

### See Him Coming. Matthew 24:36-51

Does history have a goal, an overarching purpose in all the chaos and seemingly chance twists and turns of human affairs?

Is there some endpoint in the light of which our own choices and achievements, our contribution to human affairs, will be assessed? Against which our own lives will be seen to be worthwhile or wasted?

Many say no. There is no goal, no purpose, no overarching story that embraces all human history, catches up every human life. It is random, and you make the best of things while you can in your brief life.

But Christians have always said yes.

History, human affairs has a goal - the return in glory of the Lord Jesus, the revealing of the greatness and power of the baby born in the manger, of the man who hung on the cross.

A goal which will shed light on every other human life, reveal whether it was a life well lived, or a life squandered; a life worthy of praise, or of condemnation.

And it is with Jesus' return, His coming again having come once, born into our world in Bethlehem, that our passage is concerned

With the character and timing of His return, and how each one of us can live now so we are ready for that day.

How you engage with what Jesus says here will make an eternal difference, be the difference between whether your life will be seen then to have been a life well lived, or a life squandered; a life worthy of praise, or of condemnation.

#### The second question

In response to Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple the disciples asked Jesus a double barreled question

*Matthew 24: <sup>2</sup> He replied to them, "Do you see all these things? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here on another that will not be thrown down." <sup>3</sup> While he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples approached him privately and said, "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what is the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"*

Clinton took us through the first part of Jesus' answer last week helping us distinguish the threads of Jesus' description of the character of our age and the judgment on Jerusalem from talk of the end, bringing us to today's passage where our Lord answers the second part of the question, the part about His coming and the close of the age.

Teaching that might be familiar to some, new to others, but unsettling to us all if we stop to think about it. It is hard to read of the days of Noah without being troubled if your imagination is informed by Scripture, if you know of that great and overwhelming judgment; to read of our Lord coming like a thief in the night with all the uncertainty and threat of loss in that image; to read of the serious accountability of our Lord's servants; hard to read of all these things and not be disturbed if you are paying attention.

But as you feel that, recognize also that this word is being given so that, listening to it, believing it, we would not be taken unawares by our Lord's return, not suffer loss, not be cast out among the hypocrites. It is a word given for our good.

So let's start by reminding ourselves of the wonder, the certainty, and the seriousness of the coming spoken of at the end of the age.

*Matthew 24: <sup>36</sup> "Now concerning that day and hour no one knows—neither the angels of heaven nor the Son—except the Father alone. <sup>37</sup> As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. <sup>38</sup> For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark. <sup>39</sup> 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.*

<sup>40</sup> Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding grain with a hand mill; one will be taken and one left. <sup>42</sup> Therefore be alert, since you don't know what day your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup> 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. <sup>44</sup> This is why you are also to be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Jesus says this age will close with the coming of the Son of Man, with Himself vv. 37, 39, 44.

And whereas in Daniel 7 it spoke of the coming of the Son of Man to the Ancient of Days to receive an eternal kingdom

*Daniel 7: <sup>13</sup> I continued watching in the night visions,*

*and suddenly one like a son of man  
was coming with the clouds of heaven.  
He approached the Ancient of Days  
and was escorted before him.*

<sup>14</sup> *He was given dominion  
and glory and a kingdom,  
so that those of every people,  
nation, and language  
should serve him.*

*His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
that will not pass away,  
and his kingdom is one  
that will not be destroyed.*

This coming speaks of the revealing of the majesty and eternal rule over all nations and peoples which the glorious Son has already received, of the time when all will recognize his rule, when, as Paul says in Philippians 2:9-11, every knee will bow to Him.

That is the way our Lord speaks of this coming later in this conversation with His disciples in 25:31

*Matthew 25: <sup>31</sup> "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*

This is the coming the authors of the New Testament, all of them, consistently look forward to, conduct their ministries and live their lives in the light of. There are many references, but just three to show their ever present consciousness of our Lord's return

*1 John 2: <sup>28</sup> So now, little children, remain in him so that when he appears we may have confidence and not be ashamed before him at his coming.*

*James 5: <sup>7</sup> Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. <sup>8</sup> You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near.*

*1 Thessalonians 2: <sup>19</sup> For who is our hope or joy or crown of boasting in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?*

This coming is serious. It is the close of the age, the time of resurrection [1 Cor. 15:23, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17] and final judgement [Matthew 25:31 ff., 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10; John 5:28-29], the time when the new heaven and earth is ushered in [2 Peter 3:13]

It is the time when all have run out of time, and eternal destinies settled.

This coming is serious

This coming is certain

We are coming up to Christmas, the first coming of the Son of God. That coming tells us God is not excluded from His creation by the barriers we might try and erect between heaven and earth, by the restrictions we want to place on Him. Created by Him this world is not closed to Him, and as He began it, He can enter it, and He can end it.

And we are hearing in the gospel the words of the one who said He would die and rise, the one whose Word has been shown to be true by His resurrection from the dead,

The One who lives a deathless life, whose pouring out of the Spirit says He reigns now, who has authority to do all that HE says.

His coming is sure

And His coming is wonderful and good, something we should pray and long for, the day when the Lord Jesus will be, in Paul's words in 2 Thessalonians, *glorified by his saints and to be marvelled at by all those who have believed*,

*2 Thessalonians 1:9 They will pay the penalty of eternal destruction from the Lord's presence and from his glorious strength <sup>10</sup> on that day when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marvelled at by all those who have believed, because our testimony among you was believed.*

Why wonderful, something to be longed for, when it is also so final and awesome?

It is not just because of the associated events – the resurrection of believers to life, the judgment of all evil, the destruction of the evil one.

It is wonderful and good because it is the revealing of the greatness of our Lord Jesus, and that is so good

The humble and meek one, who had time for children, made the afflicted whole, sought out sinners to save them, who now reigns

The one who in faithful love of His father and us was shamed and crucified, now revealed as glorious, with boundless, undying life in Himself

On that day He will be revealed, and God will be revealed in Him, as the faithful saving one – who fulfills all He has promised, who establishes His justice and righteousness and silences the pride of men, who alone is glorious

And though He will be fearfully glorious we pray and long for His revealing because we love Him,

That love and longing were joined by believers from the earliest

*1 Corinthians 16:22 If anyone does not love the Lord, a curse be on him. Our Lord, come!*

And Revelation expresses it as the bride longing for her husband, her beloved.

*Revelation 22:17 Both the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" Let anyone who hears, say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who desires take the water of life freely.*

And that is what our Lord's coming will usher in for His people, the great marriage feast of the Lamb, of the Son of God

And it will be wonderful for on that day, the great overarching story, the story that runs from creation to new creation, will be revealed as a great love story. It will be seen that what has driven history has been the Lord's love for His people and determination to save them, an eternal, free, gracious, faithful, pursuing love.

We can lose sight of this in talking of judgment and accountability, or in looking forward to our own resurrection and the healing transformation that will be

But it is love that makes this a day, awesome as it is, to look forward to, and it is against that love, in the light of that love, that whether we have lived our lives well or squandered them will be revealed

The serious, certain, wonderful return of our Lord reveals human history as a story that ends with the consummation of love and the revealing of the glory of the One we love

But we do not know when that return and the end of the age will be. Our Lord makes that abundantly clear

*Matthew 24:*<sup>36</sup> *“Now concerning that day and hour no one knows—neither the angels of heaven nor the Son —except the Father alone.*

### **An Unknown Time**

v. 36 No one knows

Not even the Son

Note the humility of the Son. This is His public glorification, the revealing to all of His triumph

Something He has a right to

But He is content to wait, to leave it all in the hands of the Father, just as He lived His life trusting the Father and doing His will

And He reinforces that this day is unknown by speaking of the days of Noah

*<sup>37</sup>As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. <sup>38</sup>For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark. <sup>39</sup>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.*

Life then was going on as normal v. 38

– they didn’t know their end was approaching until the flood came v. 39 and swept them all away, didn’t know until too late to do anything about it.

That is the way it will be when Son of Man comes.

Life will be going on as normal, people pre-occupied with their own affairs and pleasures

Jesus reinforces in vv. 40-41 just how normal, everyday, it will seem.

*<sup>40</sup>Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. <sup>41</sup>Two women will be grinding grain with a hand mill; one will be taken and one left.*

People will be going about their daily tasks when the Son of Man comes and there is the great separation that will happen then - one to life, and one to condemnation.

It is not what they are engaged in at the time which determines whether one is taken and the other is left. It will depend on decisions already taken, preparations already made, for that coming will be sudden and unexpected

There is nothing that is going on at the time that is telling them the day is about to come, that they are about to be overtaken by God’s judgment.

We need to hear that because we keep thinking that events will be telling everyone the day is almost here, that there will be a general air of unease and uncertainty because of the turmoil of the world – as there is, for example, at the moment

But that is not what Scripture says

Hear *1 Thessalonians 5:2* *For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.* <sup>3</sup> *When they say, "Peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.*

'Peace and security'

You can't take your sense of alertness or readiness from the world's perception of its danger. The world is committed to its continuity, has a vested interest in proclaiming its own security.

It is not events in the world that will prepare us for that day, but the word of God.

The word alone can make us alert, make us ready

It is to the word we should be giving our attention

And the word says we should always be alert – whether things seem to be going well, or we see threats on the horizon, or we are experiencing tumultuous times

<sup>42</sup> *Therefore be alert, since you don't know what day your Lord is coming.* <sup>43</sup> *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.* <sup>44</sup> *This is why you are also to be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*

The image of the thief in the night is one that stayed with the apostles

*1 Thessalonians 5:2* *For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.* ..... <sup>4</sup> *But you, brothers and sisters, are not in the dark, for this day to surprise you like a thief.*

*2 Peter 3:10* *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief; on that day the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed.*

What does it tell us of our Lord's coming.

Well a thief does not publicise his arrival. He doesn't make appointments. In fact his movements will not be noticed, be hidden from most, especially in an age without street lights, and the time of his arrival a secret known only to him.

And if you are not ready for his arrival – you suffer loss

And so the only way to not suffer loss is to stay alert, be ready when the thief arrives

What you must not do is fall asleep, or become pre-occupied with other things [1 Thess. 5:5-6]

How many times in movies have we seen the thief sneak into a building because the security guards are watching the football and not their CCTV screens

We need to be always alert, awake and focused, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect

And the only way not to suffer loss, is to be always ready.

Our Lord is going to go on and tell us how we can be ready in vv. 45-51, and also in the two stories in chapter 25, the story of the ten virgins and the story of the talents entrusted to the three servants that Clinton will speak on next week.

But before we think about how our Lord says we can be ready, let's think about this reality that no-one but the Father knows the time of our Lord's return and that HE is coming at an hour we do not expect, and how good it is that we don't know the time.

### **The value of the unknown time and the perversity of speculation**

Now there may be things we observe in the world that helps to sustain our alertness

Recognising with each war and each earthquake the truth of Jesus' description of the character of our age in 24:4-14, an age suffering from our rebellion against God and which has a use-by date on it, should make us think the Lord is telling the truth here, that this world will end with His return

Thinking about the fulfilment of Jesus' words in the fall of Jerusalem, should remind us He knows and speaks the truth about the future.

Being encouraged by the turning of many Jews to Jesus the Jewish Saviour, seeing God's plan for the salvation of all Israel through the gospel going to non-Jew and Jew being fulfilled, that might make us alert to the coming end [Romans 11:25-27], as might the progress of the gospel to all nations over the last 200 years [Matthew 24:14]

Or observing the mystery of lawlessness at work, the spread of proud rebellion against God and false religion, of which Paul speaks in 2 Thessalonians 2:7,

Seeing any and all of these things happening around us may heighten our alertness [not our anxiety]

But nothing should make you speculate about or calculate the time of our Lord's return

That is both to go against the clear teaching of our Lord and to frustrate the good our Lord does us by telling us no-one knows the day or hour, which means no one knows the time, including the year or decade, of our Lord's return.

What good does not knowing the time do us?

It should mean we are always alert, looking to Jesus and living with hope – having His future at the forefront of our thinking

And the unknown time gives us comfort in all circumstances – He is always close, never distant, His return possible at all times and so at any time, even the darkest

Not knowing the time means the thought of His return always has power to unsettle us, to stop us being totally absorbed in this life and this world, to help us resist love of this age – for we know it could be gone in an instant

House, the job, the family – all gone in a moment

And not knowing the time gives us the opportunity to live like God's Son by practicing the humility of the Son, leave the day of our vindication in Christ, the day when we come to our eternal inheritance, to the Father. Not worrying about it or speculating about it but getting on with the work entrusted to us

To help you resist the false teachers who arise in every age with predictions of the time of our Lord's return, think of the pride that says that what was unknown to the Son and He was content to leave in the Father's hands, I must and can and do know – whether by prophetic revelation or studious calculation. Such pride is not faith, though it might masquerade as faith, use the language of the Spirit or of bible faithfulness

Speculation about the date, calculation of the date, is harmful. It distracts from being ready,

because the time and energy used to pursue what you cannot know means you neglect the will of God you do know, being ready by engaging in the tasks the Lord has entrusted to you

You are much better off, much more ready, thinking about how you can love your neighbour than trying to work out the time of Jesus' return

And if Jesus' clear word doesn't convince people He will return and could return at any time don't kid yourself into thinking your speculation will convince people to get ready for His return.

