
The Time is Near – Part 1

Matthew 24:32 -25:13

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It has been interesting to watch how the world has reacted to the COVID pandemic over the past two years. Keep in mind that these are Steve and my observations. Take them for what they are worth.

We have noted how easily people relinquished perceived freedoms for the perceived promise of personal safety. Even among believers, the focus was often on the personal rights they felt they should have as Americans. Or there was a deep pursuit of personal safety. Both led to a loss of love, grace toward others and preference for their brothers and sisters in Christ. It was easy to see how governments could quickly take over and control their citizens, even here in America. Because of strong beliefs regarding mask mandates and vaccine mandates, people often positioned themselves against one another, treating one another as second-class citizens, divided by mask and health choices that recently here in the USA was generally only shared between patient and physician. Most societies were locked down with people in some countries being arrested or fined for violating government-mandated protocols. In many places around the world citizens could not even leave their homes or run basic errands such as going to the grocery store without showing a vaccine passport. Restrictions were mandated on the number of people allowed in homes for holiday celebrations, with authorities even suggesting the testing of friends and family before allowing entry into homes.

None of this is new information. We watched and read it all in excruciating detail over and over again. It is not going away. We are experiencing the Omicron wave. In fact, I (Russ) am preaching this sermon on Steve Vaughan's behalf because... he is sick.

What does all this have to do with our text today? It is amazing how quickly these measures were put in place. Think about how easy it would be for governments to follow this same protocol in the future in response to any kind of perceived crisis. Thinking over these last two years and how society has reacted to the pandemic, it doesn't take much imagination to see how quickly societal norms can change and how easy it can be for groups of people to suddenly find themselves at odds with a society's accepted behavior and beliefs, even on a worldwide scale.

There is much that can be said about the reaction of the church during the COVID pandemic, some good and some bad. As we look forward to potential crises in the future, whether it be political upheaval, health-related, or military in nature; what happens when the church in America finds itself at odds with what the culture accepts as normal? What happens when we are not accepted by our society, but rather, are snubbed, ridiculed, and persecuted, and hated as so many Christians are across the world. Will we continue to show love to our brothers and sisters in the church as well as to non-believers? Will we continue ministry in difficult times while we await Christ's return? Perhaps the pandemic was a wakeup call for the Church. Maybe it is time we consider our ministry, our priorities, and whether we are truly watching and ready for the Lord's return.

Now, does the pandemic mean that we are in the End Times? We have been in the End Times since Christ left earth after his resurrection. What does Christ say about preparing for his return? First, let's consider the location and context of Christ's teaching to the disciples regarding the end of time.

So, what is the context for our text? Jesus is with his disciples on the Mount of Olives discussing the signs of His return. The disciples ask Jesus privately how they will know that the end is near. Jesus tells them

that there will be many anti-Christ's and false prophets leading many people astray. There will be wars and rumors of war, nation will rise against nation, there will be famines and earthquakes, and the disciples will be hated by all nations for following Christ and will be put to death. Many will fall away and betray one another. Because of great lawlessness many will fall away and the love of many will grow cold and hatred will increase. But the person who endures until the end will be saved, and the good news of the kingdom needs to be proclaimed among all nations before the end will come.

Jesus also tells them that at the end of the time of great tribulation the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light and the stars will fall from heaven and the powers from heaven will be shaken. The Lost will mourn Christ's coming as they see the Son of Man coming in the clouds and as the angels gather the elect from one end of heaven and earth to the other.

I have often heard two extremes by fellow believers regarding the events surrounding Jesus' return. One, we can know the details down to the time and date, or two, which is most typical, that it is too difficult to understand the end times surrounding Christ's return so why bother trying to understand what the scripture does say about Christ's return? Scripture tells us there will be signs or indicators surrounding Christ's return, but we will not know the exact day or hour. Therefore, the central focus of this section is not on giving us a schema but rather is a strong exhortation to be ready for Jesus' coming.

