

Alert

JESUS IS COMING BACK.

Dates and time matter, don't they? Some matter more than others—and some for different reasons. A child's birthday; a wedding anniversary; Valentine's Day; September 11, 2001; December 7, 1941; or April 15—each has its own significance. Knowing the time is also essential—and for some occasions more than others. Consider what happens if someone is late for a job interview or their wedding. That matters a lot more than setting an exact time for mowing the lawn.

In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII adopted and introduced the calendar we use, known as the Gregorian Calendar. It contains twelve months of varying lengths; the total number of days is 365, except in a leap year, which has an extra day in February. A leap year last occurred in 2024. The next is in 2028.

Clocks, with their system of gears, wheels, and weights, came into use in the late 1200s. The church financed and built clock towers with bells to remind people of their daily prayer time. These clocks also helped establish the widespread acceptance of having hours of equal length. The word “clock” is derived from the French word for “bell,” *cloche*.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Matthew 24:1-51

The Jewish temple in Jerusalem was the epicenter of Hebrew worship. Jesus and His disciples were in the temple complex; this would be His final visit (Matt. 21:23). There, Jesus spoke “woe” pronouncements against the scribes and Pharisees and grieved over Jerusalem (23:23-39). He lamented that the temple, the symbol of Jewish authority, would face God's judgment and be left desolate (v. 38). Gone would be God's presence, power, and provision.

Leaving the temple, Jesus’s disciples pointed out the architecture of the temple complex. He declared God’s judgment on the temple: “not one stone will be left here on another that will not be thrown down” (24:1-2). This led to a discussion about end times. The disciples asked, “when will these things happen? And what is the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (v. 3). The rest of chapter 24 and chapter 25 record Jesus’s reply.

A careful reading shows the disciples asked about two separate events, not just one—even if they didn’t realize it at the time. They asked, “when will these things happen?” right after Jesus talked about the temple’s being destroyed. They also asked about “the sign of [Jesus’s] coming and of the end of the age” (v. 3). The temple’s destruction occurred in AD 70; we still await Christ’s return and the end of the age.



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

Earlier in Matthew 24, Jesus’s disciples approached Him with questions about signs of His return and the end of the age. He responded with some general signs in verses 4-35. However, Jesus explained that no one knows the specific day and hour, not even the Son. Only the Father knows. Jesus further illustrated this truth by describing two men in a field, where one man will be taken and one left. He also described two women grinding grain; one would be taken and one left.

VERSE 36

“Now concerning that day and hour no one knows — neither the angels of heaven nor the Son — except the Father alone.”

In replying to the disciples’ question about the signs of the end of the age (v. 3), Jesus described events with what has become familiar terminology—“wars and rumors of wars” (v. 6), nation rising against nation (v. 7), and “false prophets” who would “deceive many” (v. 11). He said it would be a time of “great distress” (v. 21) and that afterwards, “the Son of Man [would come] on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (v. 30). These signs would indicate that Jesus “is near—at the door” (vv. 32-33).

Jesus next issued a warning concerning **that day and hour**. He knew His disciples wanted to know the exact details. The disciples remained curious. Forty days after His resurrection, Jesus and His disciples were on the Mount of Olives. Again, they asked about future events: “Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?” There, He echoed a similar statement: “It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:6,7).

Knowing His disciples’ curiosity, Jesus was careful to say “**no one knows . . . except the Father alone.**” That *the Father* knows but **the Son** does not underscores Jesus’s submissiveness to God’s will—an attitude He demonstrated during His earthly ministry (Luke 22:42; John 5:30). Showing submission in no way contradicts His divine nature. Jesus chose this position and stance (Phil. 2:5-8). How He could do that is part of the mystery of the Word becoming flesh (John 1:14).

VERSES 37-38

“As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark.”

Whereas Jesus had earlier referred to Himself as “the Son” (v. 36), here He chose the title **the Son of Man**. The Old Testament prophet Daniel used this title to describe the Messiah coming with the clouds of heaven. He would receive glory and an everlasting dominion (Dan. 7:13-14). This prophetic text points to Jesus. He often used the *Son of Man* title when accentuating His role as the Messiah (Matt. 9:6; 10:23; 12:8,32,40; 16:13; 19:28).

Jesus likened the time of His return to **the days of Noah**. What do we know about the days of Noah? 1) They were evil. Wickedness ran rampant. People’s minds focused only on evil (Gen. 6:5,11-13). They lived self-indulgent and self-focused lives. 2) The people were forewarned. Noah was “a preacher of righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:5). Hearing Noah, the people had ample opportunities to heed the warnings and repent. 3) People continued life as usual, focusing on everyday activities, some mundane and others life-altering. They ate, drank, and got married, seemingly oblivious to God’s coming judgment (Matt. 24:38).

