



Alert

JESUS IS COMING BACK.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 24:36-51 Memory Verse: Matthew 24:44

Matthew 24–25 is known as the Olivet Discourse. It focuses on questions Jesus’s disciples asked as they left the temple complex on Tuesday evening, crossed the Kidron Valley, and made their way up the Mount of Olives. Jesus’s prophecy that the temple would be destroyed led His disciples to ask about the timing and the signs of that event.

They also then asked Jesus about His return. He told them even He did not know when He would return, so they needed to live in constant expectation. His return would happen suddenly and unexpectedly, producing catastrophic consequences for those not prepared. Jesus then supported His exhortation with examples and parables.

As you dig into this session from Matthew 24, examine your “preparation” for Jesus’s return. Reflect on how you are getting ready for Him, as well as asking Him to help you stay alert. You also can use this lesson to challenge adults to live in light of Jesus’s return. Underscore the urgency of staying alert and watchful each day and challenge them to consider how they occupy their time. Remind them of the importance of actually living in anticipation of Jesus’s return—both for themselves and for the world around them.



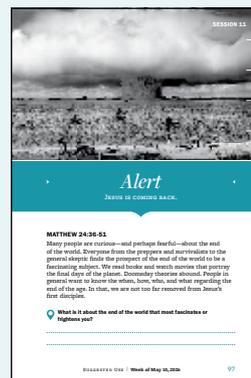
Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

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Many people are curious—and perhaps fearful—about the end of the world. Everyone from the preppers and survivalists to the general skeptic finds the prospect of the end of the world to be a fascinating subject. We read books and watch movies that portray the final days of the planet. Domsday theories abound. People in general want to know the when, how, who, and what regarding the end of the age. In that, we are not too far removed from Jesus's first disciples. (PSG, p. 97)

What is it about the end of the world that most fascinates or frightens you?



Understand the Context (Matthew 24:1-51)

On Sunday of Passion Week, Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem and received a welcome as the Messiah. On Monday He chased out those who sold livestock and those who exchanged money in the temple precincts. The observing crowd was amazed by Him (Mark 11:18; Luke 19:48).

The religious leaders, however, felt differently. They wanted to destroy Jesus. So on Tuesday, they tried at least five times to trap Him (Matt. 21:23–22:46). After Jesus successfully avoided each trap, He gave His last public discourse in which He warned the crowds and His disciples about the Pharisees.

In chapter 23, Jesus told His hearers they were to do what the Pharisees taught from the law of Moses but without following their example. He noted that the Pharisees did everything to be seen and praised by others. Jesus then pronounced a series of seven “woes” on the Pharisees, repeatedly calling them “hypocrites.”

He accused them of slamming the door of God's kingdom on the people and of traveling the world to make a convert who was worse than themselves. He pointed out their clever ways to evade their oaths and charged them with meticulously tithing while neglecting mercy and justice.

Jesus said they were so worried about the outside appearance of their “cup” that they let the internal matters slide. He even compared them to “whitewashed tombs” that looked nice on the outside but were full of death and decay.

Finally, He said they were just like their ancestors who had killed the prophets, all while building beautiful tombs for them. With that, Jesus lamented over Jerusalem. He compared the city to a desolate house that would not see Him again until He returned in glory.

Matthew 24–25 (and the parallel passages in Mark 13:1-37 and Luke 21:5-36) records the Olivet Discourse. As they were leaving the temple on Tuesday, Jesus's disciples pointed out the complex's beautiful stones. In response, Jesus said a day was coming when none of them would be left standing. As the little band crossed the Kidron Valley and ascended the Mount of Olives, Jesus began answering the disciples' questions about what He had said.

In the short term, Jesus's words were fulfilled when the temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. But Jesus had much more to say about the long-term future, what many might call the end of the age. This session picks up Jesus's response to His followers' second question regarding His future return, which is also known as “the parousia.”

Read Matthew 24:36-51. Identify words and phrases that challenge us to be ready for Jesus's return. (PSG, p. 98)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28) and **Pack Item 5** (Poster: Parables of Jesus).

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 97 of the PSG.

ASK:

What is it about the end of the world that most fascinates or frightens you? (PSG, p. 97)

DISCUSS:

Encourage the group to suggest movies, books, television shows, and other popular media that centers on the end of the world. Lead a brief discussion on how those feed our desire to know more about the end times. Affirm that it's human nature to want “inside information” on the last days.

