

Matthew 24:36-51

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[0 : 00] Well, if you would turn back to Matthew 24, 36 to 51 on page 830, that would be great. You can follow along there.

As I was coming to church this morning, I passed a bus and had three ads for this season. The first ad was traditional Christmas. The second was home alone.

And the third was frozen. And I think the question is, which one represents you? Well, if we had a St John's bus, at one end would be the first coming of Jesus, his coming in humility and obscurity.

And at the other end would be the second coming of Jesus. And we're riding between these. And the second coming would somehow be displayed as dramatic and powerful and inescapable and great power and glory, where Jesus comes to deal with all evil, to unravel all injustice, to judge the living and the dead, and to gather his people to himself so that we'll see his face.

And he will be admired and glorified in all his people forever. And the obvious question to be asked this morning is, why on earth would we believe such a thing?

[1 : 18] I mean, even if you do believe it, what difference does it make on Monday, Tuesday, this next week? And it's been 2,000 years after all.

Shouldn't we just give it all up and get on with making the world a nicer place? You know, there's an organisation in the States called American Atheists, and they have about half a million members. And each Christmas they buy space on the billboard at Times Square in New York. And a couple of Christmases ago, they loved to mock what Christians believe.

This was what it said. And another one was, And I'm not telling you anything new.

The whole idea of Jesus coming again is widely regarded as fantasy fiction for fools. And it's to keep the unsophisticated in line, and that's us.

[2 : 29] And Jesus knows perfectly well the pain and power of popular opinion. And such is his power and kindness. But not only does he make himself very clear in his teaching, particularly about his second coming, But again and again throughout his teaching, he gives assurances of why we can trust his words.

Because in the end, we believe he's going to come again because we believe in him and his words, right? I understand this week Vladimir Putin told the Russian state media, and I quote, You can't trust anyone.

You can only trust me. I'm glad you laugh at that. That's transparent propaganda. But the problem is that Putin's lies literally kill people.

And current estimates of the war in Ukraine are that something like 200,000 innocents and combatants have been killed and injured. So right before our passage, the very verse before our passage, there is this most astonishing and wonderful promise of Jesus in verse 35.

Just look down at Matthew 24, 35. Jesus says, Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. So he takes the most permanent and the dependable things that we can think of, and he says, My words have more weight, more power, more permanence than the entire creation.

[4 : 11] I mean, after all, creation depends on my words, he says. And the world is passing away, and we are passing away, but what doesn't pass away, notice he says, Not just for this world, but for the world to come into eternity, are his words.

It's so important for us to know Jesus' words, because his words don't bring death. They bring eternal life. They are the words of eternal life.

They are a living and abiding words which come from his grace and truth, and they carry much more weight on our hearts than shifting public opinion. So as we come to our little passage today, verses 36 to 51, what happens is that Jesus changes the camera angle.

So he has been speaking from the heavenly view of his coming, from above, if you like, shaking the world, power and great glory, sending out the angels to gather his people.

And now the camera angle changes down to our level, and Jesus speaks from our perspective.

What will it be like for us, and what does it mean for our discipleship in light of his coming?

[5 : 28] What difference does it make to our lives on Monday? And the reason Jesus is doing this is not just to be practical. He's doing it out of love for us, because he knows how feeble and how weak we are, and how impatient we are for his coming.

We find it very difficult to wait. And he knows that when he ascends into heaven, his followers constantly try to take control of his schedule.

He warns about this in the first half of the chapter, that we make calculations and timelines pretending to know what we don't know. And so the way he gives us clarity in this passage is he gives us a headline, verse 36.

Then he has two very practical applications. First, what does the Christian life look like from the outside? And second, what will it look like for us?

What does it look like? What does the Christian life look like to others around us? And then what does it look like for us? So here is the headline. Here is the summary verse, verse 36.

[6 : 37] But concerning that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

What does that mean? Well, it means that Jesus' coming will not be slow or gradual. He's coming on a certain day at a certain hour. And that means it will be sudden, in a moment, at an hour that God the Father has set.

Which means his coming won't just be personal and physical and visible. It won't just be universal and final and unavoidable, but it will be sudden, dramatic, unexpected.

And Jesus' focus in this passage is on the certainty of his coming and the uncertainty of its timing. The hour in which he comes is unknown and unknowable to any human being.

Not even the angels know, and they're going to be very involved in that day. And I think the surprise in this verse is Jesus says not even the Son knows. I mean, it's his day. It's a very interesting line.

[7 : 53] I mean, Jesus is quite happy to put himself on God's level by calling himself the Son. And then he says part of the glory of the incarnation is the humility with which I accept my limitations.

But the point is this. That part of being a disciple is trusting his word, not trying to do calculations. It's walking by faith and not schedules.

It's being a servant of God and not trying to play God. And we so instinctively want to play God on this. We don't like trusting him. We want to take control.

And it's very interesting. After Jesus rose from the dead in the first chapter of Acts, the disciples come to him and say, OK, Jesus, tell us now what's the time, you know, when are you going to come?

Do you remember what he says? It's not for you to know the times and the seasons. Wait for the Holy Spirit and then get on with the witness. Now, why is this so important to Jesus for us to get this?

[8 : 56] The certainty of his coming and the uncertainty of his timing. Why does he spend the next 40 verses on this? And the answer is very simply because he knows our hearts and he loves us.

I mean, just imagine Jesus gave us a date. Imagine he said, I will come again on December the 25th at two minutes past 10 a.m. in 2030.

Gives us a couple of years. What would you do? Would you pray and serve and give like crazy? Or would you be like me, give yourself to seven and a half years of self-indulgence and then have a frenetic six months of Christian activity and repenting?

I guess if I gave myself to seven years of self-indulgence, I wouldn't want to repent. And if you don't think you'd do that, you don't know yourself very well.

So the way that God has ordered our future is out of love. It's to enable us to grow in faith and longing because our hope is not in a particular date, but it's in the person of Jesus Christ and him coming.

[10 : 15] And it means daily, steadily trusting him, growing to know him by faith and strengthening each other for patient service. And he wants us to stop speculating about his coming, but he knows that's not enough.

And so he now teaches two things positively. So I've got two points for the rest of the sermon. Number one, what does the Christian life look like in the light of his coming to outsiders? And what does it look like to be a Christian from the inside? Is that okay? Any questions? Okay, let's keep going. Number one, what does the Christian life look like to others?

Verses 37 to 44. And the short answer is, it looks like a complete waste of time. It looks like pointless, even pitiful waste of a life.

And Jesus gives us three short pictures of what it looks like to others to live by faith, trusting and acting in the promise of God's future. And the first and major illustration is from the life of Noah and the flood.

[11 : 21] Verse 38. What were the days of Noah like? 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.

It was just so normal. There was nothing extraordinary about the days before the flood. People were eating and drinking and dating and celebrating in marriage, which is what we do, what we enjoy doing.

I mean, there may be a hint here that the people around Noah sought all their meaning from those things. But the point is that the reality of life on the surface was that everything is fine.

Everything is continuing. It's business as usual. It's just going on as it always had done. And the only one out in the story, the odd one out, is Noah, whom God had commanded to build a massive ark because he had promised to end the world by a flood.

And we know from elsewhere in the scriptures that Noah preached this in his generation for about a century, despite the fact that the average rainfall was in centimetres.

[12 : 26] And if anything, where Noah was, they needed more water. But it's not hard to imagine, is it? Noah and his friends. And every time they come by Noah, they say, what are you doing?

You're really wasting your life. You spend every day and every extra cent on this stupid thing. God said he's going to bring a flood. Has he? Is that right? Yes, that's right.

So when is he going to bring it? Well, God hasn't told me that. I don't know when he's coming. My wife and I, we're going to bring in a cook to cook this magnificent animal we killed last week.

Why don't you and Mrs. Noah come? And we can turn this ark into a wedding centre. And you can make a lot of money. And we'll hire out the Jaguar suite.

We like you, Noah, but what you're doing is just so unnecessary. We're all a bit worried about you. You can't let some spiritual dream let you waste your life. You've got to live for life now.

[13 : 28] Verse 38 at the end. When the flood came, it was sudden and global.

Not a single person outside the ark was able to avoid it or escape God's judgment. And Jesus knows that his teaching that the date is certain but unknowable puts us as Christian disciples in a position of weakness and difficulty.

He knows it opens us up to mocking by those who don't believe the words of Jesus and who are entirely invested in this life. And from the outside, the Christian life looks like a waste.

Because on the surface, you can't tell the difference between someone who is heading for eternal life and someone who is heading for eternal destruction. That is the point of the next picture in verses 40 to 42.

Two men in a field, one is taken, one is left. Two women working, one is taken, one is left. And you may be surprised to know that in the original, it may be that the unbeliever is taken off to judgment.

[14 : 46] But whichever one is taken, it doesn't really matter. But the fact is that at the point of Jesus coming, there will be a separation which is eternal, which you are unable to see now.

Because we're only able to see the surface. And when he comes, it'll be in the twinkling of an eye and the last trumpet shall sound. And we all will be caught up to be with him and it'll be sudden and it'll be no time to repent or to change our minds.

So Jesus' great concern in this first point, when he's talking about how we look like to those around us, is not that we look normal, but whether we're ready.

So verse 42, Therefore stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. Or in verse 44, Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

So let's turn then from what it looks like from the outside, looks like to others, to what the Christian life looks like from the inside. What does it look like for us, in Jesus' view, to follow him for the rest of our days?

[15:54] In verses 37 to 44, and the short answer is, everything depends on what kind of person you are. So if you look at verse 37, Jesus goes on the front foot.

And in a question, he asks and invites us in closer. He says, Who then, who is the faithful and wise servant? Not who is the busiest and most frenetic servant.

Not who gets the most done with great good works. No, no, no. He's after the faithful and wise. He says, What kind of person are you? And just to make the edge a little bit sharper, since the beginning of the chapter, Jesus has been speaking to his disciples.

He's not speaking to the crowd. He's not speaking to the religious authorities or to any outsiders. And this question is a question he gives to his disciples.

And it's a picture of a household with two different servants. And it's about how the Christian life is lived out in the household of God, in the community of the church.

[17:04] And it's a contrast between two different servants, two different kinds of people in the household of God. Servant A and Servant B, let's call them. They're both in the same household.

They're both given the privileges of working in the household. They're both given the same job of serving others in the household, bringing out of the master's stores provisions to care for the practical needs of others in the household.

It's an other person-centred job. And the master of the household goes away for an extended time, promising he will return. And when he does return, it's without any announcement.

It's suddenly and it's unexpectedly, just as Jesus will at the end of time. And the two servants react to the master's absence in two very different ways. Servant A just gets on with the job.

He looks for ways to serve others because he knows everything he has is a gift from the master.

And he lives in the light of the return of the master because he knows he'll give it back to the master.

[18:07] It's all rightfully his when he returns. Servant B couldn't care less about the master. He quite likes the fact the master is away. And as soon as the master goes, he uses his time and the master's resources for himself.

And he makes life miserable for the other servants because he doesn't care about the master's word or his return. So this is Jesus speaking to disciples about what it means to be awake and ready.

And the measure of the difference between these two servants is how they act to others in the household. And I think as we look at this, we're meant to ask the question, who am I?

How do I act towards others in the household of God? Am I engaged, trying to bring them good out of Christ's store? Or do I skim along the surface wanting others to serve me?

Am I a giver or am I a taker? Am I a generous person or am I a consumer? Do I seek the good of others or am I really seeking the good of myself?

[19:19] Am I the kind of person that even thinks about these things or am I just too busy? What kind of person am I? And Jesus uses two lovely words to describe servant A.

He calls him faithful and wise. And that is Jesus' picture of what it means to be awake and ready. It's not who is the busy and harried servant or who is the socially responsible and evangelistically enterprising servant.

Just faithful and wise. Because faith ties us to the master, trusting he will do as he says, that he will return when his time comes.

And to be wise means this servant just thinks about what he's doing. He's got perspective. He recognises the great kindness that the master has given him all that he has. And I point out again, there's nothing flashy or special or particularly gifted or outstanding about servant A.

Servant A is steady. He's consistent. He's dependable. He's reliable. He's patient. He's constant.

[20:26] He's unswerving. You can count on this servant to do what the master says. Now, this is a very different view of readiness than many of us have been taught.

It's a different view of readiness than I was taught as a young person. You may have seen those bumper stickers on cars. One of them says, Beware, the driver may disappear at any moment. You've seen those? Very worrying, really. Another one I've seen, I was actually, I saw one of those when I was with the principal of my seminary.

And I said, A car was parked illegally. And I said to him, Dr. Knox, perhaps the driver was raptured. And he said, No, no, no. He said, He's not been raptured because you're still here.

So lovely. Another great sticker is, Jesus is coming soon. Look busy. As though the way we are to act in the light of Jesus coming is to be in a kind of permanent panic.

[21 : 36] You know, a red alert. But what Jesus teaches about servant A is not that they're busy, busy, busy, busy. It's not that they go to the window every 30 seconds worrying about the master's coming.

His awakeness and his readiness is in the slow, normal doing each day of what the master's given him to do.

It's not a picture of fear. It's not a picture of fear. It's not a picture of high anxiety. It's not work, work, work in case I get caught slacking. It's just steady, dependable, even a bit lighthearted about what he's doing, because it all belongs to the master.

He's not constantly examining himself and saying, am I ready? Am I ready? Am I ready? I need to do more. It is his connection with the master that means he's serving others in the house.

That's what the master wishes him to do. And that is what Christian hope is meant to do to us. We take the meaning of our lives from Christ's death and resurrection and from his coming again, and we take it into the ordinary daily circumstances of our lives.

[22 : 45] And it is precisely the hope of his coming that gives us patience and steadfastness and faith and wisdom. Do you know in the letter of Timothy, Paul describes Christians as those who long for, crave the word is.

Love his appearing, Jesus appearing. To the believer, Jesus coming is not meant to create terror or alarm in our hearts, but love and longing.

And it is in the patience and serving and caring for others, which is sometimes really difficult, that our longing for Christ grows. Our hope is both the fuel and the flame of serving others.

I came across a great quote this week from Martin Luther. He says, We ought to live each day as though Jesus died in the morning, rose in the afternoon, and is coming again in the evening.

I thought that was great. By contrast, Jesus only uses one word of servant B. He calls him wicked. And the word literally means hurtful, damaging, harmful.

[23 : 54] Interesting, in verse 48, we're taken inside his own heart dialogue. He says to himself, My master is delayed.

What governs his life is the absence of his master. And he's glad. Because it's going to give him a chance to pretend to be the master. He knows up here the master will return, but he puts it out of his mind.

It has no bearing on today. His focus is on the now. The future doesn't matter, really. And the way that he shows he's not ready and not awake is he no longer plays the role of servant.

In fact, serving others is now beneath him. He tries to play the master. And he treats his fellow servants as they were his servants.

And he treats his master's resources as though they're his to do with his wishes. And there's a harshness and there's a violence in the way he treats other servants.

[24 : 57] He beats them repeatedly. He's careless and cruel and self-indulgent. This is a disciple in the household of God. Verse 50.

The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him. At an hour when 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. The cut in pieces means separated in himself. The punishment perfectly fits the crime for the believing pretender, the hypocrite.

Who says one thing but does another. And the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth is Jesus' word which is used half a dozen times in the gospel. Because part of the punishment for the disciple who lives like this is being aware of the happiness of the blessed that he's missed out on. And what does the master do with servant A when he comes? In verse 46 and 47. Jesus solemnly describes him as blessed.

[26 : 03] And then he shares all his possessions with him. That's what Christ will do when he comes. He will give us all he has. Everything is his.

We will inherit. And become ours forever. So, in the first coming of Jesus at Christmas, he brought the future into the present.

Birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, they're full of grace and truth and heavenly life. And so our hope is not just for the future. Our hope is from the future.

And though we will all seem a bit strange to those around us, we follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ himself. Who was faithful and wise.

Who brought glory out of weakness. Who brought salvation through suffering. By his faithfulness and by his wisdom. And I think the people around us are pretty exhausted and disillusioned.

[27 : 09] I can't think of a cultural hope that hasn't worn thin and threadbare. And Christ has given himself for us and to us.

So there's no place amongst us for cynicism or for despair. And he's given to, he's given us to each other in this community.

To stir each other up to love and to good works. To encourage one another. To care for and provide for each other out of the riches of his resources. To help each other to long for his coming until he comes on the day he'll give crowns of righteousness to us.

And gather us up and take him home. Which is a very happy prospect. Amen.