

Waiting wakefully

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 24 verses 36 to 51. But concerning that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

For as in those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away. So will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Then two men will be in a field, one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill, one will be taken and one left. 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 set over his household to give them their food at the proper time. Blessed is the servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, he will sit 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.

Thank you, Claudia. Before we look at God's word together, let's pray, shall we? As James says in his letter, Father, we pray that we would not only be hearers of your word, but doers also. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Carl Sagan, the world-renowned astrophysicist, famously said that the cosmos is all there is, or was, or ever will be. He believed that the universe was a closed system and it would carry on forever. And many astrophysicists like him have tried to predict what will happen at the end of the world, the end of the universe, what will happen to the universe in trillions of years, whether it will freeze to absolute zero or enter so-called heat death where no further energy exchange is possible. The assumption behind this view of the universe is that there is no God, at least no one and nothing powerful enough to intervene in history. The universe will just keep going.

[3 : 0 7] As a 19th century German philosopher, Nietzsche said, God is dead. Nietzsche developed a profound skepticism of any kind of divine being. And he tried to make sense of the world without reference to God, only with reference to himself and the rest of humanity. The problem is that if there is no God, if there is no judgment to come, no final accounting, then there is no ultimate meaning for the universe.

If God is dead and the cosmos is all there is, then what we do today is completely insignificant. As Albert Camus, the French existential philosopher, said, who followed Nietzsche, life is absurd. It doesn't really mean anything. But the trouble is it's difficult to live as if life is absurd because we want it to mean something. We fill our lives with all kinds of things to try and make us feel alive. Christmas presents, turkey, and mince pies, New Year's resolutions of a better job or more money, turning over a new leaf. But if God is dead and the cosmos is all there is, we feel profoundly empty. 2016 will bring much the same difficulties as 2015. Life goes on, much that ever has done. But Jesus says there is a judgment to come. There is a God who created the universe and who will one day draw all things to a close. The universe will not freeze to absolute zero.

Long before that, time itself will stop. History will come to an end. The Jesus who came the first time at Christmas will come back a second time in judgment. And perhaps you're sitting here this morning and you find it hard to believe in a day of judgment. I mean, life does go on, much as it has done. And evil carries on in our world, much as it has done. So where is this day? Where is this

God of justice? Where is the day of judgment with Jesus promised? 2,000 years is a long time. He's not come for 2,000 years. Is he really coming at all? Well, it was no different in Jesus' day and in his disciples' day. Listen to what Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, writes in his letter in 2 Peter 3, verse 3. He says, scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, where is the promise of this coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing, just as they have done since the beginning of creation. They would have agreed with Carl Sagan.

But Jesus says there is a judgment to come. So have a look with me at Matthew chapter 24 in the passage that Claudia read to us. And the beginning of Matthew 24 on page 999, in chapter 24, verse 3, Jesus is asked by his disciples, what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?

[6 : 38] How will we know? And Jesus answers them by warning them about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, which happened later in AD 70. But also he warns them about wars and earthquakes, false prophets and suffering before he comes. And he talks about his final coming at the end of the age in verses 29 and 31, just before our passage. So have a look at verse 29 with me.

Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. And the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man. And then all the tribes of the earth will mourn. And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds from one end of heaven to the other. The Son of Man is Jesus talking about himself using apocalyptic language from the Old Testament, from Daniel chapter 7, where it also talks about the end of the age and Jesus coming to judge. The sun darkened and the moon not giving its light and the stars falling from heaven refers to the end of history when the fabric of the universe is torn apart and time as we know it will stop. If time had a beginning, it will have an end. If God created the universe, he can tear it apart and bring it to a close. And judgment is good news for our world. See, we don't want evil to have the last word. We want our lives to matter. We want God to put all that is wrong with the universe right.

And he will when Jesus returns in judgment. And in our passage today, Jesus tells us to be ready for his return. And he gives us a series of pictures, both in our passage today and in the following passages, which we're going to look at over the next few weeks in chapter 24 and 25 of Matthew's Gospel. You see, the stakes of Jesus is so high if Jesus is going to come back or not, if we're going to be ready or not, that we need to be told in a number of different ways how to be ready. So over the following few weeks, we're going to be looking at these different images, ready as if a thief is coming, ready as if a master is returning, ready as if waiting for a bridegroom, ready as if entrusted with property, and ready as if people will be separated like sheep and goats. So in our passage today, there are three things that I want us to see. And the first is that Christ will return in judgment. And that's from verses 36 to 41. Have a look at verse 36 if you've got it with you in the passage.