CONTEXT:

Direct attention to **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28). Point out that today's session comes from Matthew 24, which is Jesus's fifth discourse in Matthew. Share the following information from Understand the Context to provide more context for today's focal passage:

Chapter 24 begins with the disciples marveling over the magnificence of the temple. Jesus informed them that the temple would be destroyed. His disciples asked when this would happen and what signs would signal His return and the end of the age. Jesus's response prompted what is known as the Olivet Discourse, an extended teaching given on the Mount of Olives found in Matthew 24–25. (PSG, p. 98)

SHARE:

Point to **Pack Item 5** (Poster: Parables of Jesus). Note that Jesus's parable of the fig tree (Matt. 24:32-35) leads into today's focal passage.

SAY:

This parable challenges believers to remain vigilant for the return of Jesus. That will continue to be Jesus's theme in the verses we study today.



Group Activity Option

Music

Provide lyrics to “Lion and the Lamb” by Leeland. Play the song and encourage adults to mark phrases that relate to Jesus's return. Allow volunteers to share what they highlighted. Discuss the distinction between Jesus coming to earth as a sacrificial Lamb and His return as a roaring Lion. Share that as Jesus moved closer to making His sacrifice during Passion Week, He taught His disciples about His second coming in Matthew 24.

An Unknown Hour (Matt. 24:36-41)

36 “Now concerning that day and hour no one knows—neither the angels of heaven nor the Son—except the Father alone. **37** As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. **38** For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark. **39** They didn’t know until the flood came and swept them all away. This is the way the coming of the Son of Man will be. **40** Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. **41** Two women will be grinding grain with a hand mill; one will be taken and one left.”

(v. 36) The words *now concerning* mark a transition to a different topic. In Matthew 24:4-35, Jesus had shared signs for recognizing the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the end time events (v. 3). But in verse 36, He told them something *no one knows*. This included both God’s *angels* and *the Son*. No one but the *Father alone* knows the *day and hour* when these things would come to pass. Jesus now spoke of that *day* in the singular, referring to “the day of the Lord.” *Hour* is also in the singular. He used the same expression in 24:50 and in 25:13.

Jesus now was clearly talking about His future return, sometimes called His *parousia* (after the Greek word for “coming”). The words must have shocked His disciples. Since no one knows when Jesus will return, it is impossible to set a date for it. As Jesus was about to point out, believers should devote their energy to preparing for His return rather than predicting it.

(vv. 37-39) Because the date and time of Jesus’s return cannot be known, it will catch people unaware, like the flood in *the days of Noah*. Jesus made the comparison twice (vv. 37,39). Leading up to the flood, people went about their normal business: *eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage*. The idea of *eating and drinking* covers both normal meals and banquets. It also could suggest a crudeness that marked sinful humanity in the pre-flood era. *Marrying and giving in marriage* are the common verbs used in relation to a wedding ceremony.

In this passage, Jesus’s emphasis was on a lack of preparation. Before the flood, people were oblivious to the danger until the waters *came and swept them all away*. Since Noah was a “preacher of righteousness,” they heard the warnings of judgment (2 Pet. 2:5). They simply gave no attention to God in their lives. As a result, they did not anticipate the coming judgment.

They rejected Noah’s calls to repent; and, eventually, it was too late. The sudden and unexpected event was catastrophic!

(vv. 40-41) Jesus then used two short examples drawn from the first century: *two men . . . in the field* and *two women . . . grinding grain*. Perhaps the two men were coworkers or a father and a son. Perhaps the two women were neighbors or a mother and daughter. Regardless, these were normal activities of life. In both cases Jesus said, *one will be taken and one left*. Again, the event will be sudden and unexpected.

Scholars, depending on their prophetic views, debate whether it is better to be taken or to be left behind in Jesus’s example. Some believe that *taken* refers to the rapture or the gathering of God’s elect. Thus, the person is taken to be with the Lord, and the other person is left for judgment.

Others point to the previous example from the days of Noah, where those swept away by the flood were taken away in judgment, while those left (Noah and his family) were saved. Either way, Jesus’s emphasis was on the unexpected nature of the event, leading into His command to be prepared when the time comes.

Key Doctrine

Last Things

According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. (See 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3; Revelation 1:7.)



READ:

APPLICATION POINT: We can be certain that Jesus will one day return.

