

SESSION 11

Alert

MATTHEW 24:36-51

JESUS IS COMING BACK.



Many people are curious—perhaps fearful—about the end of the world. Everyone from the preppers and survivalists to the 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.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD THAT
MOST FASCINATES OR FRIGHTENS YOU?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

After the confrontations in the temple in Matthew 21–23, Jesus left the temple never to return again. As He left, He spoke of the coming destruction of both the temple and Jerusalem (23:37–39).

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. Not every scholar agrees on the meaning of Jesus’s teachings. A good rule of thumb is to always let the context guide the interpretation. With that in mind, consider that the disciples asked two questions of Jesus: when would the temple be destroyed, and what signs will signal His coming and the end of time? A valid approach, then, would be to understand that Jesus was answering these questions.

In verses 4–14, Jesus described events that would occur before His return. These events could be misinterpreted as signs that Jesus’s coming was near. Jesus told the disciples to not be deceived by false messiahs. As a part of this warning, Jesus told them they would suffer persecution “because of my name” (v. 9). He challenged them to stand firm during these days.

Jesus spoke specifically of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (vv. 15–28). Some, however, see these verses as being a prophecy concerning the tribulation or a period of great distress.

In verse 29, the Olivet Discourse shifted to the question regarding Jesus’s return and the end of the age. This discussion continues to the end of the chapter. The bottom line is that the follower of Jesus is to be alert for His coming again. We do not know when. What can be known is that Jesus will return!



36 “Now concerning that **day and hour** **A** no one knows—neither the angels of heaven nor the Son—except **the Father alone**. **B** **37** As the **days of Noah** **C** were, so the coming of the **Son of Man** **D** 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. **42** Therefore **be alert**, **E** since you don’t know what day your Lord is coming. **43** But know this: If the **homeowner** **F** 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. **45** Who then is a **faithful and wise servant**, **G** 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**,’ **H** **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**.” **I**

A. The timing of Jesus’s return is unknown. This makes any speculation on our part an exercise in futility.

B. The unknown timing reveals Jesus’s voluntary limitation of His divine attributes during His incarnation (see Phil 2:6-8).

C. The timing of Jesus’s second coming is like the arrival of the flood (Gen. 6–7). In Noah’s day, people were going about their business, ignoring the warnings of God’s judgment (Matt. 24:38-39).

D. Taken from Daniel 7, this term reflects both Jesus’s full humanity and His full deity.

E. The best way to be prepared for Jesus’s return is to live with consistent faithfulness.

F. The threat of a robbery would keep the owner of a house alert. Likewise, the assurance of Jesus’s return should keep His people alert and active.

G. The first servant provides a picture of what faithfulness to God looks like as we wait for Jesus’s return.

H. The “wicked servant” used the master’s delay as an excuse to sin. Likewise, many use Jesus’s delay to deny His return, though it really demonstrates grace on His part (2 Pet. 3:9).

I. Pictures the remorse and anguish of an eternity separated from God in hell.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

1. An Unknown Hour

(Matt. 24:36-41)

We can be certain that Jesus will one day return.

- **What do we learn about God's plans for Jesus's return in these verses?**
- **How do the two illustrations given help us better understand the nature of Jesus's return?**

2. Be Alert

(Matt. 24:42-44)

Believers should be ready for Christ's return.

- **What does it mean to be ready for Jesus's return? Why is it important to be ready?**

3. Be Faithful

(Matt. 24:45-51)

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

- **How are you preparing yourself for Jesus's return?**

Apply the Text

As a group, consider how often we tend to be like the wicked servant as we allow the things of life to distract us from anticipating Christ's return.

- **What are some ways your group can assist each other in staying alert?**

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.)

BIBLE SKILL:

Use cross references to learn more about a word or phrase.

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.

DAILY EXPLORATION



Day 1: Matthew 24:36-41

Consider why Jesus made reference to the time Noah.

Because no one knows the time of Christ's return, any attempt to speculate and calculate it is a waste of time. Instead, preparedness is the proper response to the fact that Jesus will return. Jesus challenged His followers to be ready because His return could happen at any time.

Jesus used the account of Noah and the flood to point to the need to be ready. When the flood arrived, the wicked were engaged in the normal activities of life—"eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage." Nothing was wrong with these activities. But they had given no thought beyond the immediate. Such will be the coming again of Jesus. Everyone will be impacted, and no one will be exempt from the events surrounding His return. As those in Noah's day, people will ignore warnings and obvious signs of Christ's return and be unprepared to meet Him.

Jesus further illustrated His point with illustrations from daily life. The pictures are of two men working in a field and two women milling grain. "One will be taken and one left." The point is there will be a separation of the wicked from the righteous.

What do you learn about Jesus's return in these verses?



Day 2: Matthew 24:42-44

Circle the phrases "be alert" and "be ready."

Because no one can know the day when the "Lord is coming," Christ's followers are to "be alert." We need to live with the expectation that it could happen at any moment.

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. It is used in the New Testament seven times to describe this event (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2,4; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15).

Verse 44 summarizes the entire warning to be ready. 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."

While these verses challenge believers to be constantly watching and expecting Christ's return, they also serve as a strong notice to us not to attempt to pinpoint the date of His return. Jesus said, "No one knows," and "it will happen when least expected!"

If Jesus said it is not possible to know the time of His coming, why do people keep trying to predict the date of His return?

What does it mean to be ready for Jesus's return?

How can you know if you are ready?



Day 3: Matthew 24:45-47

Note what the “blessed” servant was doing.

Jesus told a parable contrasting two responses to the absence of the master of a household. The implication based on the second half of the parable is that the master was away for an extended period. The servant who was found “doing his job” when the master returned was applauded by Jesus. The word “blessed” is a word that can mean “congratulations” or “how fortunate” is this person. It is the same word used in Matthew 5:3-11 in the Beatitudes. Note that this servant wasn’t sitting idly waiting for the master to return. He was busy doing the job he had been given to do. This applies to Christians today. We are not to be idly waiting for Christ’s return but are to be engaged in the commission He has given us—to make disciples of the nations.

Jesus emphasized the truth He was teaching with the words “truly I tell you.” These words mean: pay attention! Because of the loyal servant’s continued diligence in carrying out his assignment, the master promoted him out of his temporary assignment into a permanent position of responsibility. That promotion most likely was to the position of “steward” of the household since he was “put . . . in charge of all” the master’s possessions. He now had the permanent responsibility to watch over and use wisely all that the master possessed. It was a position of great accountability and great prestige.

**The servant was found “doing his job.”
What is your God-given job?**



Day 4: Matthew 24:48-50

Reflect on the significance of the words “in his heart” (v. 48).

Next came the contrast. What if the servant did just the opposite? What if he didn’t take his responsibility seriously? What might be the outcome?

In this part of the parable, the servant is labeled as “that wicked servant.” He reasoned “in his heart” that his master was “delayed.” The word *delayed* carries the idea of being away for a long time. Thinking that he had plenty of time, he began to mistreat those under his authority. Not only did he fail to care for those in his charge, but he neglected other duties by partying “with drunkards.” His attitude was a reckless disdain for the fact that the master could return at any moment.

In Jesus’s parable, this servant does not represent a follower of Christ. If this parable represents two different servants, Jesus could well be setting up a contrast between a true follower of Christ who is faithful and alert for the return of his Lord, and an unbeliever who has no saving relationship with Him and scoffs at the idea of His return.

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 the faithful and wise servant, as well as the wicked servant. One was ready for his return, the other was not.

How would your life change if you knew Jesus was returning tomorrow?



Day 5: Matthew 24:51

Compare Matthew 24:51 to 2 Thessalonians 1:9.

Verse 51 focuses on the punishment of the wicked servant. Jesus said the master would “assign him a place with the hypocrites.” Matthew’s Gospel often speaks of Jesus condemning hypocrites. (See Matt. 6:2,5,16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13-29.) Jesus used this term to refer to the religious such as the scribes and Pharisees who appeared pure and pious but who were instead corrupt in their judgmental self-righteousness.

The punishment will be severe: “He will cut him to pieces.” To be cut to pieces means to cut a person in two; this punishment was applied in the ancient world (see Heb. 11:37). This terminology is only used elsewhere in Scripture for the dismemberment of sacrificial animals. The picture is that of a terrible end for those who fail to be alert.

Further, the place of confinement would involve “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The weeping signified sorrow and regret; the gnashing of teeth represented frustration and furor. 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.

How might verse 51 change the way we pray for others?

APPLY THE TEXT

Think through your typical day. What activities do you engage in that assist you in remaining faithful as you await Christ’s return? How can you enhance those activities in your daily schedule? Are there other actions you can take to stay alert?

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