

Will You Be Ready?

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on November 22, 2020.

But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For 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, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master 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 hour you do not expect. Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour 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 (Matthew 24:36-51)¹.

When Jesus' disciples marveled at the architectural grandeur of the temple, directing their attention to the temple's stones Jesus said, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (Matt. 24:2). It was a sobering moment for the disciples. It was also an inquisitive one. They ask, "when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matt. 24:3). The two questions combined reveal their eschatology. When the temple falls, it will be the end, or so they think.

Jesus answers their questions but ignores their presumption. There would be certain things to come that their generation would clearly see, such as the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. But other things, the secret things of God, would not be known. As Jesus explains, "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." No one knows when the Lord will descend "with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:30). Even, in that moment, the eternal Son of God, who had willingly taken humanity upon himself (Phil. 2:7) temporarily limiting his omniscience, did not know.

And as we continue in the "last days," no matter what you hear, still no one knows the day, hour, week, year, decade, century, or millenia. The point is that speculation is a fool's errand. Yet, Jesus' words have not kept people from speculation. Inquiring minds still want to know: When will these things be? But focusing on "when" misses the point. Jesus' emphasis is on preparation not prognostication.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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Consider this example: In his book, *Deadliest Enemy: Our War Against Killer Germs*, American epidemiologist Michael Osterholm gives a recent history of deadly viruses and then describes in eerie detail the likelihood of a corona virus pandemic. He predicted where the virus would originate, how it would spread worldwide, and how it would cause millions of deaths. In America, he predicted a distrust of public health, conflict, the impact on the stock market, and even its impact on baseball season. The book was published in 2017.

Dr. Osterholm was not alone in predicting the coming pandemic. There were others making similar predictions. And yet, when COVID-19 arrived, it was a surprise to most of us. What happened? Were there not leaders in public health who knew of the likelihood? It was not a matter of knowing what *could* happen or even when it *might* happen. What was the problem? Despite everything we knew, *we were not ready*.

To carry this example into our passage, what we know is predictions do not guarantee preparation. But even if we knew when Christ would return, would we be any more prepared? Instead of asking, “When will Christ return?” Rather, we should ask, “Will I be ready?” We need to ask, “Will I be ready?”

What does it mean to be ready? It doesn't mean that we act like a holy huddle, a converted commune, divorcing ourselves from reality to wait for Christ's return. It doesn't mean that we watch for “signs of the times,” carefully watching the news for clues of his coming. It doesn't mean that we ignore it completely, deterministically thinking it will just happen when it happens.

Like so much of the Christian life, there is an already-but-not-yet aspect to our salvation. By God's grace through faith in Christ, we are children of God, citizens of the kingdom of heaven, joint heirs of eternal inheritance with Christ. Yet, our final salvation awaits us. Until then, we still struggle with the repercussions of the Fall. We continue to sin, and suffer, and die. Christ's second coming changes all of that. Sin, suffering, and death will be no more. So, we long for Christ's return and the completion of our salvation. And, we live our lives until then in light of who we are in Christ: living blamelessly, living wakefully, living faithfully.

Living Blamelessly

Jesus gives the example of the days of Noah. God had spoken to Noah, charging him with construction of the ark and told him of the judgment to come. Noah believed the Word of God and obeyed. He did not know when the flood waters would come, but he knew they were imminent. Knowing this, how did Noah live his life?

Genesis tells us three important things about Noah: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God” (Gen. 6:9). Noah's life reflected his faith. Hebrews explains, “By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear, constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith” (Heb. 11:7). Every nail hammered in that ark was a testimony of Noah's faith, heralding the judgment to come to a deaf world (2 Peter 2:5).

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Despite Noah's faithful witness, the world continued, not ready for what would come. Each day that the ark grew larger was just another day to ignore God's prophetic Word and to enjoy life as it had always been. Despite God's blessings of food, drink, and family, "they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). They did not have eyes to see the coming judgment or ears to hear Noah's herald. And then came the flood:

And the waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered. ... And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, livestock, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all mankind. ... Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark (Gen. 7:19, 21, 23).

Only the "heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" and his family survived, everyone else was swept away by God's wrath.

Though he knew not when, Noah was ready. The world was not. What was the difference? Noah heard and believed the Word of God, trusting God at his Word. He lived out his faith in righteousness, living blamelessly before a world that did not share his faith.

Now, consider this in light of our Lord's return: To be ready is not passivity. We are neither speculators nor spectators of things to come. Rather, the certainty of Christ's return is to lead us to live all of life for him, in righteousness, blamelessly reflecting our faith. To be blameless is to be "innocent of wrongdoing."² Or, as the Apostle Paul puts it, "to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1). Therefore, we who have been saved by grace, live it out in our lives before a world that is not ready, giving the world no occasion to blame us for anything but being Christ's disciples.

Living Wakefully

So unexpected will our Lord's return be that judgment will come swiftly, even to those around us. Jesus gives examples from the agricultural workplace: men working in the field, women grinding at the mill. Jesus says, "one will be taken and one left." The description is similar to those swept away in the flood. It is not a description of a secret rapture but of reaping the tares from the field of the work. As Jesus taught through his parable,

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." (Matt. 13:41-43).

Those who are left behind are not those apart from Christ but those in Christ, identified not in their own righteousness but the righteousness of Christ. Those not taken but left behind will be a glorious gathering of the eternal children of God, shining like the sun in the eternal kingdom of God.

² Oxford American English Dictionary.

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It is startling imagery though, isn't it? To think that those apart from Christ will be taken away to judgment and eternal suffering? And yet, the world slumbers. Those apart from Christ have no concern for Christ's return and impending judgment. They sleep on. Let not the world lull you to sleep: "stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." Just as the imminence of Christ's return encourages us to live blamelessly so also it encourages us to live wakefully.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul borrows this metaphor, encouraging a kind of Christian sobriety: "let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation" (1 Thess. 5:8). It is a description of a soldier awake and ready for battle, protected perfectly by faith, love, and hope. In Christ we stand ready not to fight for our salvation, but to live out our faith by God's grace. For Christ's return is the completion of our salvation: as we have been justified through faith, are being sanctified by his Spirit, we will be glorified upon Christ's return. Wake up to this reality: Glory awaits those secured in Christ.

Living Faithfully

When our Lord returns, there will be some who profess Christ, even carry the name of Christ, but not savingly know Christ. Though not outwardly, inwardly they will disregard the imminence of Christ's return, having no fear of judgment to come, if they even believe in it at all. They will likely present themselves as faithful followers of Christ, but their lives will tell of their unfaithfulness. How?

Jesus gives two identifying characteristics of these false disciples. First, they treat Christ's true disciples viciously. Rather than love for and submission to the brethren, they will treat us hatefully, even despising our faithfulness. Second, they find greater pleasure in the children of the world than the children of God, enjoying the faithless over those of faith. Rather than feast in fellowship at the Lord's table, they imbibe in all the world has to offer, drinking it all in with blatant disregard for our Lord's return. But, when the Lord returns, they will be revealed as imposters, exchanging their food and drink for weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Therefore, let us look not to the world's enticements nor listen to the lies of those who live for them. Our Lord's return is certain and imminent and is to serve as an encouragement to living faithfully for him. Until then, some will still obsess on when he will return, while others will live as if he never will. Some will hear of his coming and find it compelling and then fall sound asleep to the lying lullabies of the world, the flesh, and the devil. And then there will be those who are ready, walking by faith and living out that faith in righteousness. They will hear the trumpet and see the Lord and rejoice, ready to rule and reign with Christ in the eternal kingdom forever.

Will you be ready?