

# THE (TIME OF) THE TRIUMPH OF GOD IS UNKNOWN BUT ANTICIPATED BY GOD'S PEOPLE

## Matthew 24: 33-51

### INTRODUCTION

Two weeks ago, when we began our study of Matthew 24 I told you that this may be the most controversial chapter in the Bible among those who believe the Bible is the word of God. There are about a half dozen different opinions about what this chapter has to say about the end of the world. I've attempted to stay with what Jesus says in this text without referring to the dozens of other passages that people often refer to in explaining what Jesus means here. That method has led me to a certain understanding of what the end of the world is going to look like. I know that while most of you are not familiar with and probably don't care about all the various opinions regarding the end of the world, I think it is important, before we conclude our study on this chapter, to talk about how we are supposed to relate to and fellowship with other true Christians who disagree with us about things like the rapture of living Christians and the millennial reign of Jesus. There are many things that true Christians disagree about and it's important that we agree on how we will disagree and what our disagreements mean.

Let me begin by describing a way of categorizing doctrine that has been very helpful to me through the years. I was first told this by Dr. Alan Scholes in a class on doctrine I took many years ago. If we are going to get along with one another, we need to understand the difference between convictions, beliefs and opinions. Convictions are those ideas, values or doctrines for which I will die or over which I will break fellowship. Convictions are things that I have thoroughly studied and about which the word of God is clear. I am as certain about these things as it is possible to be certain and I will not change my mind about them. A few examples would be, God is a Trinity, Jesus is both fully God and fully man, forever joined in one person, human beings are sinners by nature, unwilling and unable to obey God's law, Christ died in the place of sinners so that any sinner who trusts in Christ will be forgiven of their sins and declared perfectly righteous and only those who trust in Christ will be welcomed into heaven. These are things that if you give me a choice between death and renouncing them I will die. These are things that if someone believes contrary to them and yet claims to be a Christian, I will not cooperate with them, nor permit them to become a member of the church of which I am a part. We should have few convictions, compared to the number of beliefs and opinions we hold.

Beliefs are ideas, values and doctrines I have thought much about and studied thoroughly. I am convinced these are truths taught by the word of God and I will defend them as such and will seek to persuade others to believe them as well. I believe that to hold the contrary position is an error. However, I know that there are going to be many people in heaven who believe differently than I on these matters. While being clear about what I believe, I will be careful to not communicate that those who disagree with me are lesser Christians or inferior to me. It seems to me that questions surrounding the timing of the rapture of living Christians, the length of the Tribulation, the nature of the millennium all fall into this category. I am convinced that dispensational pre-millennialism, which is the theological system behind the "Left Behind" series, is an error. I do think that postmillennialism is an error or the view that everything Jesus mentions in Matthew 24 and the book of Revelation happened by 70 A.D. However, I am absolutely certain that heaven is going to be full of people who believe these doctrines. Therefore, I believe our church ought to be full of those who believe these things. The glory of Christ is not shown when local churches are made up of people who agree on every point of doctrine and every value and practice. The glory of Christ's redeeming love is shown most wonderfully when people who differ from another on important things, doctrines, politics, and life-style choices live together in love. In view of this, I need to ask some of you for forgiveness for the way in which I expressed my disagreement with those who believe in a secret rapture of the church last week. I spoke too strongly and critically in my disagreement with this position and for this I ask your forgiveness.

The final category of doctrine is my opinions. I have lots of them and most I have not studied in any great detail. While it is not wrong to discuss my opinions, it would be wrong to in any way communicate to those with a different opinion that they are wrong. Opinions are very liable to change based on growing knowledge and experience. The unfortunate reality in human relations is that many fractures in churches and between people take place over things which ought to be treated like opinions.

Having said all that, while there are many things in this chapter that true Christians disagree about, is there anything in Matthew 24 that every Christian ought to agree upon? Are there any doctrines here that really ought to be among our convictions? I would say that there is at least one thing that we all must agree upon, which is contained in all the historic creeds and confessions of the church and it is this: Jesus Christ, God's Son, the Son of Man, is going to come to this earth, personally, visibly and powerfully to judge the wicked, to save God's chosen people and to usher in the new heavens and the new earth. Regardless of what you might believe about the millennium or about the Tribulation or about the fate of Israel, all orthodox Christians must affirm this. (If you have any questions about these "end-time" issues that you would like me to address please write them out and turn them into me, the church office or the offering basket. I will do so either on Nov. 30 or at the next "Pizza with the Pastor.")

