious to you The Lord turn his face towards you And give you peace Amen