

Ready for the Unexpected

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[0 : 0 0] This is the AM service on December the 14th 1997. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker. The sermon is entitled Ready for the Unexpected and is from Matthew chapter 24 verses 32 to 51.

We pray that you'll make us more expectant and ready for the coming King, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Probably at some stage in your life you've all played the game of musical chairs. When the music stops, everybody runs to a seat and sits down. And of course there are always less chairs than there are people. So at each turn somebody or some people miss out on a chair and therefore leave the game. They're out of the game. If you've ever played it, do you remember the nerves as you're trying to anticipate the precise point when the music will stop so that you'll be the first to the chair? Do you remember trying to walk around the chairs so that you go from one chair and then quickly to the next and then slowly pass that chair and then quickly to the next? That anticipation of when the music would stop.

You knew it would stop. But you didn't know when it would stop. So in order to play the game you had to be constantly on your toes, constantly alert and ready for the music that would stop. Now Jesus' second coming is not a game and Jesus' second coming is not a competition where some people win and some people lose. But in the same way as in musical chairs you had to be constantly ready for his coming, so too when we think about Jesus' return to this world.

Over the last two weeks we've been looking at Jesus' answer to his disciples' question. When they asked him, when will Jerusalem be destroyed? Because Jesus had just predicted that.

And what will be the sign of the end of the time when you come again? And Jesus has been explaining various signs that would occur in the world. Fairly general signs in a way.

[2 : 1 8] Wars, famines, persecution, false Christs, false messiahs and so on. But he's also made it clear that those signs, which after all have been present from the time he spoke those words through to the current time, those signs do not enable us to calculate the precise coming again of Christ. They tell us that he's coming, but they don't tell us when.

Now look at what Jesus says in conclusion to the answer to the disciples. We're looking in Matthew 24 from verse 32. You may like to have it open in front of you from page 806 in the Black Bibles in the pews. Jesus uses the analogy of a fig tree, fairly common in ancient Palestine.

From the fig tree, learn its lesson. As soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also when you see all these things, you know that he is near at the very gates. In Palestine, most trees, like in this country, are evergreen.

The fig tree is an exception, not the only one, but a fairly noticeable one. Fig trees are fairly common there. And they have large leaves, as probably many of you know.

When it comes time for spring, the sap begins to rise in the tree and little tender shoots begin to appear. And they're a sign that summer is coming, that summer is near.

[3 : 52] And as the leaves begin to shoot forth and begin to grow, anybody noticing them would know fairly naturally, summer is on the way. We all have the same sort of thing when we see in our springtime.

Flowers appear or various birds appear and so on. Summer is near. It's a fairly obvious analogy. Jesus is saying all the signs that I've been talking about tell you that Jesus is near, that his coming again is near.

They don't say exactly when, what date, time or place, but they do say that it is near. That's the point of this analogy. Nothing more needs to happen for Jesus to return, is what he's in effect saying.

But then he goes on to say, having mentioned the fig tree, a verse that causes great difficulty and problem. He says in verse 34, Truly I tell you, meaning it's a fairly solemn statement, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

This generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Now could it be that Jesus is wrong? Because after all, that generation has passed away.

[5 : 08] His disciples, his contemporaries, they're all gone. Dead for 1950 years or so. Could it be that he's wrong when he says, and seems to imply that all these things are going to happen in their own lifetime?

Well certainly there are some scholars who think Jesus is wrong here. Some people try and define, redefine what's going on here. Some say that what he's talking about is 70 AD, the destruction of Jerusalem.

And that certainly happened within the generation of Jesus' disciples and followers. Some people say that the word generation might be better translated as race of people.

So he's talking about the Jews perhaps, that the Jews will not pass away until Christ returns. And of course there are still Jews today, and this is an indication of what he's talking about here. Some say that he's talking about the church, that the church won't pass away until Jesus returns.

Other people think that he's talking about a general sinful humanity. That is humanity will remain sinful and full of problems until Jesus comes again. All of those things I guess are true in the end.

[6 : 12] But I don't think it's what he's talking about here. What he refers to by all these things is not his coming, but the signs leading up to his coming. Jesus is saying that all the signs that he is near will be in place within a generation.

And they were. The wars, the famines, persecution, false Christs, false prophets, and indeed the fall of Jerusalem itself, all within one generation.

Everything within a generation was in place for Jesus to come again. And that is still the case. 1900 or more years later, everything is still in place, ready for his coming again.