One phrase stands like a massive roadblock to the people’s self-focused lives—**until the day Noah boarded the ark**. The time of God’s judgment had arrived. Suddenly, God had the attention of everyone who had failed to listen before. The self-focused will ignore the warnings.

Life will seemingly be going on as usual, despite obvious warning signs. People will be oblivious, just as they were in the days of Noah.

VERSE 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.”

Amazingly, the people of Noah’s day **didn’t know**. Despite the years it would have taken to construct the ark, and Noah’s preaching (2 Pet. 2:5), the people chose to ignore what they saw and heard. What they could not ignore, though, was the rising flood waters—**the flood came**. Being swept away meant they had no opportunity to escape.

The coming of Christ will parallel the days of Noah (v. 37). In his Gospel, Luke recorded Jesus also saying the day of the Son of Man will be like the days of Lot (see Luke 17:28-29). Again, the picture is of life as usual until God’s judgment comes.

VERSES 40-41

“Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding grain with a hand mill; one will be taken and one left.”

Jesus gave two illustrations of “life as usual,” using everyday tasks. These two scenes depict separation. The first depicts **two men . . . in the field**. Farming was an integral part of daily life in the biblical world. In the first century, most people lived in small towns and villages. Many had a small plot of land they farmed. Families passed these properties from one generation to the next. Others, living in large cities, had land beyond the city walls that they would farm. The wealthiest owned massive farms and hired seasonal help. Likely everyone in Jesus’s audience had done farm work in their lives.

The second illustration is of **two women . . . grinding grain**. Two types of hand mills were common in households in Jesus’s day. The first was made of two slightly curved stones laid out like an X. The grain was put in the intersection of the two stones; workers moved it back and forth on the lower stone.

The other type of hand mill used two flat disk stones, which were stacked; each had a hole in the center. The upper disk had a second hole near the edge. Grain was placed between the two stones. A single stick was inserted in the center holes; a second stick was used as a handle to turn the upper stone.

Grinding grain was a daily task, typically performed by women, slaves, or children. This, considered the most menial of tasks, took six or more hours.

Looking at these illustrations, scholars differ about who is **taken** and who is **left**. Some interpret this to mean nonbelievers are taken away, just as the unrighteous were in Noah's day. Others, though, interpret this to mean the righteous are taken away to safety, just as Noah and his family were during the flood. The ones who remain are the unrighteous who will face God's judgment. Regardless, those who ignore the signs and do not heed the warnings will face judgment.

Explore Further

Read "Time, Meaning of" on pages 1571–1572 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How might a Christian's perspective of time differ from a non-believer's? How does knowing that time is headed toward a climactic end affect how you live your life?

Be Alert (Matt. 24:42-44)

Jesus instructed His disciples to remain alert since the day and hour of His return are unknown. Then, He gave a parable about a homeowner who was about to be robbed. Had he known, the homeowner would have remained alert and prevented the robbery. Since His disciples know that Jesus's return is assured, they are to be ready.

VERSE 42

“Therefore be alert, since you don't know what day your Lord is coming.”

Therefore signals a transition in thought. Jesus had been speaking about what to expect related to the destruction of the temple and what would occur at the end of the age when He returns. Now He shifted His focus. No longer was He speaking about prophecy; He began discussing being prepared for those events. *Therefore* also indicates an expected change in people's behavior. Because Jesus is coming back unexpectedly, *therefore*, His followers' behavior is to change. Rather than going about

their daily activities oblivious to His return, they are to **be alert**. *Be alert* does not refer to expecting something to occur immediately but rather to being ready in case something does happen. It is the picture of a night watchman who is awake, alert, and at his post.

Speaking of His return, Jesus said that no one knows—“except the Father alone” (v. 36). Here, Jesus told His disciples, “**you don’t know.**” Jesus does not withhold information about His return to taunt or provoke us. Instead, He challenges us to remain faithful, ready for His return, regardless of when it occurs. Notice how Jesus closed this sentence. Although none of His followers know when it will be, “**your Lord is coming.**” This event is “the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

VERSE 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.”

Jesus again emphasized the necessity of being ready for His return. A **thief** breaking into a home at night wasn’t uncommon in Jesus’s day. In this illustration, the thief is likened to Jesus at His return, not because Jesus would be involved in any nefarious activity, but because His arrival would be so unexpected (see 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 16:15).

No police force existed in the first century. Thus, the **homeowner** was responsible for his home and family’s safety. The verse indicates the homeowner knew a thief would be coming, but he didn’t know when—**what time**. Jesus again used the term that reflects the task of a night watchman. The homeowner must **stay alert** to protect what matters.