Many people have predicted the end of the world, haven't they, of specific dates. But no one knows. [9 : 55] So don't try. If angels who are constantly in God's presence don't know, and Jesus himself doesn't know, but only his father, it's clearly a date that we here cannot know. And because we cannot know, we must be ready. Now perhaps you're a bit surprised that Jesus himself doesn't know the date he's going to come back. After all, if he is God himself, God the Son, doesn't he know everything?

Well, as far as Jesus' divine nature is concerned, he does know everything. We see in John chapter 16 verse 30 that Jesus knows all things. But in his human nature, Jesus doesn't know everything, and he needs to learn the way you or I would. Now perhaps it's difficult to understand how someone can be both divine and human at the same time. But of course, Jesus is a unique example.

There's no one else to compare him with. Clearly, Jesus depends on his father, and his father knows things which he doesn't. But the point is that we don't know. We don't know when Jesus will return, just as those in Noah's day. Have a look at verse 37 with me.

As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. As in those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away. So will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Now some people think of Noah's flood, don't they, as a kind of entertaining children's story. Noah, the zookeeper, protecting endangered species of animals from rising sea levels.

[11:43] But Noah is a story of cataclysmic judgment. Perhaps you could turn with me in your Bibles to Genesis chapter 6. It's on page 6 of your Bibles.

In Genesis chapter 6, verse 11, it says that the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. Much like today, people reject the God who made them, and without God as king, they fight to make themselves king.

And the world is full of violence. A few verses earlier, in Genesis 6, it says that God was sorry that he'd made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

So God decides to destroy them, all except for Noah. Now perhaps you're sitting here and you're thinking, well, wait a minute. Wait a minute, that's way over the top.

Can't God just, you know, give people a bit of education, a democratic government, enough money to live on, and surely they won't be so bad. They're misdirected.

[12:51] They've had bad role models, difficult upbringings. Does God really need to destroy them? Well, he does, because the problem is not education.

The problem is far deeper. The problem is our hearts. Have a look at Genesis chapter 6, verse 5. God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Our hearts are not basically good. They're basically evil. Not as evil as they could be, but they turn away from God and reject him as king.

So ask yourself, are you surprised at the amount of evil in the world? Or are you surprised that there's not more evil in the world? Because God says our hearts are a black.

So why hasn't God sent another flood? I mean, the world is full of violence and evil, sure enough, today. Why hasn't he sent another flood? Well, after the flood, as some of you will know, God promises again never to flood the world.

[14:03] He says in Genesis chapter 8, verse 21, I will never again curse the ground because of man, neither will I ever again strike down every living creature. While the earth remains, sea time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.

And it hasn't. Despite the evil in our world today, God has kept sustaining the universe. But he will send another judgment, a final judgment.

So turn back in your Bibles to Matthew 24 and to our passage. Matthew 24, verse 37. Jesus says, Remember the cataclysmic judgment in Noah's day.

So will be the coming of the Son of Man. It will be a universal judgment. No one will escape. And those who have rejected Christ as king, who have lived in his world but ignored him, will face his judgment.

In verse 38, I suppose we might expect Jesus to say, Well, in those days before the flood, there was violence and evil. But he doesn't, does he?

[15:17] Have a look at what Jesus says. He says, They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. See, there's nothing sinful about those things.

The problem is that they were absolutely absorbed in their worldly pursuits. They ignored Noah's warnings. And when Jesus returns to judge, people will be eating and drinking.

Perhaps having dinner in central London. People will probably be studying for exams, getting job promotions, taking out mortgages, getting married, having children, using their smartphones.

People will be doing everyday things. And like people in Noah's day, they'll be completely unaware. So how do you feel about Jesus returning?

Perhaps you're sitting here and you're thinking, Well, I'm not too bad, really. I'm not full of violence and evil. I've never killed anyone or been in prison. Surely I'll be fine when Jesus comes back.

[16:19] If Jesus does come back, surely he'll be happy with me. Well, imagine the Queen. She invites you to Buckingham Palace.

All the finest food and wine, silver platters, napkins embroidered in gold leaf. You dine at a lavish banquet with the Queen. And there's violinists and harpists playing for you throughout your 17 courses.

But imagine during the evening, you don't speak to the Queen once. She's sitting right next to you, but you're so engrossed in the banquet, all this delicious food, that you don't give her a second thought.

And it's not until after you leave that it suddenly dawns on you, you've ignored her the whole evening. But then it's too late.

You can't get back into Buckingham Palace to make it up. You've ignored your royal host, and there's no chance of making it up to her. And to rebel against God, it's really very easy.

[17:26] Live in his world, enjoy his gifts, but ignore him. Like being too taken up with the banquet to speak to the Queen, we can be too taken up with the things of this world, eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage, to give God any attention.

And when the Son of Man comes, it will be too late. So if you're here and you think that you'll be okay because you've lived a good life, because you go to church, because you're a respectable person, you won't.

Not if you've ignored the God who made you. And in verse 40 and 41, Jesus explains that what matters is not what job you have, how much money you earn, how famous you were, but whether you're ready or not.

Do you know your creator, or have you ignored him? Have a look at verse 40 with me. Of Matthew 24, Jesus says that two men will be in the field, one will be taken and one left.

Two women will be grinding at the mill, one will be taken and one left. See, both the men and the women look the same, don't they? They're both in the field or both at the mill.

[18:37] And you can't tell from their appearance. But one will be taken, that's taken by Jesus and rescued, and the other left, left for judgment.

Those who belong to God and those who don't belong to God often live side by side, and you might not be able to tell the difference until the final judgment. So what about you?

Perhaps you've been coming to Grace Church, Dulwich, for many years, and on the outside, it looks like you're one of God's people. It maybe looks like you're a Christian, maybe you go to a growth group, or you help with Sunday Club.

But do you really belong to God? Are you ready for the coming of the Son of Man? Will you be saved like Noah, trusting God's rescue, or left outside?

Christ will return in judgment. Secondly then, Christ will return suddenly. That's the second thing I want us to see from this passage.

[19:40] Christ will return suddenly, that's from verses 36 to 44. See, one of the reasons why the Bible uses Noah's flood as an example, as a comparison with the final judgment, is not only because it is global and cataclysmic, not only because Noah is saved by God's rescue, but also because it was sudden and unexpected.

They were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away. You don't need me to tell you about the past month or so of horrendous flooding up in the north of England.

Whole communities were devastated by the surge of water through houses, shops, along streets, covering fields. Why did it cause so much damage? Because it was sudden, at least initially.

There was no gentle warning of kind of gradually increasing water week after week. The towns and villages were flooded overnight. And there's no countdown to Jesus' return.

No warnings the day before. Jesus will return suddenly. And Jesus could return at any time. It's precisely because we don't know when Jesus will return that it could be today.

[21:00] It could be this hour. It could be before you've had a chance to put milk in your coffee after the service. Now perhaps you're sitting here thinking, well, well yes, theoretically, I suppose that's true.

Jesus could come back in the next five minutes. But he's not returned for the last 2,000 years. Surely he's not going to return today. Not in my lifetime. He's obviously been delayed for some reason.

And, you know, maybe a few more thousand years in the future. Perhaps. But why shouldn't Jesus return today? In the Bible, timeline, that's the only thing left to happen.

Jesus came to earth at the first Christmas 2,000 years ago. He died on a cross to rescue us. And rose again, demonstrating that he is the king. And the only thing left is for him to come back.

The only reason he hasn't come back yet is so that more people can be saved. Peter writes in his letter in 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 8, Do not overlook this one fact, beloved.

[22:05] With the Lord, one day is as 1,000 years and 1,000 years as one day. The Lord's not slow in keeping his promises. Some count slowness. But he's patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

So you and I might think that 2,000 years is a long time. But to God, it's like two days. It's like waiting until Tuesday. It's not very long at all.

In C.S. Lewis' book, *The Narnia Story, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Aslan the Lion, who represents Jesus, says to Lucy, Do not look sad.

We shall meet again soon. Please, Aslan, said Lucy, What do you call soon? I call all times soon, said Aslan.

And instantly, he was vanished away. From God's perspective, Jesus coming back to judge really is very soon. But to us, it will be sudden.

[23 : 13] And it will be like a thief in the night. Have a look back at Matthew chapter 24 and verses 42 to 44. Jesus says, Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

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

Therefore, you also must be ready.

Peter, Paul and John, Jesus' disciples, all use this image of a thief coming in the night to describe Jesus' return.

So in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 2, Paul writes, You yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief. Suddenly, destruction will come upon them.

In 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 10, Peter says, The day of the Lord will come like a thief. In Revelation chapter 3 verse 3, which John wrote, he writes, Of Jesus, I will come like a thief and you will not know what hour I will come.

[24 : 21] Revelation chapter 16 verse 15, Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake. When I was at university living in a house with four others, when we were all out, a thief came to steal our possessions.

They stole our computers, our laptops, our passports, our money, and our DVDs. And it was the first time I'd ever had someone stealing something from my house. They came at an hour I was not expecting.

If I'd have known, I would have done something about it. I would have made sure someone was in. I would have kept my passport with me. I would have taken precautions. But I didn't know. They gave me no warning, no countdown.

They came, well, like a thief. Perhaps you've experienced something similar. I guarantee it, you weren't expecting it. And when Jesus comes, he'll come like a thief.

Not that he steals. Everything belongs to him already. He'll come like a thief and he comes unexpectedly and suddenly, people will be going about their daily lives and he'll return when they're not expecting it.

[25 : 37] How would you feel if Jesus returned this evening? Perhaps you'd be surprised that he'd return today, that he'd returned in your lifetime. But would you be surprised that he returned at all?

He said he would come back. What reason have you to doubt him? Many of us, perhaps we say, well, I want Jesus to come back.

I do. But not yet. Not yet. No, there are things I want to do first. I want to finish my studies, have children, buy a house, see my grandchildren grow up. Well, Jesus' return would put an end to all of that.

The only thing that matters when Christ returns is, are you ready? So thirdly and finally, Jesus says, therefore, be constantly ready. And that's from verses 42 to 44, be constantly ready.

Have a look at what Jesus says. Verse 42, therefore, stay awake. Verse 44, therefore, you also must be ready. If Jesus' return is like Noah and the flood, how should we be ready?

[26 : 50] Well, not by swimming, not by putting our socks up and trying to save ourselves with all our might to try and be good, as if that will help. It's by getting in the ark.

You can imagine Noah building the ark and people around him laughing. It's not rained here for months. In fact, we're in a drought. You're wasting all that wood on building a boat?

You must be mad. You're deluded. You're wasting your time. Noah would have pleaded with them. There's a cataclysmic flood coming which God is sending to judge the world for all the evil in it and the way people have turned their back on him.

Please get in the ark. You cannot save yourself. You cannot survive the flood. There's only one rescue. Get in the ark. What is the rescue that God has provided for us at the final judgment?

Well, it is Christ himself. It's his death on the cross. It's the only way we can be safe. There's no other way. You cannot build your own boat. There are no other religions or insurance policies which can save you on the day of Christ.

[28 : 04] Trust in his cross or be left outside. There are lots of things people do, aren't there, to try and prevent themselves from being harmed these days.

You can get life insurance, pay protection, private medical care, personal bodyguards, private detectives, security systems, buildings insurance, flood protection. The list goes on and on. But they're all useless on the day of Christ. On the day of Christ, like in Noah's day, everything will be swept away. So ask yourself, am I in the ark?

Am I trusting in Jesus' death for my rescue? Or am I too busy eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage, paying on my smartphone, paying off my mortgage, studying for my exams, that if Christ came back this afternoon, I would be utterly unprepared?

Jesus says he is coming like a thief in the night. And because we don't know when he's coming, we must be ready. So what does it look like to be constantly ready for Jesus' return?

[29 : 13] Three things. Firstly, and most importantly, stay in the ark. Keep trusting in Jesus' death to save you. Maybe you trusted Jesus years ago, but you started to doubt that there's going to be a flood, a final judgment.

You're tempted to give up on the ark, to give up on Jesus. Stay in the ark. Secondly, pray for Christ to return.

I don't know if you've ever prayed for Christ to return, but it's such a good thing to do because it reminds us where the universe is heading. If we don't pray for Christ to come back, if we don't long for him to come back, we're probably too absorbed in this world.

We probably live like Kyle Sagan, as if the cosmos is all there is. Thirdly, hold on to the things of this world lightly.

They'll be swept away. The career that you're so desperate to advance, the money you're so quick to save, the house you're so obsessed with, none of these can save us. None of them will last.

[30 : 26] We have the ark, which is Christ. And if we have him, we need nothing else. Now perhaps you're sitting here and you're feeling that being constantly ready for Jesus' return, it's just exhausting.

It's just exhausting. It's like staying awake all night just in case a thief comes. Maybe I'm ready now, trusting in Jesus, praying for his return, holding on to the things of this world lightly.

But what about the next 20 years? What if Jesus doesn't come back tonight? What if he doesn't come back in my lifetime? How can I keep being constantly ready?

Well, like locking your door each night before you go to bed. Take each day at a time. A thief could come tonight and that's why you lock your door. Tonight.

So each morning, ask yourself, am I ready for Christ to come back today? Am I still in the ark? Am I still holding on to the things of this world lightly? Christ will suddenly return in judgment.

[31 : 36] So be constantly ready. Martin Luther, the famous Protestant reformer, famously said that he should live as if Christ died yesterday, rose this morning, and is coming back tomorrow.

Christ's return should be at the forefront of our minds. Not as a vague idea that maybe will happen in a few thousand years. It will happen and it will come like a thief.

It could come at any time. Therefore, we must be ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour we do not expect. Let's pray, shall we?

Father, we thank you that the universe is not all there is. We thank you that through Christ you will make a new world and get rid of evil once and for all.

And we pray that Christ would come soon and that we would be constantly ready for his return.

Help us to flee to the safety of Christ so that we wouldn't be destroyed on the day of your judgment.

[32 : 40] Amen. Amen.