Nothing more needs to happen before he comes again. So those people who from time to time say this war or this cold war or this event or this catastrophe or this false Christ is a sure sign that the end is here and Jesus is about to return are not quite right.

That's always been the case. Ever since the end of that first generation. As we've said last week or the week before, no war, no false Christ, no prophet, no persecution, no famine, no disaster is the pinpoint to Jesus' imminent return.

[7 : 32] They're general signs that he is near. But they do not tell us when. But the point he's saying here with the fig tree and saying that this generation will not pass away is to say that his return could well be imminent.

You can't calculate it, but it could be imminent. Indeed he makes this a very important statement. It's not just an off-the-cuff remark. He goes on to say in verse 35 that heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

And I think that's saying in effect to us, 1900 or more years later, that that generation's gone and the next generation's gone, but Jesus' words about his coming again still stand true.

He is coming again to this world. And everything that is needed to happen before he comes is already in place and he's already occurring.

But having said all that, Jesus himself does not know when he's coming again. That was part of the disciples' question at the beginning of the chapter.

[8 : 42] When? But Jesus' astonishing statement in verse 36 is, he doesn't know. But about that day and hour, no one knows. Neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, that's Jesus himself, but only the Father knows.

Only God the Father. Jesus the Son doesn't know. It doesn't make him less than God not to know. But the prerogative of that date belongs to the Father alone.

And Jesus doesn't know. So how blasphemous it is when people in our world claim that they know when Jesus is coming back. 2000 AD or 1914 or 1842 or 1530 or whatever year they dream up and calculate.

What blasphemy that is. To claim knowledge that belongs only to God the Father. That not even Jesus Christ knew. We should not listen to such people who claim to know when he's coming again.

They're wrong. But worse than that, they're blasphemous. Claiming the knowledge of God alone. Jesus goes on to draw an analogy with the times of Noah.

[9 : 51] Almost at the beginning of the Bible. He says in verse 37, For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Or what were the days of Noah like?

He says, For as in those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until the day Noah entered the ark. There's nothing wrong with those things per se.

We all need to eat and drink and people get married and are given in marriage and so on. And they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away.

So too will be the coming of the Son of Man. In the story of Noah and the flood, you know that only Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives were saved by the ark that Noah built.

And no doubt the people around Noah mocked him for building an ark on dry land, such a crazy venture. Well, of course, in the end, God had the last laugh, if it was indeed a laugh.

[10 : 50] These people were living for the here and now, going about their daily life. A wicked generation, we're told, back in Genesis. But that's not so much Jesus' point here. Jesus' point here is that they did not expect the judgment of God to come at all.

And he says, and so it is in his own age and in every age. Our world does not expect Jesus to return. Our world does not expect God to judge it. And it mocks those who expect such things.

But when the flood came, they were found to be wrong. They were punished for their wickedness. And only Noah and his family were saved. Humanity was split in two, in effect.

The vast majority perishing in the flood, the small minority being saved in the ark. And in a similar way, when Jesus returns, he will return in judgment on this world.

And his people will be saved, but those who aren't will not. And like the flood, in a bigger and more permanent way, the return of Jesus will divide humanity forever.

[11 : 58] That's what Jesus says in the next couple of verses. Verse 40 and 41, he gives two illustrations. Firstly, of men. Secondly, of women. Two men will be in the field.

One will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together. One will be taken. One will be left. Typical bits of work. Probably today, we'd have two men are sitting side by side on computers.

One taken, one left. Two women doing their work or the shopping or in the office or whatever. One taken, one gone. Just typical examples to show that when Jesus comes, there will be division that divides between workplaces, between neighborhoods, between families even, between friends.

Those who are Christ's and those who are not. It's unclear whether the ones who are taken are saved or the ones who are left are saved. It doesn't really matter. The point of the illustration is not whether those who are saved are taken, but the point is the division.

Some will be saved and some will not. Some people use this verse to say that when Jesus comes again, he will do so secretly and he will draw his people to himself secretly.

[13 : 05] What's sometimes called in theological terms a secret rapture. Well, it's a bit of a nonsense, I think. Some people have speculated that if Jesus came like that, well, what would happen if a Christian was driving a car?

All of a sudden, whoomp, they're gone and a car continues down a freeway or a road without a driver. Well, it's a bit of nonsense, isn't it? We've seen already in this chapter that it's clear that when Jesus comes, everybody will know it.

You won't need me to tell you or anybody else to tell you that Jesus has come. For when he comes, every eye shall see him and know who he is, whether or not they are Christians.