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 24:36-41 aloud as the group listens for details about Jesus’s second coming.

ASK:

What do we learn about God’s plans for Jesus’s return in these verses? (PSG, p. 100)

EXPLAIN:

Stress the primary teaching of this parable:

Implied in the disciples’ question about signs of Jesus’s coming was the question, “When?” The answer, according to Jesus was, no one knows—neither the angels nor He Himself knew God’s timetable. . . . Because no one knows the time of Christ’s return, any attempt to speculate and calculate it is a waste of time and energy. Instead, preparedness is the proper response to the fact that Jesus will return. (PSG, p. 99)

ASK:

How do the two illustrations given help us better understand the nature of Jesus’s return? (PSG, p. 100)

SHARE:

Noah tried to warn those around him, but they refused to listen. Before the flood came, they continued going about their normal routines. By the time they realized what was happening, it was too late. Only Noah and his family were spared. Likewise, Jesus’s return will catch people off guard. Like men walking in the field or women working at a mill, many will ignore Jesus’s warnings and fail to prepare for His return. And they will suffer the consequences for their decision.

PRAY:

Encourage adults to take a few minutes for silent prayer, asking God to help them prepare for the return of Jesus. Urge them to find ways to live like Jesus is coming back each day.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Phone Notifications

Invite adults to take out their phones and consider any unaddressed notifications. Ask: **How much attention do you pay to the notifications on your phone? How quickly do you respond to them?** Point out that we might choose to ignore a notification—we know it has come and that more will follow. Explain that the same is true of Jesus’s return. Note that we don’t know when He will come back, but we can be sure that it’s going to happen.

Be Alert (Matt. 24:42-44)

42 “Therefore be alert, since you don’t know what day your Lord is coming. **43** But know this: If the homeowner had known what time the thief was coming, he would have stayed alert and not let his house be broken into. **44** This is why you are also to be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

(v. 42) As pointed out, many will be caught by surprise by Jesus’s return because no one can know the time or date (vv. 36-41). **Therefore** Jesus told His disciples to be ready always—to **be alert**. We are called to maintain constant vigilance.

Jesus’s use of *therefore* indicates a conclusion of an idea or lesson point from His twin illustrations in verses 36-41. *Be alert* is written as a present tense active imperative. This means the phrase stresses both the authority of a command and the warning of an ongoing need for active watchfulness.

Again, the reason for vigilance on the part of Christ followers is **you don’t know what day your Lord is coming**. Again Jesus emphasized that *you don’t know*. If neither He nor the angels of God know the timing of His return, it is foolish for any human to speculate (v. 36). However, Jesus did note that it is “your Lord” who will come for His followers. The term does not illuminate any details about the second coming, but it does remind readers that Jesus has an intimate and personal relationship with His people.

Since the phrase also suggests a measure of ownership or belonging, it should remind us of our responsibility to live out our faith (and our belief in Jesus’s return) until He comes back. Because we do not know what day it will arrive, we must live with a consistent spiritual tension that produces constant readiness. We have to act like His return could happen at any time because that is the only way to be found faithful when He actually comes back.

(v. 43) To illustrate the need for constant vigilance until His return, Jesus shared a short parable about a **homeowner** and a **thief** (see also Luke 12:39). This image comparing Jesus’s return to a thief striking without warning was later repeated by Paul (1 Thess. 5:2-4), Peter (2 Pet. 3:10), and John (Rev. 3:3; 16:15) in their writings to first-century churches.

Of course, in proper context, the image does not suggest dishonesty or a lack of integrity on the part of Jesus. It is not implying that He shares those qualities with a common thief. Rather, it underscores the sudden and unexpected nature of the Lord’s return—and the catastrophic consequences for those who are not prepared. Again, the focus is on vigilance.

Jesus noted that if an owner knew **what time the thief was coming**, he would not be caught with his guard down. Given this information, **he would have stayed alert** and taken precautions. For example, he might have set guards to protect his property. But since he didn’t know, he slept.

What time literally is “which watch.” Both the Jews and the Romans divided the night into “watches.” The Jews recognized three watches, while the Romans observed four. Each watch lasted several hours.

Jesus’s description of the burglar’s action is based on the construction of the houses in the first century. Walls were made of sun-dried mud bricks, so a house literally was **broken into**. The verb means “to dig through.” Jesus used the same word in the Sermon on the Mount when He encouraged people not to treasure temporal things that could be destroyed or stolen by thieves breaking in (Matt. 6:19-20).

(v. 44) Jesus repeated His call to readiness but shifted the motivation. In addition to the uncertainty of the time, He added the certainty of the event. He noted that, date and hour aside, **the Son of Man is coming**. Jesus’s return is a sure thing, even though it is yet to take place.

You do not expect is emphatic and presses home each disciple’s personal responsibility to be ready for Jesus’s return. That Jesus compared His return to the coming of a thief emphasizes its unexpectedness, as well as its unpleasantness for those who are not prepared.



APPLICATION POINT: Believers should be ready for Christ's return.

SAY: We saw in verses 36-41 that we don't know when Jesus is coming back, but His return is guaranteed. In these verses, Jesus focused on what believers should do while they wait.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 24:42-44** aloud as adults underline the responsibilities of believers waiting for Jesus to come back.

DISCUSS: Lead a brief discussion on what adults marked in the verses. Highlight the need for diligence. Affirm that it would be easy to discount Jesus's return since it has taken so long, but we are called to be alert as we serve Him here on earth.

ASK: **What does it mean to be ready for Jesus's return? Why is it important to be ready?** (PSG, p. 102)

RECAP: Review the illustration that Jesus used to make His point about vigilance in this passage:

Jesus used another illustration—the homeowner and a thief. The idea of Jesus's return being like a thief coming at an unknown time became a common metaphor for the early church as they anticipated Jesus's coming. . . . Verse 44 summarizes the entire warning to be ready. No one knows when Jesus will return. The day is not known (v. 42), no one knows during which "watch" He may come (v. 43), and no one knows the hour of His return. Constant watchfulness is essential because Jesus's return will be at an hour you do not expect. The command is not just to be alert or stay awake but to also be ready. (PSG, p. 101)

CONTRAST: Draw a two-column chart on the board. In the left column, write *be alert, know, and be ready*. Encourage adults to suggest the opposite of these terms and record their responses in the right column. Discuss how each side of the chart could affect one's approach to the second coming.

SHARE: *Again, Jesus made two points here. First, we don't know when He is coming back. That's up to the Father. Second, we can be sure that He is coming back. And because that's a guarantee, we need to stay alert and keep serving Him well until the day of His return finally arrives.*

Be Faithful (Matt. 24:45-51)

45 “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give them food at the proper time? **46** Blessed is that servant whom the master finds doing his job when he comes. **47** Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. **48** But if that wicked servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delayed,’ **49** and starts to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with drunkards, **50** that servant’s master will come on a day he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know. **51** He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

(vv. 45-47) After illustrating the sudden nature of His return, Jesus told a series of parables stressing responsibility and accountability. The parable of the servants is similar to that in Luke 12:42-48. Bible students debate whether Jesus pictured two different servants—a **faithful and wise servant** (vv. 45-47) and a “wicked servant” (vv. 48-51)—or whether the same servant debated the consequences of two courses of action. In keeping with His reference to two men (v. 40) and two women (v. 41), it seems likely that Jesus referred to two servants.

Assuming Jesus was referring to two different servants, both were put into the same set of circumstances. In language reminiscent of Joseph being appointed over Potiphar’s house (Gen. 39:4) and all of Egypt (41:39-41), this servant was **put in charge of** his master’s **household**. The word **master** literally is “lord” (*kyrios*) and recalls verse 42.

This is the only time this term for a *household* (*oiketeia*) is used in the New Testament. It refers to control over the master’s property, along with the supervision of his fellow servants. For example, he was responsible for getting them **food at the proper time**.

Jesus highlighted the trust this servant had earned. He also called the man *wise*, “prudent,” or “discerning.” It is the same word Jesus used for those who build their lives on the solid foundation of His teachings (Matt. 7:24).

For whatever reason, the master went away with no indication of when he would get back. But he expected to find the servant **doing his job** upon his return. If so, the servant would take responsibility for **all his possessions**. The servant would be **blessed**, indicating God’s favor.

(vv. 48-50) As noted, Jesus contrasted the faithful worker with one who was **wicked**. More emphasis falls on the wicked servant as his thoughts, actions, and punishment are given in more detail. The wicked servant’s internal conversation—**in his heart**—focused on his master being **delayed**. The word rendered *delayed* can refer to a failure to return in a timely manner. Confident the master wouldn’t return for a long time, the evil man began to **beat his fellow servants**. He also indulged himself and neglected his duties by carousing **with drunkards** (see also 1 Thess. 5:5-7).

Once again, Jesus used the singular words **day** and **hour** (see v. 36) to refer to what the servant did **not expect** or did not **know**. Obviously the master’s return pictures Jesus’s own return, as He explained in verses 36-44.

(v. 51) Verse 51 focuses on the punishment of the wicked servant. Jesus said the master would **assign him a place with the hypocrites**. In other words, he would suffer the same punishment as those Jesus condemned (see Matt. 23:13-29). In Luke’s parallel passage, these hypocrites are labeled “the unfaithful” (Luke 12:46).

The punishment will be severe: **He will cut him to pieces**. This terminology is only used elsewhere in Scripture for the dismemberment of sacrificial animals. Possibly then the wording means “cut off” (that is, being cast out or excommunicated); but, given the context, it likely refers to literal torture and suffering.

Further, the place of confinement would involve **weeping and gnashing of teeth**. In Matthew 8:12, Jesus identified this place of anguish and suffering as the eternal destination of the wicked. It seems reasonable to assume that the evil servant’s suffering on earth provides a hint to the intensity of eternal suffering for those who reject Christ.



APPLICATION POINT: Believers are to remain faithful while we await Christ's return, stewarding well the resources God has given us.

READ:

Invite the group to read silently Matthew 24:45-51, underlining the question in verse 45 and considering how the rest of the passage answers that question.

RECAP:

Briefly discuss adults' responses to the verses they read. Summarize the following content (PSG, pp. 102-104) to provide more context to Jesus's contrast of the two servants:

"In the first scenario, the master considered him to be trustworthy and sensible. Because of this, he left him in charge of his household. The implication based on the second half of the parable is that the master was away for an extended period. This servant was given authority over the household and the responsibility to administer the household. . . . Next came the contrast. . . . Just like the thief who comes at an hour when he is not expected, so the servant's master will come when least expected. Again, Jesus spoke of both an unexpected day and an unexpected hour. This sudden return applies, of course, to both the faithful and wise servant, as well as the wicked servant. One was ready for his return, the other was not. The consequences on the wicked servant for being unprepared were devastating."

ASK:

How are you preparing yourself for Jesus's return?
(PSG, p. 104)

REFLECT:

Remind adults that the servants represent two responses to Jesus and that the blessing and punishment represent real eternal consequences. Provide a few minutes for silent prayer so adults can consider where they stand with God right now.

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

In Matthew 24:51, Jesus used the expression "weeping and gnashing of teeth." Examine these other passages where Jesus used the phrase: Matthew 8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 25:30; and Luke 13:28. Observe the context and setting of these passages. Write a summary of what the expression refers to and why it should be a warning to all.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 105 of the *Personal Study Guide* as adults consider their own level of commitment to each item:

- *We can be certain that Jesus will one day return.*
- *Believers should be ready for Christ's return.*
- *Believers are to remain faithful while we await Christ's return, stewarding well the resources God has given us.*

CHALLENGE:

Challenge the group to consider their feelings about Christ's return and to use those as reminders to live for Him, seek Him, and share Him with people who do not believe.

DISCUSS:

Enlist a volunteer to read aloud the first set of questions from page 105 of the PSG. Discuss responses and encourage adults to find ways to hold one another accountable to staying alert. Remind adults that this is what Jesus expects of His people as they wait for His return.

REFLECT:

Encourage adults to read and reflect on the second set of questions on page 105 of the PSG during the week. Urge them to identify ways they can keep Jesus's second coming at the front of their minds and to remain faithful as they wait.

PRAY:

Close in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to bring this passage to life this week as each adult seeks to know God, live for Christ, and be filled with the Spirit.

AFTER THE SESSION

Keep the conversation going this week through your group text or email communication. Encourage the group to share how they are keeping Christ's return in mind as they go about their everyday tasks and life. Encourage adults to point to Jesus as they live among people who need to hear the truth.

ADULT COMMENTARY



Want to go deeper in your study?
Explore the Bible Adult Commentary offers additional information and biblical insights related to the key passages.
(Available for purchase at [Lifeway.com](https://www.lifeway.com).)

EXPLORE  THE BIBLE.