

How can I be ready?

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[0 : 00] Matthew 24, starting at verse 42. Therefore stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake, and would not have let his house be broken into.

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time?

Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions, but if that wicked servant says to himself, my master is delayed, and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him, and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites.

In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps, and went to meet the bridegroom.

[1 : 32] Five of them were foolish, and five were wise, for when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept, but at midnight there was a cry, Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.

Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps, and the foolish said to the wise, Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.

But the wise answered, saying, Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves. And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut.

Afterwards, the other virgins came also, saying, Lord, open to us. But he answered, Truly I say to you, I do not know you.

[2 : 42] Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. Well, good morning. My name's Andy Acting, Lead Pastor at Grace Church here. It's great to see you.

Let's pray before we dive into God's word. Father God, we thank you that your word is like a lamp onto our feet. It is light to our eyes. And we pray that you would speak to us through your words this morning.

Amen. Expect delays. That's the two words that nobody wants to hear over the tannoy at a train station or at an airport.

I remember being at an airport being delayed for six hours in the days before smartphones. What do you do for six hours? Only so many times you can go around the duty free, isn't there?

Over the past few weeks, we've been thinking about the return of Jesus. And Jesus is teaching his disciples. And the question that has set everything in motion is back in chapter 24, verse 3, if you flick over.

[3 : 46] As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately saying, Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?

How will we know you're coming back? And we saw last week that the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem AD 70 by the Romans was one of the signs Jesus' return is near.

And so Jesus stresses that we are living in the dying moments of this age. His return can be at any time. Hence the implication is clear.

Verse 44 of chapter 24. Therefore, you also must be ready. For the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

And then how this reading ended, 25, 13. Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. And yet throughout this section, Jesus has been teaching about a delay.

[4 : 47] And to expect a delay. It came up earlier in chapter 24. And it's what these two parables have in common that we are looking at this morning. So chapter 24, verse 48.

My master is delayed. And then 25, verse 5. The bridegroom was delayed. Now Jesus is saying just as it's a mistake not to be ready at any time, it's also a mistake not to be ready for a long time. But what does that look like in practice? What does it look like to stay ready? To be ready for Jesus? And to stay ready for him for our whole lives? Well, let's drill down into these parables. You'll see an outline on the handout or on the screen behind me. Firstly, be ready by living for Jesus with faithfulness. Verse 45.

Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom his master has set out and has set over his household to give them their food at the proper time?

[5 : 55] Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. I don't know if you're a fan of costume dramas. Something like *Pride and Prejudice* or *Downton Abbey* or *Emma* or *The Crown*.

Not a new series. Sometimes the lord of the manor goes away. And the household is lined up on the steps to wave them off in their lovely carriage.

And once they go, the staff get on with their jobs, doing what they've been told to do. That's the picture here. When it comes to waiting for Jesus to return, there's a good master.

He's given particular responsibility to one servant to look after all the others. And so Jesus outlines two scenarios for this servant.

In the good scenario in verse 45, the servant is described as faithful and wise. All because he kept doing what he was asked to do. The master returns.

[6 : 55] He walks into the kitchen and he sees him preparing food for the other servants because it's lunchtime. He's doing what he's been asked to do. Sometimes you get the pictures on those period dramas when the master returns.

And the household staff are lined up there again on the steps. It's almost like they've done nothing else. Like they've just got their sleeping bags and the thermos flasks just waiting for the master to come back.

But readiness is not that, just a passive weight. Readiness is faithfulness. And faithfulness is getting on with what they've been told to do.

So verse 46, Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions.

The master is pleased when we follow his instructions and get on doing what he's told us to do. That is what the true Christian does.

[8 : 00] That is what it means to be ready for Jesus. They don't stop living for Jesus. Now this is not so much about keeping busy with lots of church activities and somehow finding a way of squeezing more into our lives that are already pressured and busy.

Now if you are prompted to serve at church in a particular way, that would be a very good thing. But this is more about living for Jesus in every sphere of life all the time.

Flip it around. This is about having no times when we put following Jesus on hold. With technology now, I guess we all know we can pause live TV.

My mind was blown the first time I could do that. Growing up, you probably remember having to dash to the kettle or the toilet in the break, restock on snacks.

But now you'll watch something on iPlayer or something and it thinks, just press pause and just come back to it when you like. Well, living for Jesus with faithfulness is about having no times when we press pause on following him.

[9 : 13] I guess lots of us are looking forward to holiday or at least that week between Christmas and New Year when nobody knows what day it is. You may have a holiday booked, time to relax, catch a breath.

But maybe you're like me. I find sometimes that the stopping of normal life can sometimes lead to a subconscious stopping of the Christian life. I'm almost embarrassed to say it.

Where holiday means pausing Jesus. Pausing being a Christian. What else might pressing pause look like?

Well, for some, being at home, I guess because being at home, that is relaxation, that's comfort. I put Jesus on pause. Whereas at work, well, I know I've got to be a witness. There's an agenda. I know I've got to be distinctive. For others, it's the other way around. Maybe it's easy to be a disciple at home. But at work or at school, it's far too hard.

[10:25] And so I press pause with my colleagues, with my students, with friends. Maybe there's a pressing pause when it comes to certain people, like unbelieving family, who make life difficult for us because we follow Jesus.

Well, if it's not an area of life, well, I guess maybe we're tempted to put following Jesus on hold for a stage of life. We can find ourselves saying, can't we?

I'll just get through this busy patch. And then I'll remember Jesus again. Or I'll just wait for the children to get a bit older. When everything's a bit more manageable, then I'll think about following Jesus a bit more seriously.

Or I'll just wait for retirement. Then I can really get stuck in living for Jesus. But faithfulness looks like steadiness all through the areas of life all the time.

So that whenever Jesus comes, we're not caught out. You see, it's the master's delay, though, that catches out the servant in the other scenario that Jesus gives.

[11:41] The bad example. So verse 48. But if that wicked servant says to himself, my master is delayed. And begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards.

Do you see what happens? The servant in the bad example draws wrong conclusions from the delay. Maybe he won't come back.

Maybe he won't come back while I'm a servant. It's like the train that gets delayed. You look at the screen. It gets later and later.

The expected time increases and increases. There's more delay. What happens next? Well, eventually it gets cancelled. There's a thinking like that in the Christian life.

It's been such a long time. Maybe Jesus won't come at all. The equivalent, perhaps, like the servant of saying, well, Jesus won't come back in my life.

[12:45] It's not likely, is it, given the track record of the past 2,000 years? Not likely. Maybe. And you and I, I guess we can do that and have that affixed on some horizon in the future.

And we plan for that horizon. Maybe it is retirement. Or the children getting to a particular age. We think of all the things we'll do and enjoy. And we can end up planning as though Jesus won't come back in our lifetime.

And so wrong conclusions lead here to wrong concerns. So verse 49 again.

And he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. He ignores the master's instructions and begins to indulge himself with anything he wants to do, with whoever he wants around him.

The mindset is, he's not coming back, or at least he won't be for ages. I can indulge myself. But the point here is that don't stop living for Jesus with faithfulness.

[13:59] For some of us, living for Jesus for a long time, dare I say we may be tired of living for Jesus. But then verse 51 is sobering, isn't it?

And we'll cut him, the wicked servant, in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place, they'll be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It's a real warning to make sure we're living for Jesus with faithfulness. Jesus could return in our lifetime. And we're not to think, yeah, but he probably won't.

That's ignoring the master, which could lead just for living for ourselves. Pausing Jesus. Ultimately turning our back on Jesus.

And then we're caught off guard when he does return. Instead, being ready means being faithful in every area and stage of life.

[15:00] So that when he returns, we are found following him. Back in May 1780, the sky above New England in America suddenly turned so dark that it seemed the sun was blotted out at noon.

And so surely the end must be imminent. Leaving aside the later historical explanation, it was a combination of forest fires, cloud cover and fog that caused the darkness.

But it was interesting reading about how people reacted. Some were shocked and scared. Even the courts that were sitting discussed where they should suspend their sitting and return to be with their loved ones before the Lord's return.

However, a judge called Abraham Davenport, he rose to his feet and he said this. I choose for one to meet him face to face. No faithless servant frightened by my task, but ready when the Lord calls. And therefore, with all reverence, I would say, let God do his work. We will see to ours. Bring in the candles. See, Davenport was not embarrassed.

[16:16] If Jesus, the master, should suddenly return, he was eagerly waiting and he was ready. Living for Jesus. And so should we be.

Living for Jesus with faithfulness in all spheres of life. Today in the knowledge that he could come at any time. Well, then the next parable has a similar theme, but it comes at it from a different angle. So secondly, be ready by living for Jesus with perseverance. Living for Jesus with perseverance. So 25 verse 1.

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise.

But when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them. But the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. The virgins here are a bit like bridesmaids today.

[17:16] But back then, it wasn't about walking the bride down the aisle. It was walking the bride and groom from the ceremony at the bride's house to the reception at the groom's house.

And verse 1, we see that they all take part. They all have lamps. And they go off to meet the bridegroom. And they all look very similar. But verse 3, we're told that five were foolish because they had no oil with them for their lamps.

They had the torch with no spare batteries, kind of like that. But five were wise because they had flasks of oil. They had the spares. They were prepared for a delay.

They were prepared for the long haul. And the unreadiness of the other five was exposed when the bridegroom finally arrived.

So verse 5. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight, there was a cry. Here is the bridegroom.

[18:18] Come out to meet him. Now, they all fall asleep. We can't blame them. Weddings are tiring, aren't they? All the makeup and I wouldn't know. Make up helping the bride and her dress.

Endless photographs. The issue comes when they're woken up. For five of them, panic sets in. Their lamps are going out. And so verse 8.

The foolish said to the wise, Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out. But the wise answered, saying, Since there will not be enough arson for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.

So the five are packed off to the late night Tesco to get the oil. But whilst they were gone, verse 10, The wedding feast goes on without them and the door is shut.

Now, we may feel sympathy. Once they realise their mistake, they do try and sort it out. But the twist comes to show that it's more serious than that.

[19:25] They get to the party. Verse 11. They say, Lord, Lord, open to us. But the devastating reply comes, verse 12. Truly I say to you, I do not know ye.

They had no real relationship with the bridegroom. And so we're left with desperate people pleading to be let in, but left outside.

You see, when the delay ended, their unreadiness in their lack of perseverance was exposed. And they were shut out of the wedding feast.

And so Jesus concludes, verse 13. Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. The wise virgins pack oil because they don't want anything to get in the way of them being ready.

And so keeping watch here is an ongoing state of readiness. So it's not something we do once and then forget about. So it's not like I put my trust in Jesus years ago so I'm ready.

[20:37] But knowing Jesus now and today. Keeping watch by continuing to know him. Shown through our ongoing trust, obedience and perseverance.

For those who wouldn't call ourselves follower of Jesus here this morning, in this parable we see the warnings against these wrong assumptions. The wrong assumption that I can rely on others. You see, the moment where the wise virgins don't share their oil is a reminder that we cannot rely on anyone else to make us ready for Jesus' coming. This is a personal responsibility.

It doesn't matter if the rest of our family follow Jesus, if our spouse follows Jesus or our parents or grandparents. Readiness is not contagious like that.

Now we each need to respond personally to Jesus' call to trust in him to be ready. This is also the warning against the assumption, I've got time.

[21 : 46] I've got time on my side. It's easy to put Jesus off as we've thought. Or not even press play on Jesus to start with. I'll sort it out later.