The point of this illustration is to say that when Jesus comes, humanity will be divided between those who are Christian and those who are not.

What determines how we are found on that day is our attitude to Christ now. Our attitude to Christ now determines his attitude to us then.

[14 : 05] Those who choose to live without God now, God will respect their choice and he will not force them to live with him then, but rather allow them to keep on living for eternity in hell without him.

It's a fairly sombre picture that's coming up in this chapter. But Jesus is not wanting to strike a note of fear or terror into his disciples. A warning, yes, but he's wanting them to live responsible Christian lives.

So the point of it all is what he says in verse 42. Keep awake, therefore. It's a good thing to say halfway through a sermon on a warm morning. Keep awake, therefore.

But not literally meaning keeping our eyes awake, but rather to keep alert, to keep on our toes, to be constantly ready for the coming again of Christ. Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

Be alert. Be in a state of constant readiness, like in the game of musical chairs, only, of course, eternally much more significant and important. I'm not sure about you, but over my lifetime I've been burgled about four or five times in different houses that I've lived in.

[15 : 21] But not once have I had advance notice. Not once has there been a note in my letterbox saying, I'm going to burgle you at 7pm on Sunday. Please make sure you're at church so that I can burgle the house without being disturbed.

And I guess if you've been burgled, that's the same for you. No burglar leaves a calling card before they've been. Jesus uses that illustration to say what it'll be like when he comes again.

You see, we don't know when a thief comes. We don't know when we're going to get burgled. We have to be always alert and ready for the possibility that it might happen. And how often do we hear it said, it was the one time I left my window open that I got burgled.

The one time I left my car unlocked. Or the one time I left the keys in the car or something like that. It's always the one time, isn't it? We've got to be constantly ready for the coming again of Christ and not have lapses in our life.

Jesus himself, of course, is not a thief. He's not likening himself to a thief in character, but he's likening his coming again to the unexpectedness of a thief coming.

[16 : 31] So he says in verse 43, but understand this, if the owner 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 unexpected hour. There is no doubt at all that he is coming what is unsure is when.

Now some people might want to respond and say, well, why doesn't God tell us when? Why doesn't he give us a date for when he's coming? Wouldn't that be helpful if we knew that Jesus was coming on the 14th of January the year 2014?

It would help us plan a bit better, wouldn't it? We'd know whether we were going to have Christmas dinner or not. I mean, after all, what was the point of preparing all Christmas dinner and Jesus returns on Christmas Eve or something like that.

It would be a bit of a waste of effort. So wouldn't it be helpful if God told us when? Wouldn't it help us to be better prepared? I think the answer to that is no.

[17 : 38] I teach at Ridley College, Old Testament, and each year or semester when I begin, I tell them that in such and such a date will be your exam. Do they all race out of the room and start studying?

No. They wait until a couple of days before the exam, go into a mild panic, then ring me up and say, can you tell us if this question is going to be on the exam? And I say, no, I can't tell you that question.

And they go into a mild panic and they cram their exam for a couple of days and then within the same couple of days after the exam they've forgotten all they've learnt anyway. The real good students prepare well, regularly, constantly, keeping up to date with the course and more than that they're the ones who actually remember what they've learnt for years to come.

Imagine if I began my course, and I must say preparing this sermon I've been tempted to do this next year, imagine if I began my course by saying at some stage during this year I will give you an exam.

I'm not going to tell you when, it could be at any time of this year. Well firstly I'd have a student write, they would all say it's unfair. But if I actually did that it'd make sure they studied well wouldn't it?

[18 : 45] They'd have to be always alert. In fact one thing they'd have to come to the lectures. What about Christmas shopping for those who don't understand exams and so on?

How many people finish their Christmas shopping in February? We all know when we've got to do it why don't we just get on and do it early in the year? Well occasionally I meet somebody who actually does that in January even when the sales are on.

Well I must say even though I'm an organised sort of person I think that's a bit bizarre and if you're like me you're still trying to fit in Christmas shopping with everything else that's going on. See God knows what we're like.

He knows that if he told us what day he's coming again none of us would get ready. We might just cram a bit at the end but you see what God wants from us are lives that are constantly lived for him.

That are constantly lived in readiness of him. Not a cramming at the end but rather a constant alertness for God's sake. He wants us always to be ready.

[19 : 43] What does it mean then to be ready? How do we live ready lives? We can't sit up waiting every night. We do need our sleep. I don't think Jesus' words about keep awake are to tell us never to go to bed.

