

“Be Ready”
Matthew 24:32-51
October 27, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

Jesus may not tell us everything we *want* to know about the future, but he does tell us everything we *need* to know. He has been doing so in this chapter, where he tells us to expect tribulations of various kinds during this era between his two comings. And he assures us that he will return to set things straight. General Douglas MacArthur, forced to leave the Philippines early in World War II, promised multiple times during his absence, “I will return.” Jesus promises the same thing. He will return in victory, putting all things right in his world.

In today’s passage, Jesus applies these teachings about the future to his disciples. His primary application is found in verse 44: **“Therefore you also must be ready, for the son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”** The verb phrase translated “be ready” is a present tense passive imperative. It has the literal sense of “be becoming ready,” or as one commentator suggested, “You, too, must learn how to be a ready people.”

As Jesus speaks of our need to be ready, we quickly encounter a problem. Beginning in verse 32, he says that we need to learn from the fig tree how to interpret the signs of the times. When we see the tender shoots of the fig tree, we know that summer is at hand. Similarly, when we see the signs Jesus has spoken of, we should know that his return is imminent. But here’s where we encounter the problem. **“Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place”** (v. 34). Some say that Jesus just made a mistake here. He predicted his return within a generation, generally considered to be around 40 years, and it obviously did not happen. If Jesus is wrong about this, then we need not heed his warning to be ready. Is Jesus just another of those who make predictions that turn out to be wrong?

In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell approached the President of Western Union, William Orton, offering to sell him the patent for the telephone for \$100,000. Orton refused, calling the telephone a mere “toy.” In a memo, he wrote, “The idea is idiotic on the face of it. Furthermore, why would any person want to use this ungainly and impractical device when he can send a messenger to the telegraph office and have a clear written message sent to any large city in the United States?” Here’s another bad prediction. Steve Ballmer, CEO of Microsoft, said in 2007, “There’s no chance that the iPhone is going to get any significant market share. No chance.”

If Jesus was mistaken here, then he is a false prophet. And if he is mistaken, then he compounds his error by stating in the next verse, **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”** The only thing worse than being wrong is to be wrong with complete confidence that you are right. Further, if Jesus is mistaken in this statement, then he contradicts himself in the very next sentence, where he says that no one knows the hour of his return, not even the Son, **“but the Father only”** (v. 36). That would be like me saying, “I can guarantee you that it is going to rain tonight,” and then immediately saying, “No one knows for sure whether it will rain tonight.”

So if Jesus is not mistaken, what does he mean? The answer is found in the meaning of the “all things” that Jesus says will take place before this generation passes away. These things cannot refer to the return of Jesus for the reasons above. What they refer to are the tribulations of this age and the destruction of Jerusalem that he has predicted. And, in fact, those things did happen within a generation of this time. Let’s turn, now, though, to consider Jesus’ main point in this passage—his charge to his followers to be ready.

I. Be Ready at All Times – v. 36-44

The reason we must be ready at all times is that no one knows the exact time of Jesus’ return. Jesus even says that he doesn’t know, but only the Father knows. This is an expression of Jesus’ humanity, in which he gives up some of the prerogatives of divinity. His main point, though, is that since we don’t know the time of his coming, we must be ready at all times.

If we are to be ready at all times, the first thing we are going to need is to believe Jesus when he says that he will return at a time unknown to all. That’s why he adds the words of verse 35. **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”** Jesus’ words are more dependable than nature, more dependable than the sun coming up every morning and the earth revolving around the sun. The words of Jesus are the great treasure of the Church. They keep us alive. On Reformation Day today, when we remember the *solas* of the Bible, this text reminds us of *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone. The words of the hymn we sang earlier express it like this: “How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent Word!”

Frederick Bruner tells a story from Warsaw, Poland at the end of World War II. Following the war, every building on the main street of Warsaw was completely destroyed, except for one. The British and Foreign Bible Society had been badly damaged but was still standing. On the wall facing the street were written the words of our verse: **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”** Nothing in all the universe is more certain and assured than the words of Jesus.

In light of this, Jesus tells us to be ready for his return, which is certain to happen. He gives three illustrations to help us. The first one concerns the days of Noah. **“For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man”** (v. 37-39). Jesus doesn’t fault the people in Noah’s day for any particularly evil behavior. They were doing normal things such as eating and drinking and forming families through marriage. He faults them for doing these things with no sense of coming judgment. Such judgment never entered their minds until it actually happened, when it was too late to be avoided and they were swept away by the waters of God’s judgment.

Apparently, various tribulations are not the only feature of the last days. The analogy of Noah teaches us that another feature will be that of living out the normal routines of life with no fear of coming judgment. I make no claim to know that Jesus will be returning soon, but it is striking to me how apt a description this is of our own day. There is little fear in our world of a day of judgment. Even in many churches, talk of God’s judgment is rarely mentioned. It is ironic that those who claim to follow Jesus should ignore something to which Jesus gave such emphasis. Someone has taken the trouble to count all the individual stories and teachings of Jesus in the gospels, arriving at a total of 148. In sixty of these, almost half, the final judgment is mentioned either explicitly or implicitly. Does Jesus speak of this so frequently out of cruelty, as some believe? No, he does so out love, because Jesus himself is the only refuge from being swept away by the waters of divine judgment.