When I'm less busy. After uni. When I'm older. When I'm on my deathbed. Actually, deathbed conversions are very rare. I'm guessing because as much as people do fear death when you're faced with it, well, if you've got that far not following Jesus, then why change?

But Jesus stresses our need to be ready now. Again, this is a warning against the assumption, it'll be okay in the end.

I'll be okay in the end. It's easy to have that, it'll be fine attitude in life. I live with a guy like that. It was chaos.

It'll be fine. It'll be fine. Lighting fireworks in a kitchen. It'll be fine. Gosh, that's brought memories back that I've suppressed for a while.

[22 : 56] But we can apply that to our standing with God. It'll be okay. I'm not going to be shut out. But the reply of the groom shows this is serious.

Are we willing to chance it? Well, for those of us who are already followers of Jesus, well, Jesus may come back this year. But are we prepared to stay ready for the next five, ten, fifteen, fifty years?

Do our priorities and patterns of life display that we are persevering in being ready for Jesus? Do we display that we are ready for the long haul?

Are we setting up our children for the long haul in following Jesus? Are we laying the foundations and instilling patterns now that will help them as they grow up to, under God's grace, put their trust in the Lord Jesus and to continue following him until he comes?

We will probably know people who used to call themselves followers of Jesus, but not anymore.

Those who seemingly were ready a few years ago, but not if Jesus came back today.

[24 : 19] Well, Jesus calls his followers to live for him with perseverance. Well, how do I know? How do I know if I'm ready for Jesus to come back?

How do I know if I'm keeping watch? We all have our blips, don't we? And we have days when we forget Jesus. When we live for ourselves, we still sin. But gloriously, as our service has been geared up around this this morning, we remember why Jesus came in the first place.

He was born in a crib to die on a cross to provide that forgiveness of sin. The full atonement has been made. His death in our place.

Every single sin covered when we turn to him and trust in him. And Jesus wants us to really remember that and to be assured by that and to keep trusting in that and nothing else.

But these parables are not speaking about the blips or the moments of failure. They're warning against a pattern setting in of pressing pause on Jesus, an ongoing trend of ignoring the master's instructions and living for ourselves instead, leading to turning our backs on Jesus altogether.

[25 : 39] And so there's no better sign of whether we're ready or not than whether we are following Jesus today. In this moment now, in everything that happens, in every place we go, with everyone we meet, in every stage of life, so that when it comes to it, it won't be, I never thought it would be now.

I'm not ready. Well, just as we close then, I think I've spoken before about Florence Chadwick. She was an accomplished long-distance swimmer.

In 1952, she attempted to swim the 26 miles between Catalina Island and the California coastline. And as she began, she was flanked by small boats that walked for sharks.

Imagine that. And after 15 hours, a fog set in. Florence began to doubt her ability, and she told her mother in one of the boats alongside her she didn't think she could make it.

She swam for another hour before asking to be pulled out, unable to see the coastline because of the fog. And as she sat in the boat, she found out she had stopped swimming just one mile away from the finish line.

[27 : 01] Now, it would be a tragedy, wouldn't it, for someone to give up on Jesus in the last moments before he returns. Now, we can't see the future.

In that sense, we are in the fog here this morning, and Jesus calls us to keep swimming, to keep living for him. Well, two months later, Florence tried again.

The same thick fog set in, but this time she reached the finish line. She said that she kept going because she had a mental image of the shoreline in her mind while she swam.

Well, likewise for us. We are also to have that image of the master's return, the shoreline in our minds as we live each day.

Jesus' return could happen at any time, but it might not happen for a long time. So we are to live for him with faithfulness and perseverance.

[28 : 08] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for these words here, that we can trust that you are returning, that Jesus will come back.

Please help us, Father, to live each day with that in our minds, and to live for him with faithfulness and perseverance until he comes.

Amen.