Knowing our Lord will return at an hour we do not expect means we have to be always ready.

But how are we ready?

### **A Picture of Readiness**

*Matthew 24:45 "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? 46 Blessed is that servant whom the master finds doing his job when he comes. 47 Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. 48 But if that wicked servant says in his heart, 'My master is delayed,' 49 and starts to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with drunkards, 50 that servant's master will come on a day he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know. 51 He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

Readiness is keeping on with the task entrusted to us – being the servant *whom the master finds doing his job when he comes.*

Not being ready is using what is entrusted to you to abuse others and to indulge yourself, to live a selfish life

And Being found ready is blessedness, life and peace in a continuing relationship with our Lord Jesus, and being found unready is eternal death – a place with the hypocrites

Flesh that out

Readiness is keeping on with the task entrusted to us – being the servant *whom the master finds doing his job when he comes.*

This is instruction for all of us, not just those in positions of responsibility for others in the church [as might be the emphasis in Luke 12:41-48]. Every believer is a servant of the Lord Jesus, a steward of the resources entrusted to us, and every believer is expected to use what is given us in conformity to our Lord's will, for the good of others.

So what are the jobs, the work, our Lord wants us to be busy with when He comes.

Some are particular to where we are in life – for example, if we have children, bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, if married respecting our husbands and loving our wives, and these can vary over time. Single we can become married, married we can become single again

We might for a time have specific responsibilities in an organization, or in the church – teaching Sunday School, serving as a deacon or caring for property, or being a pastor – and these can vary over time as well

We can have responsibilities, service, that is there for a time in our particular circumstances

But there is service that is expected of us all, all the time

Loving our neighbours, even though who our neighbours are and the way in which they need to be loved will vary over time.

Living godly lives, what Paul characterises as a self controlled life of faith and love and hope

*1 Thessalonians 5:8 But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled and put on the armor of faith and love, and a helmet of the hope of salvation.*

And what Peter calls a life of holiness and godliness v. 11, without spot or blemish v. 14

*2 Peter 3:11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, it is clear what sort of people you should be in holy conduct and godliness 12 as you wait for the day of God and hasten its coming. Because of that day, the heavens will be dissolved with fire and the elements will melt with heat. 13 But based on his promise, we wait for new heavens and*

*a new earth, where righteousness dwells.* <sup>14</sup> *Therefore, dear friends, while you wait for these things, make every effort to be found without spot or blemish in his sight, at peace.*

In Matthew we have heard our Lord call all believers to be salt and light in the world, doing the good that brings others to praise our God by living according to Jesus' teaching. That has to be us, all our lives

And this gospel ends with calling us all to be disciples who like the first disciples and taught by them are making disciples, calling others to follow Him and teaching what He has taught. Again, that must be us all the time, although the context in which we do it can change over time and with our changing circumstances.

Being ready is keeping on with the tasks entrusted to us – being the servant *whom the master finds doing his job when he comes.*

And not being ready is using what is entrusted to you to abuse others and to indulge yourself, to live a selfish life

Notice that – our Lord is not talking of someone who gives up a particular task because they are sick, or their life circumstances have changed. That is just a change in the context of their service.

The servant who will be caught out by His unexpected return and incur His wrath is one who stays in the role given him by the Master but who now uses the authority and resources entrusted to him to do His Master's will to do his own, to act selfishly. And so he bullies others – pushes them around to get his own way, have them afraid of him, and pursues his own pleasures, indulging himself with company that will support his self centred lifestyle.

We can be that wicked servant in any stage of life, with any set of responsibilities

A parent who expects the rest of the house to be organised around their wishes and wants

A pastor who thinks the congregation is there to serve them and promote them, and not the other way around

A believer who thinks they have grown beyond being concerned for the salvation of others, committed to making disciples, and wants to use their time and resources, the good gifts of God to them, to pursue their own private pleasures

What makes the difference between the faithful and wise servant and the wicked servant?

They both start well, look the same

But the difference becomes apparent with the passing of time and the way they understand that.

The wise servant understands that the time of the Master's return was always in the Master's hands, and while indefinite, is also certain. Because the Master is trustworthy the passing of time doesn't make it less certain – just closer.

The wicked servant *says in his heart, 'My master is delayed,* He had a time in his head in which he thought the Master must return, and the Master's non-arrival according to his expectations is understood as neglect, or inability, or disinterest, an opportunity to replace the Master's will with his own

The difference becomes apparent with the passing of time, but it is not the length of time that causes the difference. Rather the passing of time reveals the different hearts of the wise and wicked servants.