VERSE 44

“This is why you are also to be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Just as the homeowner was to be prepared, Jesus’s disciples “**are also to be ready.**” The phrase is an imperative. The adjective *ready* means to be prepared to receive someone who is expected. The good news from this verse is that just as being ready is not optional, neither is it impossible. Jesus wouldn’t have given that imperative if it were impossible. “**The Son of Man is coming.**” An unnamed angel used this same phrase at Jesus’s ascension: “This same Jesus . . . *will come* in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven (Acts 1:11, emphasis added).”

The ten virgins knew the bridegroom was coming; they did not know when (Matt. 25:1-13). Jesus's disciples knew He would be returning; they did not know when. That is our situation still today. We, therefore, are to live ready.



Explore Further

Read "Second Coming" on pages 1423–1424 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does it look like for believers today to live expectantly of Christ's return?

Be Faithful (Matt. 24:45-51)

Jesus shared a second parable that further illustrates the importance of remaining faithful while we await Christ's return. Two servants are entrusted with a master's household. One is faithful to continue his tasks, honoring God with his life. The other refuses to repent, thinking he has time to do so later. He pursues selfish pleasure. This man may suddenly realize there is no time left to repent when Christ returns.

VERSE 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?”

Jesus gave a series of parables related to being ready for His return and the coming judgment. Verses 45-51 record the first of those parables; chapter 25 contains the rest. In Jesus's parables, He commonly contrasted someone who was good and did the right thing with someone evil who did not. This parable involves one man, a servant, who did the right thing and contrasts what happened when he did not.

The **servant** was an overseer; he was not the owner; he simply had been entrusted to care for something in the owner's absence. Having proven himself to be **faithful** and **wise**, he was **put in charge** of his master's **household**. The word *household* means household servants. Along with other unnamed responsibilities, this man was to make sure the other servants were fed.

VERSES 46-47

“Blessed is that servant whom the master finds doing his job when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.”

This wise and faithful servant had done what was expected. He would be **blessed**. Jesus was teaching a lesson about the importance of staying alert and watching for His return. His followers who had been alert and watching would be blessed. The Greek word for *blessed* refers to an inward contentment that is founded in one’s relationship with God. Circumstances can neither produce nor destroy this state of blessedness.

This servant would be rewarded when the master returned. He had been a good steward of a few of the master’s possessions; he was thus put in charge of looking after **all of his possessions**.

VERSE 48

“But if that wicked servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delayed,’”

The phrase **“But if”** alerted Jesus’s hearers that He was still telling this hypothetical story. He described this **servant** as being **wicked** rather than wise and faithful. *Wicked* typically describes immoral and unethical behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes (“evil,” Mark 7:21; Rom. 2:9; 7:19; Col. 3:5). It can also refer to harm (Acts 28:5). In every biblical usage, the term is always negative—never good or positive.

Whether the servant was wise and faithful or wicked was determined by what he said **in his heart** and how he behaved as a result. Jesus viewed the *heart* as the seat and center of a person’s thinking. When explaining to His disciples why He spoke in parables, He mentioned those who “understand with their hearts” (Matt. 13:15). This wicked servant kept his thoughts to himself. However, his actions would soon reveal his thoughts about his master’s prolonged delay.

VERSE 49

“and starts to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with drunkards,”

How a servant treated his fellow servants was an indicator of character. To **beat his fellow servants** and eat and drink **with drunkards** violated the master’s trust and defied the standards of proper conduct. Jesus’s hearers would have shaken their heads in utter disbelief.

VERSE 50

“that servant’s master will come on a day he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know.”

Here, Jesus returned to the theme of the master’s return, or as He had said earlier, “the coming of the Son of Man” (see v. 37). Jesus was teaching His disciples about the certainty of His return and their doing His work and will as they awaited that day. Here, Jesus repeated the words He had used earlier, **day** and **hour** (v. 36). Jesus was reemphasizing that the time of His return cannot be predicted or known. The lesson for believers is to live prepared because no one knows when.

VERSE 51

“He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

To be **cut . . . to pieces** means to cut a person in two; this punishment was applied in the ancient world (see Heb. 11:37). Matthew’s Gospel often speaks of Jesus condemning **hypocrites** (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 **weeping** signified sorrow and regret; the **gnashing of teeth** represented frustration and furor. Jesus used this phrase to describe the condition of those separated from God and eternally doomed (8:12; 13:42).

Jesus did not explain this parable. He was confident that its message was clear. He gave His followers the task, as the Fanny Crosby hymn says, to “Rescue the perishing, care for the dying.”¹ As we await His return, may we be about the Father’s business.



Explore Further

Think about Jesus’s birth in Bethlehem. Then, consider what the Bible teaches about His return. How are the two events similar? How will they differ? Why do you think the two events differ so dramatically?

1. Fanny J. Crosby, “Rescue the Perishing” (1869).