Let's turn our attention to Matthew 24: 33-51 which is Jesus' description of how we should live in light of the fact that he is going to return to this earth. In Matthew 24, after Jesus has explained to the disciples what kinds of things they can expect to happen during the years prior to his coming again and after he has described in brief, but familiar words, what will happen when he comes to make a new heavens and a new earth, now goes on to tell us to remain alert while we wait for his return. In vv. 32-51, Jesus gives us three reasons we should remain alert to his coming again. The central point is contained in v. 42 where he commands us to "keep watch". We are to live our lives here always ready for his coming again to save the elect and to punish the wicked. This morning we are going to examine why we should keep watch and how we should keep watch.

## MAIN POINT

**Christians are to stay alert because...**

### **I. Christ could come at any time (vv. 33-35)**

In v. 32 Jesus uses a different metaphor from the "birthing" process metaphor to communicate a very similar point. He tells us that our situation in relation to his visible return is like what we experience at the end of a long winter. We know that summer is coming when we see the branches on trees get tender and the buds begin to swell and put forth their leaves. Again, like the metaphor of labor pains, it is a picture of a present process that points to a certain end. Leaves begin to sprout and thereby, let us know that summer is coming. Then in v. 33 he makes the connection to what he has been saying. "When you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door." The "it" refers to the visible return of the Son of Man he just described in v. 31. Therefore, the "all things" includes everything else he has said except for vv. 27-31. So he tells the disciples when they see false Christs, false prophets, false teachers performing miracles, professing Christians deceived, famines, earthquakes, wickedness increasing in the church and the world, professing Christians abandoning their faith and betraying other Christians, the gospel being preached to all the nations of the world and the fall of Jerusalem, then they should know that the return of the Son of Man is near.

What does the word "near" mean? First we can say what it doesn't mean from vv. 34 and 36-44. It does not mean "in a very short time" or "immediately". First, we know this because he says that all the things he described in vv. 4-26 are going to happen to "this generation". The "all things" of v. 34 has to be the same as the "all things" of v. 33. What generation is he referring to? This phrase appears in Matthew, 6 other times and in every instance, it refers to the people living while Jesus is alive. There is no reason to understand it in any other way unless you have a presupposition you are trying to make when you come to the text. Jesus says that people to whom he is currently speaking are going to experience everything he described in vv. 4-26. All you need to do is read the rest of the NT and know about the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., to see that is exactly true.

Therefore, when Jesus says the return of the Son of Man is near, he does not mean immediately. Second, he says in v. 36 and illustrates the point in the following verses, that no one, including himself in his pre-resurrection state, knows the time of his return. Therefore, he does not know when he is going to return and so he cannot be saying I'm coming back immediately or right after the fall of Jerusalem. How could he say that when he doesn't know when he 's coming back? Therefore, "near" does not mean, "in a very short time". Nor, can it mean, right after the fall of Jerusalem or right after Israel becomes a nation again or right after the European union is formed or right after the rapture of the church, as then vv. 36-44 would make no sense. His coming is going to be completely unexpected. No one knows the hour of his appearing. Therefore, there can be no "sign" that says, OK, now we know, without a doubt, that Jesus is going to appear in the very near future.

What this word means is that the coming of Christ can happen at any moment. He is near, in the sense that he is prepared to return whenever the signal is given. Just like labor pains tell us that the baby is near and tender twigs and sprouting leaves tell us that summer is near, so all the deception and suffering of this age, all the missionary activity, tell us that Christ could come back at any moment. Everything is ready, he could come at any time, whenever the Father gives the signal. Dr. Don Carson, one of the world's leading evangelical NT scholars says the picture of a person who is walking along the edge of a cliff, parallel to it, illustrates the word "near". He is always near to the edge and it wouldn't take very much to push him over it. In the same way, Christ is always near to his return. We do not and cannot know if any one of the "birth pains" is the final one. We do not know if the appearing of this leaf means summer is here, now. We can only tell by what we observe in the world that his return could be at any moment.

In v. 35 Jesus says, that while heaven and earth are going to disappear when he returns, his word will never disappear. Why does he say this at this point? It doesn't seem to fit. There are at least two reasons. First, the disciples are about to be very disappointed by the death of Jesus. They are presuming that he is going to set up God's kingdom in a few days or perhaps weeks. Therefore, Jesus is assuring them that when they see these things happening they should not be afraid. He has told them in advance what is going to happen and they should not be troubled because all is happening according to his word. He is in control, even when it appears that all things are out of control. When they see false teachers and false Christians and earthquakes and humanity's existence threatened, they should not fear that his mission has failed. These are all part of the plan. Second, he is warning the disciples and us not to put our hope in the things of this world. This world is not permanent. It is temporary. Only his word is permanent. As we live in this world, with all its trouble and deception we should make sure that we are trusting in, depending upon the eternal and solid word of Christ, not the security of our job or our investments or our health or our political system. As the apostle John says, "The world and its desires pass away but the person who does the will of God lives forever." Whether you are living in a time when the whole world appears to be crumbling around you or you are living in a time when the world appears secure, you must always remember that this heaven and this earth are going to pass away when Christ returns. Therefore, the only certain thing is what God has said in his word.

May I be personal with you for a moment. What Jesus is telling me in this passage is that as I see my oldest son Jared, every day in our home in a minimally conscious state due to a skiing accident, I should think, the return of Jesus is near. This is not everything I should think, but it is what he commands me to think in these verses. He told me that when I see these kinds of things happening I should remember his word that he is coming again to punish the wicked and to save his people. I should not think that he is not in control or that he has abandoned us. I should not ask him why. I should look at my suffering son and rejoice that his coming is near. He is right at the door. This is what you should think when you experience tragedy or when you see deception and wars and famines.

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- *Christ could come at any time*
- *And because...*

## **II. We do not know when Christ will come (vv. 36-44)**

Immediately after telling the disciples and us that he could appear at any moment he tells them and us that no one, not the angels in heaven, not even he in his pre-resurrection, pre-glorified condition, knows when that day will occur. It is great error when anyone claims to know when Christ is going to return. Additionally, it is inaccurate to say while we cannot know the day or hour we can know the month, year or decade. The entire point of vv. 36-44 is that we will have no clue as to the immediacy of the return of Christ. While we know he could come at any time we can never know if it is at this time. All who say that the return of Christ is more likely in our day than it was in any other day are doing exactly what Jesus says you cannot do in these verses. The only certain thing we can say is what the apostle Paul says in Romans 13. Today is closer than yesterday. There is a clock ticking down to the end of the world in heaven and we are closer to that day today than we were yesterday but there is no sign that can tell us if it is more likely in our lifetimes than it was likely in the lifetime of the apostles.

Jesus next gives two illustrations of how surprising and unexpected the return of the Son of Man is going to be. It will be just like in the days of Noah. People were going about their daily business, eating, drinking, going to parties, marrying, going to work. They lived as if their way of life was never going to end, as if they would never have to give an account of their lives to God. Their entire focus was upon this world and its pleasures and pains. They gave no thought to the fact that God had decreed an end to their existence by the flood, even though Noah told them this was the case. The day that Noah and his family entered the ark and God closed the door was like any other day. There will be no warning, the world will be going about its business and suddenly, like lightning flashing in the sky, Christ will return and this world will end. On that day two men will be at work on the assembly line at the GM plant, suddenly, one will be taken and the other one will be left. On that day, two moms will be watching their children play at the park, one will be taken and the other one will be left. On that day, two students will be sitting next to each other in class, one will be taken, the other one will be left. There will be no warning, just like in the days of Noah when Noah and his family entered the ark and were taken from this world into salvation while the rest of the world perished in the flood. So it will be when the Son of Man returns. The angels will gather the elect out of their daily, mundane, ordinary lives and they will be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. They will meet the Lord in the air and then Christ and his angels will pour out the wrath of God upon the inhabitants of this world, making all of his enemies, a footstool for his feet.