But what does it mean to be Christians who are ready? Well Jesus gives another little illustration in the final verses of this chapter. Two people two servants a good ready servant but a wicked unready servant.

The first is the good one. Who then is the faithful and wise slave whom his master has put in charge of his household to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? Who is the wise one?

Who is the faithful servant? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. The master goes away he's got a group of servants and slaves he allocates to one of them responsibility for the others.

The wise slave is the one who's doing the master's work when the master returns. Now in that analogy it's talking in one sense about leadership. So the most direct application is for Christian leaders to be involved in their work of looking after God's people.

[20 : 51] But I think Jesus is not telling it for Christian leaders so much as for Christians generally. He's saying for Christians for you people and for me as well we are to be about the Lord's work when he returns.

That doesn't mean singing from a hymn book or being in church it means living godly lives. It means using the opportunities God gives us to declare the glory of his name and the gospel. It means being prayerful people being people who are seeking to live everything for God rather than for ourselves.

It means serving others and serving God rather than serving ourselves. By contrast the wicked slave says to himself my master is delayed and so because he thinks he's got plenty of time before the master returns he goes on a drinking spree.

He beats his fellow slaves he eats and drinks with drunkards in verse 49. Just like school children when the teacher goes out of the room what do students do when the teacher says now I want you to be working for the next five minutes while I'm out of the classroom?

Who works for five minutes? Soon as the doors shut rulers get thrown about paper gets screwed up and hurled around people slap the people sitting in front of them and so on don't they? As soon as they hear a footprint down the door everybody goes back to their desks and pretend they've been working all the time but every teacher knows that's never the case.

[22 : 09] What about those parents of you who've got teenage children and you go out and allow them to have a few friends around you're not allowed to have the music up too loud you've got to be in bed at a certain time etc etc. Whoever thinks their teenage children do that thing as soon as the doors shut the party begins.

What about when the parents come back unexpectedly? The teacher comes back a little bit earlier the family comes back like on that advert for ice cream the man with his leg all in plaster as soon as the family goes down he goes to the ice cream and watches the cricket but he gets sprung because his family comes back early well that will happen for the wicked slaves the people who think Jesus is delayed the people who think oh he's not coming back in my lifetime he's not coming back tonight he's not coming back this week so I can go and live for myself I've got plenty of time in my life to get right with God I'll put it off I'll live and eat and drink and be merry now at the end of my life I'll sort all those spiritual things out well our world is full of people like that who think Jesus isn't coming again certainly not in my lifetime I've got plenty of time so many of us spend more time preparing for retirement than we do for the second coming of Christ but don't be caught out he's coming at any time maybe tonight may not be for millions of years but he is coming and everything that needs to happen before he's coming again has already occurred and just because he's spent 2,000 years before coming again doesn't mean he'll spend another 2,000 years either and when Christ returns those who are not found ready for his return will not have a second chance there won't be time to say I'm sorry there won't be time to turn again to Christ indeed

Jesus gives a very somber picture of what will happen to those wicked servants the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know he will cut him in pieces perhaps meaning cut him off and put him with the hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth fairly serious judgment but that's the eternal judgment for those who are not Christ's and refuse to live for him in modern Christians thinking the second coming of Christ does not get a high priority apart from those people who try to calculate dates but our expectation of Christ's return I suspect is fairly weak I doubt that many of us really think he could come back this week or certainly even in our lifetimes most of us live each day oblivious to the possibility that Christ may return today one reason why that's the case I think is because we've been duped by so many wrong

Christian theologies abounding in the last few decades the thinking that he's not coming at all it's just a myth something to provoke us to live now but he's not really going to come or the liberal theology that says everybody's going to go to heaven anyway so what does it matter when he comes we'll all be taken up with him there's no judgment God's so full of love that he can't judge anybody ignoring of course the fact that God is also perfectly holy such deception is one reason why our churches are paralyzed and why the character of Christians is so often corroded in these days don't be deceived Jesus is coming back and he's coming to judge the living and the dead and his warning his somber warning here is not an idle threat his coming is absolutely certain what we don't know is when he said he's coming back and he does not tell lies he said he's coming back to judge and he does not tell lies he said he's coming back to gather his own people to be with him forever in paradise but to cast off those who do not know him and are not prepared for him and he does not tell lies so the warning for us is to get ready to be ready and to stay ready to always be about the Lord's work and his priorities to live each day for him as if there were no tomorrow for he is coming again and we pray come

Lord Jesus Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen