

Alert  
Matthew 24:36-51

#### FIRST THOUGHTS

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

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

#### UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

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

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

#### AN UNKNOWN HOUR (MATTHEW 24:36-41)

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

Because the date and time of Jesus's return cannot be known, it will catch people unaware, like the flood in the days of Noah. Jesus made the comparison twice (vv. 37,39). Leading up to the flood, people went about their normal business: eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. The idea of eating and drinking covers both normal meals and banquets.

In this passage, Jesus's emphasis was on a lack of preparation. Before the flood, people were oblivious to the danger until the waters came and swept them all away. Since Noah was a "preacher of righteousness," they heard the warnings of judgment (2 Pet. 2:5). They simply gave no attention to God in their lives. As a result, they did not anticipate the coming judgment. They rejected Noah's calls to repent; and, eventually, it was too late. The sudden and unexpected event was catastrophic!

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

#### BE ALERT (MATTHEW 24:42-44)

As pointed out, many will be caught by surprise by Jesus's return because no one can know the time or date (vv. 36-41). Therefore Jesus told His disciples to be ready always—to be alert. We are called to maintain constant vigilance. Again, the reason for vigilance on the part of Christ followers is you don't

know what day your Lord is coming. Again Jesus emphasized that you don't know. If neither He nor the angels of God know the timing of His return, it is foolish for any human to speculate (v. 36). However, Jesus did note that it is "your Lord" who will come for His followers.

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

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

Jesus noted that if an owner knew what time the thief was coming, he would not be caught with his guard down. Given this information, he would have stayed alert and taken precautions. Jesus repeated His call to readiness but shifted the motivation. In addition to the uncertainty of the time, He added the certainty of the event. He noted that, date and hour aside, the Son of Man is coming. Jesus's return is a sure thing, even though it is yet to take place.

BE FAITHFUL (MATTHEW 24:45-51)

After illustrating the sudden nature of His return, Jesus told a series of parables stressing responsibility and accountability. Assuming Jesus was referring to two different servants, both were put into the same set of circumstances. In language reminiscent of Joseph being appointed over Potiphar's house (Gen. 39:4) and all of Egypt (41:39–41), this servant was put in charge of his master's household. The word master literally is "lord" (kyrios) and recalls verse 42.

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

As noted, Jesus contrasted the faithful worker with one who was wicked. More emphasis falls on the wicked servant as his thoughts, actions, and punishment are given in more detail. The wicked servant's internal conversation—in his heart—focused on his master being delayed. The word rendered delayed can refer to a failure to return in a timely manner. Confident the master wouldn't return for a long time, the evil man began to beat his fellow servants. He also indulged himself and neglected his duties by carousing with drunkards (see also 1 Thess. 5:5–7). Once again, Jesus used the singular words day and hour (see v. 36) to refer to what the servant did not expect or did not know. Obviously the master's return pictures Jesus's own return, as He explained in verses 36–44.

Verse 51 focuses on the punishment of the wicked servant. Jesus said the master would assign him a place with the hypocrites. The punishment will be severe: He will cut him to pieces. Further, the place of confinement would involve weeping and gnashing of teeth. In Matthew 8:12, Jesus identified this place of anguish and suffering as the eternal destination of the wicked.

Next Week – Active Faith, Matthew 25:31-46

