

Death, Or Not A Hair Of Your Head?

Matthew 24:1-51

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There are few things as fascinating or as problematic as prophecy. Prophecy is fascinating because most people would like to know the future. Some would like to know out of fear and would like to be able to know and avoid life's difficulties and tragedies. Some would like to know what is coming in order to plan for it successfully. If we could know what the stock market would do in the next few months we could all become wealthy. Other people would like to know what is coming simply out of curiosity.

Christians' speculations about the future are often in this category. In the secular world, horoscopes, fortune tellers, séances, taro cards, and the popularity of cult figures show how fascinated most people are with what is coming. However, prophecy is difficult, because many prophecies are vague.

Jesus' disciples were human and curious about the future and the questions they asked about it provided the occasion for Jesus' famous teaching about all these last things. This is recorded in Matthew 24-25—the Olivet prophecy, given on the Mount of Olives.

Jesus left the Temple and was walking away when His disciples came up to Him to call His attention to its buildings. “Do you see all these things?” He asked. “I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another. Every one will be thrown down.”

Later, while Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately and said, “Tell us, when will this happen and when will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Jesus' answer to these questions provides valuable lessons which are essential to our living in the last days. Let us begin here in Matthew 24.

Matthew 24:4-14 And Jesus answered and said to them: “Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate

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one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

The place to begin is with the disciples double question in Matthew 24:3, "Tell us when will these things be, and what will be the sign of you coming and the end of the age?" These were natural queries for them to raise in view of the two things that they had heard Jesus say.

In the first two verses of Matthew 24, they had called Jesus' attention to the large buildings of the Temple complex and had heard Jesus predict Jerusalem's destruction. "Do you not see all these things?" He asked. "Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

Again just before this at the end of that terrible list of woes spoken to Jerusalem's religious leaders reported in Matthew 23, Jesus had spoken of His departure saying to the citizens of Jerusalem, "You will not see Me again until you say, 'blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Now it was natural for the disciples to put these two sayings together. They probably associated Jesus' prediction of the city's destruction with the words about His return, but these were still two separate questions and they came from separate contexts: "When will Jerusalem be destroyed?" and "What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?" Jesus answers the questions separately, in fact that seems to be the main point of the passage.

The disciples may have associated the fall of Jerusalem with Christ's coming and the end of the world, but Jesus did not want them to assume that these two matters are necessary linked. On the contrary, although Jerusalem would fall quickly within forty or so years of His prediction, the disciples were not to regard either it or other historical disasters, however terrible, as signs of His coming. His return would be without warning and they needed to be concerned about being ready for it whenever it took place.

The first part of Jesus' answer has to do with bad things that will happen, but which are not in themselves signs of the end.

The six signs that are not in and of themselves signs of the end are: false messiahs;

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wars and rumors of wars; famines and earthquakes; persecutions; apostasy; and false prophets.

It is easy to give many examples of these from the early years of church history but that is not the point. The point is that false teachers, natural disasters, persecutions, and forsaking of the faith by many by false teachers will characterize history. We will always have these things, they are painful and Jesus likens them to the beginning of birth pains [sorrows] in verse 8, but they are not necessarily signs that the end of the world is near.

These things existed in the disciple's days and they have existed in every age of church history up into and including our own. Certainly some of them have taken a great deal to develop, for instance nation rising against nation, and the gospel being preached throughout the whole world. The followers of Christ must not be deceived. The end is still to come.

The destruction of Jerusalem in verses 15-22, is a particularly terrifying example of the birth pains. Jesus is predicting that it would be a time of unprecedented suffering. Jerusalem has always been of special significance in biblical history. Now let us continue the story in verse 15.

Matthew 24:15-22 “Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” (whoever reads, let him understand), “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.

There was to be a warning sign of this calamity, verse 15 says: “when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place.” Those words occur 4 times: Daniel 8:13; Daniel 9:27; Daniel 11:31; Daniel 12:11, where they seem to refer to the destruction of the Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes in 160 BC.

Antiochus erected an altar to Zeus over the altar of burnt offering and sacrificed a pig on it, which was the worst possible affront to Judaism or God's truth. It was a true

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abomination.

Jesus was not referring to this past event in Matthew 24. He was referring to something like it, a type of it that would happen before the fall of Jerusalem and would be a warning to His followers to flee the city. Not only did this type happen to men, it is also a prophecy for a coming event, very likely the approach of the Roman armies and surrounding the city in 63 AD, during the Jewish war.

The standards bore emblems of the legions and the images of the emperor and were virtually worshipped by the soldiers. They were erected in the Temple area after the city was subdued. The link between these standards and the abomination that causes desolation is strongly suggested in the parallel text in Luke 21.

Luke 21:20 “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near.”

The Jewish historian Josephus describes the destruction of Jerusalem saying that, “It was a time of distress unequalled in any previous destruction.” Eusebius, the Christian historian, and a few other ancient writers say that the Christians fled Jerusalem prior to this fall and found refuge in the town of Pella in Perea.

However another fulfillment awaits. A short time before Christ returns, armies will once again surround Jerusalem and an abomination will be done in the city, as verse 21 says. This act inaugurates this time of great tribulation.

Luke 21:21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her.

The destruction would have been terrible but the destruction of the Temple in 63 AD would still not be the end. We will continue in verse 23, revert back to the original point, and summarize it.

Matthew 24:23-28 “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, ‘Look, He is in the desert!’ do not go out; or ‘Look, He is in the inner rooms!’ do not believe it.

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For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.

So what should our attitude be in the midst of the terrible things we see occurring now? How should we live between the first coming of Jesus and His second coming? We know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He is the Lord of history and of detailed circumstance. Nothing has ever happened that has not flowed in the channel that God has dug for it. There have never been any events that have flamed up in the sight of God to leave Him astonished or confused. God is on His throne and He is in total control.

The sin of man has reduced the world to an arena of passion and fury. Men tear at each other's throats, yet in the midst of the history which God controls, each individual who has believed in Christ as the Savior will know the power of His resurrection and will learn that events, however terrible, cannot separate us from the love of God.

This is our God and this is the Word of our God. Jesus knew what was to come in the war pits of human history, but He told His disciples not to be alarmed. Wars have come and they will come again, people will suffer and men will die, but instead of dismay we are to serve Jesus Christ faithfully, even in the midst of these horrible things until He comes again. Our faith will be tested to its limits, but we will be thankful that we have Christ's faith within us.

The prediction of coming events gets even grimmer and very personal but it is not without hope.

Luke 21:16-18 "You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But not a hair of your head shall be lost."

He says there that "they will put some of you to death" and then in verse 18 it seems to be saying the opposite, that "not a hair on your head shall be lost." Now are we to be put to death, or is not a hair on our head to be lost? Which is it?

Under the prediction that some of God's people will be put to death, it is best to take, "not a hair on your head shall be lost" as a metaphorical way of saying that God's people will suffer no eternal spiritual harm.

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The phrase “some of you” in verse 16 suggests the martyrdom of who will be the exception, not the rule. Nevertheless faith will be needed because every member of God's church must have his faith tested and most, if not all, will experience some sort of persecution in varying degrees. God is the one who chooses how much persecution each person is going to have and we are not to worry about it.

At our calling we were excited about having found God and His truth, we may have even thought that we were ready to face the lions den, crucifixion, the fiery furnace, or burning oil. In retrospect, however, our failure to follow all of God's instructions, our weakness in trials, and our impotence in tests of faith are mute testimony that our zealous early faith, though encouraging, was not the kind that Christ is looking for in His elect.

He seeks mature faith as we see in the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. They were faithful in little and followed through when everything was on the line. This is the mature, living, unwavering faith required as a condition for the gift of salvation that allows us to please God.

Have we reached the point where we do not fear those who can destroy the body but rather who can destroy both soul and body? The just, those who are righteous, shall live by faith and in doing so will inherit the Kingdom of God. Jesus puts fear in its right perspective in Luke 12.

Luke 12:4-7 “And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him! Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Most of you know that “hell” in verse 5 is from the Greek word, *Geennan*, referring to the fire used to burn the garbage of Jerusalem, which represents the all-consuming fire used to burn up the wicked.

So we are not to be as concerned about our physical body being killed as we are to be about our name not being in the Book of Eternal Life. The physical body is of less importance compared with the essence of our heart and mind.

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There have been religious persecutions ever since Cain killed Abel and there will be religious persecutions both official and personal. Jesus promised that His people would suffer and that promise holds true today.

Romans 8:16-17 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

II Timothy 3:12 Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

So that is a given. We will suffer but Christ says not to worry about it. Now notice the encouragement Jesus gives to all who suffer persecution. To begin with, we must remember that when we are persecuted we suffer for His name's sake and this is a high honor. It is not important about what people say about our names as it is that the name of Christ be glorified. In addition, times of suffering provide opportunities for witness. Now we will go back to Luke 21.

Luke 21:13-15 But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer [He is not only talking about the things you are about to say, He is talking about the whole situation as well.]; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist.

The apostles made good use of the witness stand when they were arrested and taken before the council and Jesus' servants and martyrs throughout the centuries have followed their example. Because of official persecution, God's witnesses will stand before important people and when that happens, we must not panic because God will give us the words to speak. It is an assurance to faithful witnesses that God will always give us the words we need when we need them.

Not only will the saints endure official persecution from the government but there will also be opposition from family and friends. Relatives will even follow in the footsteps of Judas and betray their fellow Christian loved ones to be imprisoned or killed. Hatred, arrest, and death will be the lot for a number of God's children, possibly many during the tribulation.

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We must not despair because God is in control, not man, and not a hair on our head can perish apart from His sovereign will. Knowing this we can have patient endurance and be able to face the challenge with faith and courage.

God's promises are guarantees with conditions, for example: obedience, submission, faithfulness, and so on. God's will is so that all may come to the completion described by Paul in Ephesians 4.

Ephesians 4:13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

While many Christians today enjoy many freedoms from official persecution or even family opposition, there are those who suffer greatly for their faith. What Christ said here is an encouragement to them.

We must ask God to help us not compromise, because compromise is the first step toward sinning. As the coming of the Lord draws near, these things will multiply and intensify and no matter what our views may be of the coming of the Lord, we need to heed His three admonitions: 1) do not be deceived, 2) do not be afraid, and 3) do not worry. It sounds simple enough, and he guarantees that He will give us the strength to do these things.

Now what Jesus says in the Olivet prophecy up to Matthew 24:28 is fairly straightforward. He has warned the disciples about disruptive world events that will not be signs of His return, and He has predicted the fall of Jerusalem, an exceptionally traumatic event, but would be merely another example of the kind of tragedies that would occur throughout history. Then Jesus continues, in verse 29.

Matthew 24:29-31 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

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Next we have the Parable of the Fig Tree in verse 32

Matthew 24:32 “Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near.

Jesus is using the budding of the fig tree to illustrate a point about His coming. When spring comes and the trees put out new leaves, we know that summer is not far off. In the same way we will know Christ’s return is near when we see the events He mentions beginning to occur. Verse 33 provides the key to His parable.

Matthew 24:33 So you also, when you see all these things, know that it [Christ’s second coming] is near—at the doors!

So Christ cautions us that we will only have a general idea of the time of His return, but we will know that it is close. He says in verse 36:

Matthew 24:36 “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.

We think that the time is approaching because we see the ever-increasing approaching repulsive ripening of evil in the world today. Nevertheless we only have a rough idea of how soon it will be. The apostle Paul told the Roman brethren and us in Romans 13 that:

Romans 13:11 And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.

How much closer is it now for us? If we live as if Christ will come tomorrow we will always be striving to be prepared for it. Now notice Jesus’ solemn affirmation in verses 34-35

Matthew 24: 34-35 Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

Many generations have come and gone since that time and Jesus still has not returned, so this scripture here about this generation has caused just as much discussion as any in Matthew 24.

In my research, I found something interesting. The term "this generation" is from the Greek word *genea*, meaning a generation, as translated by most translations. But by implication it means: an age; the time period, or the persons of an age. For example: the Christian age or the New Testament age. I do not know if this is referring to a present generation today or the whole time period of the last 2000 years, but it could be either one if you look at the meaning of the word and its implications.

For clarity, let us summarize the flow of thought in Matthew 24. Verse 3 begins with the disciples' two important questions: "when will this happen?" and "what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

The first question was about the destruction of Jerusalem, which Jesus had predicted and the second was about His glorious return which He had also predicted. Though the disciples probably held these two events together in their minds, Jesus began answering the second question first.

In Matthew 24:4-14, the first thing He told them is that there will be many earth-shaking events that might be thought of as signs, but they will not be. They will include false messiahs, wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, persecutions, apostasy, and false prophets, but the disciples were not to be troubled by them.

These are the beginnings of birth pains, but they are not signs of His return and this is because the gospel of the Kingdom must be preached in the whole world before the end will come.

The next point that Jesus makes in verses 15-22. He says that there is going to be one particularly dreadful event, the destruction of Jerusalem, but even this will not be a sign of His return. Those in Judea should flee the city when they see these things beginning to happen, but this is still not the end.

The next point is in verses 23-28. At this point Jesus makes clear that the destruction of Jerusalem is only one example of the bad things that will happen to people in the course of world history. He does so by returning to what He said earlier about false messiahs. They will appear at this time, as at other times. They will not be true messiahs, and God's people are not to be deceived by them. That has been a battle that God's people

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have been fighting for 2000 or so years.

Verses 29-35 leads to Jesus' specific teaching about the second coming. There will be signs in the sky including the sign of the on of Man, a loud trumpet call and the work of angels in gathering the elect from the far reaches of the earth. Christ's coming will be sudden. If a person is not ready beforehand, there will be nothing anyone can do when Jesus actually returns.

In the last section of the chapter, verses 36-51, Jesus stresses the suddenness of His return by historical reference and images. His coming will be like the flood in the days of Noah, or like a thief that enters a house at an unexpected time, or a master who suddenly returns home. Jesus' servants must be ready since the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of.

The bottom line of this is that we need to be ready, because no one knows the day or hour when the Lord will come. Now how long do we have to get ready? What if you died this evening? You would only have a few hours and what would we do with those hours? It is something to think about. Matthew 24 emphasizes being ready more than anything else as far as advice to us.

Here is a review of the lessons we can learn from the first 35 verses of Matthew 24. First, that the coming of Christ and the end of the world are imminent, meaning that the end could begin at any moment and therefore our present responsibilities must be the following: *to watch that no one deceives us* (Matthew 24:4, 26).

Jesus has a great deal to say about deception in this sermon. Having warned against false christs at the beginning of the chapter, He returns to the same point after speaking of the fall of Jerusalem. It would be possible to write a history of the church in terms of the eras that had been foisted upon it, sometimes from without, and more often than not from within, and how the believers have either resisted the eras or have been taken in by them. We have deceivers today, but we are warned here not to be fooled by them because they come in all forms using all enticements.

A second responsibility we have is: to be settled in times of war or threats of war (Matthew 24:6). This warning includes all political and historical events and is a reminder that the city of God is distinct and different from man's city and will survive regardless of what happens in the world. We are not to be unduly encouraged by political events or unduly frightened by them.

A third responsibility we have is: to stand firm in the faith and obedience to the end

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(Matthew 24:13). We speak of the perseverance of the saints, meaning that God perseveres with His people so that none of those that He has elected to salvation will be lost. Jesus taught this in John 10 where He says:

John 10:27-28 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.

“They shall never perish.” He is speaking spiritually there as He was when he said, “Not a hair on your head will be harmed.”

While it is true that God perseveres with us, it is also true that we must persevere. That is what Jesus is speaking of here. He is encouraging us to keep on keeping on, since there is no promise of salvation for those who abandon the faith and deny Christ. The apostle Paul believed in and taught the security of every genuine believer, but he also said in II Timothy 2,

II Timothy 2:12 If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us.

The fourth responsibility we have is to teach the truth to the church first, then preach gospel throughout the world (Matthew 24:14). The followers of Christ will be persecuted and the love of many will grow cold, but throughout the ages of church history, Christians must be strong, faithful, and diligent in preaching the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God. In fact this is the note on which the gospel ends. We find Jesus' last words to His disciples in Matthew 28.

Matthew 28:19-20 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them [those who come into the church] to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.

We are to teach the world and we do that through our publications and through the Internet and we are to continue teaching them until Christ returns.

As we read in Matthew 24, rather than wondering about the specific moment when

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Jesus will return, we should be asking ourselves if we are ready for it, whenever it might be. In the next section of Matthew 24, Jesus emphasizes His warning to us to be ready, precisely because we do not know the time of His coming.

An important contrast exists between the verses we looked at in the previous section of Matthew 24 and the opening verse in this section of Matthew 24. It is the difference between “you know” in verse 33 and “no one knows” in verse 36.

Matthew 24:36 “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.

What the disciples were to know is that when you see all these things, the end will be near and right at the door. However “all these things” refers to the terrible characteristics of their age and ours. Seeing these things increasing rapidly, the false messiahs, earthquakes, persecutions, apostasy, and false prophets, we should know that Jesus’ return is near.

When a person dies, how close is Jesus’ return? It is just like the blink of an eye, it is that fast. So when the apostles or someone in their time died, to them it will be as if it were the blink of an eye and they will be raised up at Christ’s return. So that is what it means when it says “it is near” to each and every one of us.

On the other hand, we do not know when Christ will return. When Jesus said, “No one knows [that] day or hour,” He did not mean that smart Bible teachers are nevertheless able to calculate the year of His return. Amos 3 reveals that:

Amos 3:7 Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.

This deliberate contrast reinforces: 1) that the return of Christ to gather His elect and judge the world is still in the future; 2) that we do not know when this will be, and 3) that we must keep watch and be ready so that we do not fall away and perish.

Matthew 10:22 And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.

Now everything in this last discourse, even the prediction of the fall of Jerusalem makes

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these points. About half of Matthew 24 deals with signs that are not true signs of Christ's soon return, that is at looking at the course of history and how long it is.

Matthew 24: 27-31, a very small section, describes the return of Christ itself. But a third of chapter 24, verses 36-51 and all of Matthew 25:1-46, a total of 62 verses, warn us to get ready since we do not know when Christ is to return. So what does this tell us? It is telling us to get ready.

Or, put another way, Jesus stresses the single most essential point with seven historical references, verbal pictures, or parables. Four are given in chapter 24 and three are given in chapter 25.

The application is clear here: are you watching, are you ready for Jesus Christ's return? What if you die tonight, how long would you have to prepare for Christ's return? So what would you do with those precious hours?

The first story that Jesus uses to emphasize the suddenness of His coming and the need to be ready for it is the destruction of the earth by the flood in the days of Noah.

Matthew 24:37-39 But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.

This is a well known example of God's judgment of wickedness and it is referred to quite naturally by Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel and by New Testament writers such as the author of Hebrews, Peter, and of course Jesus refers to it here in Matthew 24.

The point of these verses is that the waters of the flood came suddenly and that those who were not prepared, drowned. However this also points to a world that will be largely unbelieving at the time of Christ's return.

Those who were taught by Jesus say that there will be terrible wickedness and even widespread apostasy in the church when Christ returns. Let me give a series of scriptures that show this. Peter wrote in II Peter 2 of the presence of false prophets in the last days saying:

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II Peter 2:1 But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.

II Peter 3:3-4 knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation."

Also all of II Peter 2 and 3, two thirds of the letter, describes the evil of the final days. Jude is almost entirely about such times and the author seems to echo Peter.

Jude 17-19 But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts. These are sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit.

I Timothy 4:1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons,

II Timothy 3:1-5 But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

Who and what does that describe? It describes this society we are living in today, and what does it say we are to do? "From such people turn away"; basically it means to not socialize with them. We do have to live in this world and we do have to work with these people and we have to treat them decently.

None of these passages teach us that we are to be pessimistic. We much preach Christ everywhere knowing that all whom God has elected to salvation will be saved. But

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neither do these passages teach an increasingly successful expansion of the gospel, still less a triumphant expansion of organized Christianity throughout the world. Rather than encourage a faithful adherence to and preaching of the gospel in spite of the fact that it will not be universally received and in spite of the fact that there will be increasingly entrenched unbelief.

The second picture that Jesus paints to describe the nature of things at His return is in verses 40-41.

Matthew 24:40-41 Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left.

Here we find the idea of a sudden separation. Two men working in a field would be coworkers, two women working a hand mill would be closely related, most likely a mother and daughter.

At the beginning of Matthew 24, Jesus' disciples specifically ask Him for a sign of His return and the end of this age. In this light, verses 40-41 can be taken to mean that at Christ's return a separation will take place—those who attain to the first resurrection and those who do not.

Revelation 20:6 Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.

Jesus had spoken earlier in Matthew 24:31 of sending His angels to gather His elect from the four winds, from one of the heavens to the other, yet the verses do not specify how this will happen and certainly do not say when. The point is that only people with an intimate spiritual relationship with God will be separated by that unexpected coming.

In verse 51, the servant who is found to have been unfaithful when the master returned will be cut off and be assigned a place with the hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

There is this point too: no one will be saved simply by being close to or even related to another person who is a Christian. Salvation is not hereditary, on the contrary, you must accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and you must have God's Spirit within you

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and you must be ready, personally.

Jesus' third illustration is that of a thief breaking into a house.

Matthew 24:42 Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.

Watching points directly to the necessity of being ready for Christ's return, it also includes patiently waiting, which is emphasized more in Matthew 25:1-14, where the virgins must wait for the bride-groom.

Now if the master's return is late at night or very early in the morning, the alertness of servants is even more commendable.

Matthew 24:43 But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into.

This illustration also teaches the sudden and unpredictable coming of the Lord and is used this way in four other New Testament passages. Paul wrote in I Thessalonians 5,

I Thessalonians 5:2-3 For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.

II Peter 3:10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.

Then Jesus told the church in Sardis in Revelation 3.

Revelation 3:3 Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.

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This indicates that if we do watch, if we have repented and are watching, then we will have an idea of the hour.

Christ also says the same thing later in Revelation 16.

Revelation 16:15 “Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame.”

Walking naked is speaking of spiritual nakedness, not having studied or prayed, fasted or been close to God the Father or Jesus Christ.

Each of these verse emphasizes the suddenness of Christ's rerun, but the image of a thief adds two additional factors. First it adds the matter of value. Since the thief comes to steal what is worthwhile, everyone values his/her possessions. No one is careless with money, jewelry, cars, or something else of value. That is why we lock these things up.

If we take such great care of these physical valuables, things that will be lost to us eventually or decay over time, should we take at least, if not more, care for the things that are eternal? Should we not be equally anxious for our own salvation? Jesus said on an earlier occasion in Matthew 16,

Matthew 16:26 For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

Obviously such a person will have lost the thing that really matters. The second thing to learn from the picture of the thief is that it emphasizes the necessity of being watchful, since no one knows what time the thief might strike.

Constant vigilance is required. What distracts you from what you should be doing? There is a never-ending list from which you can choose from it seems.

The need to watch is explicitly stated in both the verse that precedes the words about the thief and the one that follows. Matthew 24:42 and Matthew 24:44 is that of the preparedness of the second coming of Jesus Christ. We now that when Christ emphasizes something more than once it is essentially important.

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Matthew 24:42 Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.

Matthew 24:44 Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Consider that Christ gave this caution to His disciples; not to the general public. We will know that His return is near because of the signs of the times. We are able to have at least a rough idea of the timing by watching the rapidly deteriorating world events, although that should not be our primary focus.

Our focus should be on our relationship with God; being even more diligent to make our calling and election is sure. Even with our watching there will still be an element of unsettling surprise; we may even be unnerved by its ferociousness. It will challenge our faith, but we will not be as shocked as the willfully ignorant world will be. They will be caught off guard and totally helpless!

If nothing else we must at least take away from this sermon that by being watchful of the signs and using them to motivate us to diligence in our personal spiritual lives, we should be ready. But we must also be worthy to escape these terrible catastrophic events.

Luke 21:36 Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Jesus' final caution was one of deep concern for His disciples of all ages because He knew how easy it is for human beings, even those with the Holy Spirit, to maintain their attention and be watchful for the dangers of thinking that the Lord delays His coming.

Since Christ's return comes at an unexpected hour, Jesus teaches His disciples to be ready at all times, not just on the Sabbath, but during the rest of the week as well.

Each of these pictures is alike in stressing the sudden nature and unpredictability of Christ's return, but each also adds its own unique elements. The picture of the flood reminds us that many people will be lost.

The picture of the two men working in the fields and the two women grinding at the mill

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points to a radical separation and reminds us that we are not saved by knowing or being close to another converted, faithful member of God's church. The picture of the thief reminds us that our lives are valuable and that it is simple prudence for us to be ready.

What about this next picture, the contrast between the two servants in Matthew 24:45-51?

Christ's concern for His disciples is a real and urgent need to be ready, so He tells them the Parable of the Faithful and Evil Servants, which is also found in Luke 12:41-48.

The narrower sense of this parable is that of preparedness for the second coming of Jesus Christ. All who are members of the household of faith must be found serving God and one another with regard to things of the Kingdom of God.

The wider sense of this parable refers to the time when God calls us. It is a call to prepare to meet our God. Both senses express the overall theme of this parable which is "watchfulness."

Matthew 24:45-47 "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? [This emphasizes our responsibility for those placed under our care.] Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods.

Jesus says that exhortations to watch apply to everyone. Leaders have a special responsibility, the steward in charge of the servants is a servant himself, which shows the importance of faithfulness and in so doing the will of the master.

Not only does Jesus teach the certainty of His return at an unexpected moment, but He also implies that the church, His disciples, will continue serving God for an unspecified time until His return, and He says, "blessed is the servant whom his lord will find so doing when he comes."

This picture provides an explanation of what being ready means. Being ready means loving, trusting, and patiently waiting for Jesus Christ. The faithful servant is faithful because he is expecting his Lord's return, but it also has to do with faithful service, that is continuing to carry out what Jesus has left us in this world to do. We find the same idea in two of the three parables in Matthew 25.

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In Matthew 25:14-30, faithfulness is demonstrated by the wise use of the talents Christ has given. In Matthew 25:31-46, it is seen in selfless service to those who are hungry or thirsty or have a pressing need.

Matthew 24:48-51 But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat [mistreat] his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites [the professing Christians without works]. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

How are we to evaluate the service of these two men in Matthew 24? Not much is said about the good servant, only that he gave the other servants their food at the proper time. Jesus may be thinking of spiritual food and of the service of ministers teaching the Bible, as well as the general membership.

