

The Second Coming of Jesus

Matthew 24:29-51

Mark Vroegop

29 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 30 Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, 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. 31 And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

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.

36 "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. 37 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.

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.

This week I attended the funeral of Larry Rose who died after battling cancer for years. As his children shared testimonies, scripture was read, the gospel was preached, and great hymns sung, I found myself overcome with this thought: I hate death. My feelings reached a crescendo when we listened to "In Christ Alone" and heard these words:

No guilt in life, no fear in death
This is the power of Christ in me
From a life's first cry to final breath
Jesus commands my destiny

No power of hell, no scheme of man
Could ever pluck me from His hand

'Til He returns or calls me home
Here in the power of Christ I stand

I was overwhelmed with a sense that our world is broken, deeply marred by the presence of sin, and I found myself hating what sin does in my life, in the lives of others, and in our world. I was moved to tears with a longing for Christ to come back, raise the dead, and restore things back to the way that they should be. I was craving for what Revelation 21:4-5 describes:

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev 21:4-5).

Have you ever felt like that? A funeral made me long for the completion of salvation – to be saved, not only from personal sin, but to be saved from the very presence of sin. Death made me long the Second Coming.

For the last few weeks we've been looking at the subject of the End Times, and today we are considering a passage that helps us answer some important questions about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. There are three questions that we'll answer today: What will Christ's return be like?, How close is it?, and What should we do?

What will Christ's return be like?

After describing the experience of the disciples and all believers in his absence (vv 4-14) and an unparalleled season of anguish and hardship (vv 15-28), Jesus turns to the specific dynamics of his Second Coming. This is what they have been waiting for since verse 3 when they asked, "What will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?"

Three words could summarize what Jesus says here: cosmic, public, and redemptive.

1. It will be cosmic (v 29)

Christ's return doesn't just involve human beings; it affects the entire creation. Therefore, cosmic events serve as a warning or sign that the end is near.

Specifically, Jesus says that there will be fundamental changes to the sun, moon, and stars – the great lights of the heavens. In this respect, the sun, moon, and stars are more than just objects in the sky; they are signs of a season of change. Genesis 1:14 says, "...and let them serve as signs to mark the seasons, and days, and years..." No wonder that the second coming of Jesus is marked by 1) the darkening of the sun, 2) the absence of moonlight, and 3) stars falling from heaven.

Great cosmic disturbances are happening, and it is summarized with this statement: "the powers of heaven will be shaken." These cosmic disturbances portend the judgment of God, and the shaking cosmos is signaling both the limitations of humans and the power of God which should lead those hearing this to be watchful and reverent. The books of Hebrews has the same theme:

25 See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. 26 At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." 27 This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:25-29).

Both the signs and the prediction about the signs call for spiritual alertness!

2. It will be public (v 30)

The second characteristic is the public nature of Christ's Second Advent. Verse 30 indicates that a sign will appear. The meaning of this sign could be either the Second Coming itself, the trumpet sound, or something else that is very obvious. The point is not the particular nature of the sign, but the public nature of the event. The effect of this sign is that the world ("all the tribes of the earth") will mourn in fear of what they see and its frightening implications.

The final public description – "coming on clouds" - is familiar biblical language connecting clouds, power, and glory (cf. Acts 1:9-11, Rev 1:7, Exodus 13:21-22). In the same way that "shaking" summarizes the message of the cosmos, the statement "coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" summarizes this message. Jesus is coming in power and might, and it will be obvious.

3. It will be redemptive (v 31)

With all of these cosmic disturbance and demonstrations of power, you might think that Jesus's Second Advent is just about judgment. However, verse 31 says that Jesus sends out his angels, and that a loud trumpet blast (often used for announcements – Ex 19:16, call to worship – Lev 25:9, and battle cry – Josh 6:4) will signal the gathering of his followers from every corner of the globe ("from the four winds").¹ For those who have a personal relationship with Christ, the return of Christ is the culmination or consummation of their redemption. In

¹ This is one way to view the "rapture" passage in 1 Thess 4:17 – as a posttribulational event which coincides with the Second Coming of Christ.

fact, the Second Coming is part of the process of bringing salvation to its completion. Peter reflected on this in his first letter:

According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time...13 Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:3-6, 13).