From a Natural Lesson (v. 32-35)

From a natural lesson, Jesus explains to the disciples that there are signs that will tell the reader when Jesus' return is near. The reader should be able to discern the signs of Christ return like one understands the signs of the changing of the seasons.

³² "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Jesus uses a simple, common, and easily understand lesson. We all recognize that summer is coming when we begin to see the plants and trees budding. So, when we begin to see all the things that Jesus has referred to, we know that He is near. The signs or the indicators function to point to something that is near, but not quite here yet.

Be careful not to over read the fig tree budding. The olive tree is the usual analogy for Israel. Jesus is probably not using the fig tree to point to a rebirth of Israel as the sign. It is a comparison, an analogy. What the Lord has talked about in the context are the budding trees of spring indicating the soon coming summer. He is more likely pointing them back to Isaiah 34:4 which he has used in the previous paragraphs.

Verse 34 has caused no end to debate. I am of the view that the "this generation" is referring to those who will see these things unfolding in their day and primarily refers to the Jews. While the nation of Israel will be destroyed (in 70 AD), Jews will continue to exist until the time spoken of here.¹ "This generation" is a way of referring to Jews. "Pass away" does not mean "die" in vernacular English but means "to cease to exist." Why is that? Because God will be faithful to His Word. In contrast to the fading and failing natural order, the promises of God's Word will hold true. Physical (and possibly, spiritual) descendants of Abraham will be alive when Jesus comes because God's Word will stand.

So even though the Jews in Jesus' day would cease to exist as a nation after 70 AD, all Jewish people would not be destroyed and when Jesus returns at the end of time, a remnant of the Jewish people will be saved with all of God's people, because God's word is true.

From a Scriptural Analogy (v. 36-44)

From a Scriptural analogy, Jesus warns us to be ready for judgment is coming.

³⁶ "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ 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, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

In a very surprising statement, Jesus says that He Himself does not know the exact day nor hour of the return. Jesus here is speaking in His capacity as serving under and in submission to the Father. The point here is not to create theological controversy, but rather to warn us. The *parousia* will take place in the ordinary flow of life, like the world-wide flood of Genesis 6-8. Then, even though there was Noah's preaching and the building of an ark as sure signs of future judgment, people went on ignoring the warning calls to repent. Thus, when the judgment came, the wicked were swept away.

There is a difficulty here: who is taken and who is left? In the ordinariness of life one person is taken and one is left. In the immediate context, it was the wicked who were "swept away" in the flood. Now, some are taken away. Is this in judgment? The similarity in the English, "swept away" and "taken away" simply does not exist in the Greek. The word translated "swept away" is exactly what it means. A cataclysm of water washed the wicked from the face of the earth. But before that happened, Noah and his family entered the ark of safety and were rescued before that judgment. The word translated "taken" here is usually used in a positive sense: to take my children, to take over an office, to take to fellowship. We have also seen from the context, that the angels will be sent to gather in the elect. The wicked are left to endure the massive judgment of God.

So, in final days of the time of great trouble for believers, when life is just going on and the wicked are ignoring the warnings, then God will first take away or gather in His elect. The day of judgment will come when it is not expected, even in the day when peace and safety will be most loudly declared.

Repeatedly, Jesus warns us to be alert, to watch, to be ready. While we may not know the exact date or the exact hour, we can know that it is near. We must be people who are ready. To be ready, there must be a good and clear understanding of the Bible and a wise attention to events around us.

Now I want to address something. There are those who teach what is called the *imminent* return of Christ. They would say, from this text, that Jesus can come at any moment, even right now. There is nothing that must happen before Jesus' coming. This is held as key to understanding prophecy.

Except, then, Jesus has directly contradicted Himself. We are to watch for signs one of which is in the middle of a 7-year time frame (Mt. 24:15-28). If he could come at any moment, then it is silly to point to signs that will precede His coming. No, Jesus will come at the end of a time in which we may observe recognizable events that tell us His coming is near. But we will not be able to predict the exact date and hour; no trying to calculate from the signs, particularly the Abomination of Desolation.