The wise servant keeps on doing what he has been entrusted with because he trusts and loves his master. He lives to please his master and so the passing of time is just more opportunity for loving service.

The wicked servant, however, is revealed by the passing of time as one who does not trust or love his master. His obedience at the start had its origin in other motives – fear of punishment, or the possibility of advancement that the service offered. But when he thinks the Master won't be present, trusting his own assessment of the situation and not His master's word, his selfish heart expresses itself.

And that is the same for us.



It is not the length of time to our Lord's return that will make the difference between whether we are ready or unready. It is our hearts, whether we love our Lord or not.

If we love Him, whatever our changing circumstances – sick or well, in work or retired, single or married, and however long our lives, we will see that time as a time to serve Him, we will be busy with the service given us.

And if we don't – if it was fear, or self concern – wanting a certain lifestyle, or community, or the praise of others, that had us joining in with God's people, even serving amongst them, time will reveal that – and that love of self will express itself

And when He appears we will receive what we deserve, a place amongst the hypocrites – for that is what those are who play act their service of Jesus but are using their opportunities and resources, given to them by Jesus, for selfish control and indulgence, are – hypocrites, unready because they live for self, not their Lord.

### **Are you ready**

History is moving to a goal

Our Lord will return, a return that is serious, certain, and wonderful, which will happen at the time of the Father's choosing,

A return that will mark our lives as worthwhile or wasted, lives which will rise to life or to condemnation

A return whose time is unknown by us, unannounced, like a thief in the night.

The Lord Jesus tells us this for a purpose, so that we will be ready

The question is – will you be ready because you have listened to Him and believed Him

Perhaps you are not yet a believer and you have never engaged with that question, or thought you could put off answering it because you are too busy with other things

Now is the time to get ready if you don't want that day to sweep you away to destruction like Noah's generation

To get ready by repenting and believing the gospel that HE has died for our sins, been buried, and has been raised to reign

Turning away from being the boss of your own life, the one who can decide for yourself what is right and wrong

Confessing that He is Lord – the One who rules all things, who has authority both to judge – to judge you by His standards, and to forgive, to forgive you

And asking Him to forgive you, and give you His Spirit and make you one of His people

“Lord Jesus, I have been wrong to ignore you and disobey you. Please forgive me and make me one of your people.”

Perhaps you have heard it all before and are wilfully rejecting the thought that one day the Lord Jesus will return in glory – because it is a real threat to you living to please yourself

Don't. Jesus has risen from the dead. Wanting it not to be won't keep Him in the grave. You will meet Him – and you can either meet Him now as one who can forgive your proud rejection and give you life, or you will meet Him then as judge, when there is no more time to make peace with Him

Perhaps you are a believer, someone who confesses the Lord Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead

Our Lord asks us the same question

Especially to those of us who have been believers for a while, where the passing of time is revealing our hearts

Will you and I be ready, ready because we are keeping on with the work our Lord has entrusted to us

Or has the passing of time made us unready, have we drifted into a life lived for self, whatever its outward form

That is easy to do in our culture – that marginalises any belief in God to psychological comfort, not a living Lord, that says life is pursuing your own dreams, and even speaks of getting older or that time when the kids leave home as a time to focus on yourself,

However long you have been a believer, what do you think your Lord will think of the way you are using your time, which is His time

Your money, which is His money

Your abilities, which are His gift

These are His words – “You also must be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

And readiness is not what you used to do, but what you are doing

So ask, ask to make sure you are ready

Repent of selfishness, turn away from a life that has no other purpose than your own security and comfort

Ask the Lord to renew your zeal, to show you the good He would have you do, to make you willing to give your time to serve – whether it is supporting others, teaching others, using your gifts to encourage others, to keep you being salt and light,

And yes – to keep you a disciple who is always wanting to make disciples and who shares in that work as they are able

And as we think about being ready let’s resolve to continue together in those things that will help us, as those who know our Lord’s return is certain even if the exact time is unknown, sustain our readiness – for it matters

You know those things

*Hebrews 10:<sup>24</sup> And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.*

Meeting to encourage each other

Teaching and admonishing one another so that none are hardened by sin’s deceitfulness

The encouragement of meditating on God’s Word

The prayer that orients us to our Lord’s will, prayer that He would return.

These are His words – “You also must be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Come, Lord Jesus, come