Again, notice how closely connected the promise of Christ's return is linked to both the completion of God's plan of salvation and the call for spiritual watchfulness.

The return of Jesus Christ is a spectacular event demonstrating the sovereign plan of God, the power of the resurrected Christ, the coming judgment of sin, and the redemptive rescue of the followers of Jesus. It will be spectacular, global, frightening, and hopeful depending on which side of God's judgment a person is on.

How close is it?

The second subject that Jesus addresses is the nearness of his return. Verses 32-41 point back to the environment or the context of life between the ascension and the Second Coming of Christ. In other words, Jesus is explaining what their attitude and mindset needs to be toward his return while they are living in his absence.

So, how close is Jesus's return? The answer from the text is this: **closer than you think.** Jesus says that his return is near, and it will be unexpected.

Closer...

In verse 32 Jesus uses the parable of the fig tree to encourage his disciples to anticipate and look for his coming. A fig tree, like any other tree, would begin to get buds in the spring that anticipate the full bloom of the summer months. In the same way, Jesus says that the environments and the events of verses 32-41 (i.e., suffering, betrayal, wars, earthquakes, abomination of desolation) indicate the nearness of His return. Verse 33 states it pretty clearly: "When you see all these things you know that he is near, at the very gates."

The disciples were to live with a constant anticipation of Christ's return. In fact, verse 34 says that "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." So how do we take

this verse? Historically there have been three ways and they are directly connected to how you read the Olivet Discourse²:

1. One way (Past/Preterist) to take the passage to mean everything did in fact take place in the lifetime of the disciples. This view sees verses 29-31 through allegorical lens to refer to Christ's entrance into heaven and the destruction of Jerusalem.
2. Another way (Futurist) is to take "generation" to refer to the Jewish nation or those alive during the tribulation thereby disconnecting the fulfillment to the disciples' lives.
3. I prefer to see this passage as being typologically fulfilled in the life time of the disciples with future fulfillment in the future. This view (past-future) allows for "all these things" (vv 4-28) to be fulfilled and usher in a season of great anticipation.

Therefore, the followers of Jesus should view the return of Jesus through a lens of immanency which means that he could return at any time.³ Additionally they should maintain their confidence and hope because Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Keep in mind why Jesus is saying all of this! He wants to awaken watchfulness in their hearts. Their spiritual posture should be one of confident and expectant longing for his Second Coming - an event which is close...closer than they might think.

...than you think

The second thing that Jesus says about his return is that it will catch many off-guard. Some will predict his return and be wrong. Others (far more) will simply live as if the second coming is never going to happen. Jesus urges his disciples to not be in either camps, but instead to be continually prepared.

The return of Christ is a mystery even in heaven. The event is completely controlled by the Father's timetable: "concerning the day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son but the Father only" (v 36). Signs might indicate that it is close and getting closer, but Jesus doesn't return on his own volition; the Father determines the timing.

However, the greater danger is a far more common tendency to simply live day after day, week after week and year after year as if Christ is not really returning. The error is living as if there is no ultimate and eternal accountability. To make this point clear, Jesus uses the metaphor of the Days of Noah which was a season of unprecedented sinfulness and unparalleled judgment by God (cf, Genesis 6-7). The mental image is intentional: normal, daily living that is interrupted by sudden and devastating judgment.

² See last week's sermon: <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/the-abomination-of-desolations/>

³ Some argue that immanency has to mean "at any second." But the range of meaning can also mean that Jesus could come and might come at any time; therefore we are to be ready (see Grudem, Systematic Theology p. 1096).