From a Practical Illustration (v. 45-51)

From a practical illustration, Jesus explains how faithfulness in the kingdom is evidence of grace.

⁴⁵ “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? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

At first blush, this sounds like, “be faithful until Jesus comes or you may lose your reward.” Except, clearly, losing a reward is not what is at stake. The faithful and wise steward who has been set over the household is doing what the master expects. The unfaithful steward is careless, cruel, and carousing². He takes advantage of his position and brings harm to the master’s household. He is taken out, chopped up into pieces and cast into hell.

Now remember our context: this is a terrible time of persecution and suffering where there are many false prophets and fake messiahs. In that kind of time, wise and careful faithfulness exhibits that we are true sons and servants. But there will be many who will be in and over the household, whose actions now and particularly then, will expose them as unbelievers. At the reckoning day, at the judgment, our heavenly master will take them and cast them into eternal hell.

From a Familiar Parable (25:1-13)

Finally, from a familiar parable, we are warned to be sure we have all that is required when the Lord returns

¹ “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. ¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The temptation to make each element of this parable equal to something has been too strong for many commentators. It is a common story in Jewish culture. Here is a wedding in which there are ten bridesmaids who are waiting for the groom to come by so that they can join the wedding march to the place where the wedding feast is to take place. Half of these young ladies had oil in their lamps and were ready to light them and hold them up in the procession. The other half had lamps but no oil at all. They were totally unprepared. They all fell asleep waiting through until the groom arrived around midnight. When the groom's party arrival is announced, they all trim their wicks. The foolish bridesmaids try to beg oil from the others who wisely say, "No" and send them to the marketplace to buy what they need. This makes the five foolish ones late for the wedding feast. They are not allowed entry for they are "not known" by the lord of the wedding.

The point? It is in verse 13 as it has been through this whole section – "Watch and stay alert because you do not know the day nor the hour." Those who are not prepared for the Lord's return by having all that is required will be shut out.

Now, Jesus does not intend for us to see the bride as the church, the groom as Jesus, the bridesmaids as Jews, the oil as the Holy Spirit – this is reading our own agenda into the text. For those who are waiting during terrible trouble and who have seen the signs that point to His nearness, be warned to stay watchful. Be prepared. Be faithful. Be ready. For if you are not, then you will be shut out.

What then through these parables does it mean, "to be ready?" Being ready means to be living out what it means to be a Christian, to be a believer, even when it becomes incredibly hard to do so. If we falter, fail, and leave the faith, we will show that we are not God's own. We will maintain faith and faithfulness by hearing these grave warnings and great exhortations.

Brothers and sisters, we have yet to enter this great time of trouble. Many believers all over the world are being persecuted and suffering the birth pangs of that terrible time. We know little of it here. So, when that hour comes, if it comes in our lifetime, be ready, be faithful, be watchful – live out who you are.

Reflect and Respond

Be faithful and wise in discerning the season of Christ's return. We should know God's word well enough to understand what is going on in the world around us. We should be able to anticipate the season of Christ's return. There are things that will happen to prepare Christ's return, but we will never know the exact time or date, only God knows.

Be a wise and faithful servant until Christ returns. Remain faithful to the work of the kingdom and the responsibilities God has given you, even when it becomes difficult to remain faithful to the Lord.

Be watchful, ready, and prepared for Christ's return. Remain faithful in stewarding God's kingdom. Even though there are signs of Christ's return, life will also be going on normally around us, and we won't know the exact time of Christ's return. You cannot let your oil run out; you cannot get tired of waiting. You cannot be distracted by the treasures of the world; you cannot prepare at the last minute. Watch and wait and work. No matter where we are in God's timeline, the call is the same. God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish.

Front-sight focused is what our life in ministry should be while we await Christ's return. No distractions. Be watchful, ready, working and focused on our mission and Christ's return.

¹ See Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary*, p. 868-870

² Hendriksen, p.873