The second illustration Jesus gives in an effort to help us become a ready people is a little ambiguous. **“Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left”** (v. 40-41). The ambiguity is in the purpose intended for those being taken. Are they being taken for judgment, or are they being taken to be gathered by Jesus? It could be either one, but whichever it is, it doesn’t affect the point Jesus is making. People will be going about their daily tasks when Jesus returns. To outward appearances, the two people are indistinguishable from one another. But their destinies could not be more dissimilar. One will go to eternal judgment while the other to everlasting life.

The third illustration is that of the thief at night. Jesus is not saying that he is a thief, but he does find one similarity between himself and the thief. Thieves don’t announce the precise time of their coming. They don’t send you a text message saying, “Remember, tonight is the night I am coming. Make sure you’re ready.” How, then, do you prepare for the thief? You do so by being ready all the time. No one prepares for thieves by trying to predict their coming. Similarly, we should not attempt to be ready for Jesus’ coming by predicting

the time of his arrival. We should be ready by assuming that he could come at any time and by being ready at any time.

So how do we prepare for Jesus' coming? What's entailed in being ready for him? I notice that all three of the illustrations have something in common. All three speak of a place of safety and refuge to protect us from a disastrous outcome. In the illustration of Noah, there's an ark to protect from the floodwaters. In the illustration of the thief, there is the safety of the house which, when well-prepared, can defend against the efforts of the thief. And the middle illustration, assuming the ones taken are the ones Jesus gathers up to himself rather than the ones taken for judgment, there is the safety Jesus spoke of back at the end of the previous chapter. **"How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!"** (23:37). Jesus himself is our refuge. When so much is at stake, this invites another question. How can I know that I am seeking refuge in Jesus? That brings us to our next point.

II. Be Ready through Faithful Stewardship – v. 45-51

In the closing paragraph of our passage, Jesus gives a parable of a faithful steward. A master has a household, but has to go away for a long time. In his absence, he appoints one of his servants to be in charge. This servant will have the authority of the master and is expected to manage the household in a way that the master himself would manage it were he present. The servant is to make sure the members of the household are adequately fed and taken care of. When the master finally returns, he finds that his servant has performed faithfully, and he rewards him with even greater responsibility.

Jesus then mentions a second possibility with this servant. The master's return is delayed, and the servant begins to act as if the master will never return. Perhaps he thinks that his master has met with some fatal misfortune and will never return. So he forgets all about acting in the master's best interests and begins acting in his own best interests. Instead of serving the members of the household, as the master would have wanted him, he begins to view these members as those who are to serve him. He seeks to control them to serve his interests and ends up beating them. He takes the money entrusted to him by the master and uses it to indulge himself rather than care for the household. The master is delayed in his return, but he does eventually return. When he sees what his servant has done, his judgment is immediate and severe. The judgment Jesus announces here is that which comes to his servants who have been unfaithful to him. He **"will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"** (v. 51).

What do we learn from this parable about being ready for the return of Jesus? We learn first that faithfulness is an indication of true faith. If you are genuinely seeking refuge in Jesus, your heart will start to change into a heart that wants to please Jesus. And you please Jesus by being faithful to the assignment he has given to you. So this invites us to consider what that assignment might be. What is the household over which you have been put in charge? Everyone has such a household, an assignment from Jesus. It refers to your sphere of influence, your domain. Perhaps it includes children living in your household. Or maybe it's those with whom you work or some neighbors or those you come into contact with because of a hobby you share. Every single one of us has been given by Jesus some sphere of influence, and he asks us to be faithful servants to those in this domain. We are to serve them instead of use them for our own benefit.

What would you do if you knew Jesus was returning tomorrow? Here's what you should do. You should wake up tomorrow and go about your normal duties assigned to you by God. Start the day by remembering and celebrating God's grace to you. You have a place of refuge from the flood of judgment that must come upon sinners, and that refuge is your Savior Jesus. You would never have come to him for refuge apart from God's pursuing you and bringing you into his family. And then go about your normal business. If you have a job, go to work and be faithful to the work assigned you by God. Do it with all your heart as unto God. If you're a student, go to school and be faithful to be the best learner you can. If you're a stay-at-home mom, manage your household faithfully, nurturing your children and praying for them. Just be faithful to what God has given you to do, no matter how small or big the assignment.

And tomorrow just might be the day that he does come. Perhaps it will be while you're drinking your morning coffee, or maybe when you are taking your children to school. It could happen at lunchtime or during rush hour traffic tomorrow afternoon. Are you ready? I can't think of a more important question.

CONCLUSION:

On Reformation Sunday, we remember the *solas* of the Protestant Reformation, and these equip us to be ready for Christ's return. Scripture tells us of Jesus' inevitable and imminent return. And the Scriptures tell us that it is by grace alone and through faith alone that we are delivered from the flood of God's wrath. By Christ alone it is all secured for us. Because of Christ, his return is good news to us.