37 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 (Matt 24:37-39)

Next, Jesus gives the Noah-Judgment motif a more contemporary feel. Instead of a flood, he pictures a sudden separation of his followers from those in the world. Jesus talks about two men in field; one is suddenly taken, leaving the other behind (v 40). He talks about two women grinding at the mill; one is suddenly taken and the other is left behind (v 41). Jesus wants for them to feel the weight and the urgency of this moment, and to be warned about going about life too casually and without thought of what could happen.

The point here is pretty simple: **God's judgment in the coming of Christ is completely unanticipated.** There is a danger in assuming that because the date is not specific or because it has been a while since his departure, Jesus is not coming soon. Our Lord aims to increase their anticipation of his return and urge them to be ready.

His coming is closer than they think, and he wants them to keep alert. The anticipation of his sudden return is meant to shock them into being awake – to get their attention.

I saw a video some time ago that helped me catch what I think Jesus had in mind here:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmLhyPjHVes>

What should we do?

Now that Jesus hopefully has our attention, we can address the final question which is “what should we do?” It flows out of the anticipation of the sudden return of Jesus when we were going about our regular, earthly lives. His return is going to be glorious, powerful, obvious, and unexpected.

Verse 42 begins with the important word “therefore.” And what follows are two areas in which believers could fail: spiritual dullness and unfaithful service. Jesus calls his followers to stay awake and to be faithful.

Be watchful

To be watchful is the same thing that Jesus will say to his disciples during his prayer of agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:38-41). It literally means to not sleep or wake up. But in this context it means to be spiritually vigilant. It means to be pulled out of a spiritual stupor or sleepiness.

I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God (Rev 3:1-2)

He then uses an illustration of how a master would respond if he knew that a thief was coming sometime during the night. Verse 43 says, "he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into." In other words, the anticipation of what was imminent would have created certain actions on the part of the master. Jesus makes the application very obvious: "Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (v 44).

So what does this look like? Peter gives us some great insight into that in 2 Peter 3.

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. 11 Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be **in lives of holiness and godliness**, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! 13 But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, **be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace** (2 Peter 3:10-14).

Spiritual watchfulness is not just to have your eye on the sky; it is having an eye on your heart. It means to read your Bible and the newspaper with a longing for Christ to come not only so you can "get out of this mess" but also because you long to be near the one who cleaned up THIS mess (me!)

Be Faithful

The second and final thing that Jesus says here is about faithfulness. Watchfulness for his return should result in daily faithfulness. Our Lord calls his disciples to anticipate his return **and** to actively live as his disciples.

To make this point clear, Jesus sets up a contrast between two servants – one is faithful, the other is not. Both servants are given roles in the house of the master, but they do not act the same way.

The faithful servant (vv 45-46) consistently does what his master has asked him to do – "to give them their food at the proper time." He is taking care of the other servants, and he is called "blessed" when the Master returns to find him being faithful. In fact, he is rewarded for his faithfulness. "He will set him over all his possessions" (v 47).

The wicked servant (vv 48-51) is a different story. Although he is given a position of authority and responsibility, he neglects his role because he thinks that the master is delayed in coming (v 48). The absence of the master gives the servant license to show his true colors. Verse 49 paints a bad scene: "he begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards." The servant's lack of watchfulness creates abusiveness and lasciviousness.

The servant's lack of concern is an affront to the master. The result is surprising and stern judgment.

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 (Matt 24:50-51).

The overwhelming tone of judgment here pretty clearly indicates that the wicked servant who was guilty of a lack of watchfulness and a lack of faithfulness is excluded from the kingdom. In other words, watchfulness and faithfulness are not "add-ons" to the disciples' life; they are central to it. Be sure you get that!

Grow in Grace and Knowledge

It has been said that the true test of character is who you are when no one is looking. Well the true test of discipleship is how you live when the Master is away. Jesus will return in power and glory. One day, death will be no more. But until then our calling is to be watchful and faithful because his return will always be closer than we think.

In light of all this, heed the words of Peter:

11 Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God...But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace...17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (2 Peter 3:11-18)

May God help us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ until and in light of his return.

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