In other words a great deal is said about the bad servant. His attitude is contrary to the command to be ready. His severe treatment of the other servants is similar to the description of that of false leader, for example those talked about in Acts 20:29-30, who ravaged the congregation.

Similarly, the dramatic portrayal of the servants punishment—"cut him in two"—stresses the seriousness of the evasion of one's responsibility. The original statement in Aramaic was probably stated as, "he was cut off." This has two implications: to be executed; or exiled for sin. With respect to the church, "cut off" means being disfellowshipped from associating with church members because of flagrant sin or because of the mistreatment of other members.

The evil servant's service is marked by three vices: 1) carelessness (Matthew 24:48). He neglects his work because he says: "my master is delaying his coming." This reminds us of II Peter 3:4: "where is the promise of His coming?" Everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation. It always seems like that to the world. They say, "It's too big to fail!" But God will bring the system down.

Jesus has not returned yet, so they are careless. But, Peter says, they deliberately forget that God judged the world in ancient times by water and that He has promised to do so again, this time by fire at the final day.

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With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. What seems delayed to us is not a delay with Him, Therefore, says Peter, "Be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position."

The second vice of the wicked servant is cruelty to his fellow servants, because he began "to beat" them (Matthew 24:49.) This is not only physical abuse but verbal as well. This is like the Pharisees whom Jesus said would pursue, flog, kill, and crucify His servants, stated in Matthew 23:34.

Here it is not merely the apostles who are beaten, the underservants are beaten, and the one doing the beating is a person who claims to be a servant of the Lord.

The third vice of the wicked servant was carousing (Matthew 24:38, 49). Finally, Jesus denounces the wicked servant for his carousing, noting that he has begun to eat and drink with drunkards. He was behaving like those living in the days of Noah who were eating and drinking and knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. They were so much into entertainment and other popular worldly things that they failed to prepare.

What else does the evil servant's attitude reveal? First, he says, "I'll do whatever I want while my master is away," forgetting that the day of judgment must come. Human beings have a habit of having two different attitudes toward God. Sometimes, we remember that God is present, and sometimes we may not think of Him at all. That is what happens to all of us when we get caught up in the things of the world.

Second, he says, "I have plenty of time to put things right before the master comes." Nothing may be more harmful than to assume we have more time. Jesus says in John 9,

John 9:4 I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work.

Something went wrong in the evil servant's heart. He ceased to expect Christ to return and he lived like the world and mistreated his fellow servants, he refused to forgive them. Whenever God's servants cannot work together, it is often because somebody has forgotten that Christ will return and judge. Looking for His appearing, and loving His appearing, should help motivate us to be faithful and loving.

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Are we judged according to what we understand? The evil servant failed in his responsibility because he was not looking faithfully to Christ and hopefully toward the Kingdom. The penalty tells us that Jesus is speaking about Christians who are not ready either because they ignore their calling or because they neglect to produce fruit worthy of repentance.

Faithless Christians will be judged more strictly than those who do not understand about the coming of Jesus Christ. Professing Christians with knowledge of God's revelation will have to answer for their lack of response to God.

Their punishment seems severe until we realize that the servant who knew his master's will but did not follow it represents those who sin presumptuously. Even though the servant who was ignorant of his master's will sins unwittingly, it was still his duty to learn and know his master's will.

In either case, each holds personal responsibility for his own actions and therefore comes under judgment. All have some knowledge of God, and He judges according to the individual's level of knowledge and responsibility.

Luke 12:47-48 And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes[or receive a harsh judgment]. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.

Ask yourself, "How much have I been given?" Knowledge and privilege always bring responsibility. Sin is doubly sinful to the person who knows better. We who know better would like God to find us with our work completed upon His return, just as Jesus was able to say to His Father:

John 17:4-5 I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

It would be wonderful for God to find us glorifying Him and at peace with our brethren when Christ returns. Watch and be ready! The end could begin at any moment!