The second illustration is that of a homeowner who is robbed. If a homeowner knew when he was going to be robbed he could set the alarm to wake him up at that hour and only stay awake during that period of time. However, no one knows when the thief is going to come. Thieves do not tell their victims the hour they are going to show up. They don't even give them a period of time, such as, "I'll be coming to rob you between 1am and 3 am" so that the homeowner only has to stay awake for a short period. No, the only way to keep thieves at bay is to continually be alert and to protect yourself by locking the doors, installing alarm systems, paying the police, etc. You don't know when the thief might come so you incorporate activities into your daily routine to prevent the thief from gaining access.

When we moved from LaCrosse, WI to Champaign, IL we quickly discovered that we had moved into a very different city and environment. In LaCrosse, we never locked our doors or closed our windows in the summer time. We left our children's toys and bikes laying out in plain view in our yard all the time. We never thought about being robbed. However, one month after we moved into our home in Champaign we called the children into dinner on a beautiful, sunny, September day. They dropped their bikes and toys in the driveway and came into dinner. After we ate, Jared and Justin ran outside to keep playing and were immediately back in the house sobbing, as their bikes were gone. We went into the neighborhood and started asking our neighbors, who were out in their yards, if they had seen anything. We discovered that four boys came riding down our street on two bikes from one direction and were seen riding the other direction on four bikes. A month after that episode, I came home late one evening from a meeting. Jane and all the children were in bed. It was a warm night and all the windows were open and I left the back door open. I sat on the couch to read the days paper when suddenly I heard a weird sound from the kitchen. I walked around the corner and there was a very large man standing in

my kitchen, looking at the microwave. I asked him what he was doing and told him to get out of my house. I grabbed him, turned him around and pushed him out the back door. He began telling me he was homeless and that I needed to help him. I just pushed him out the door and locked it after him. After searching the basement for accomplices, I stopped by the back window and heard glass breaking in my neighbor's driveway. I called the police and immediately three squad cars surrounded my neighbor's house and they caught my home invader pulling the stereo out of my neighbor's car.

After these two episodes, we began a nightly routine of locking all of our windows and doors, picking up and putting all of the toys in the locked garage. We were continually aware of strangers in the neighborhood and called the police on a regular basis to report suspicious activity. We have many stories of thievery and attempted thievery in our nine years living there. We never knew when we might become a victim of another crime and so we were continually on the watch while we went about our daily lives. That is a perfect picture of what Jesus is telling us to do in vv. 36-44. We do not know when he is going to come. That doesn't mean that we stop living our lives. You don't protect yourself from thieves by sitting on the porch with a shotgun 24/7. We are not to quit our jobs, sell our possessions and live in communes to wait for his coming. We're not all supposed to be missionaries or buy a house in the country and stock up on food. I love what the great reformer Martin Luther said when asked what he would do if he knew that Jesus was going to come tomorrow. He said, "I'd plant a tree." On the other hand, we are not to become negligent and complacent as if he was never going to show up. As John Calvin says in his commentary, "The apparent delay of Christ's return should excite us to watchfulness not encourage us in slothfulness." We are to go to work, marry, raise families, pursue careers. However we are to do it, always watchful. Always aware that Jesus could come at any moment. Our hope for happiness is not fixed on success in this world but on appearing before the judgment seat of Christ blameless and pure. We place in our daily lives activities and reminders that Christ could come at any time and so we are always prepared for his return.

What we are not to do is to engage in endless speculation about what this event or that event means about how close the end of the world has come. That is not part of being prepared. The whole point of these verses is that there is no way to know if it is going to be today or in the near future. We don't know when the thief might come, only that he could come at any time. Therefore, we daily lock the doors and windows. We daily are aware of strangers. Live your life and put in place the daily activities of Bible reading, family worship, private prayer, Christian fellowship, confession of sins, loving other Christians, caring for the poor, praying for world missions, giving money to the cause of Christ, to make sure you are watchful and always prepared for Christ's return. What daily activities show that you are watching for the return of Christ?

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### **III. Everyone will give an account to Christ for how we lived while waiting for him to come (vv. 45-51)**

Jesus uses another illustration in vv. 45-51, to help us think about what a watchful life looks like. He compares and contrasts two slaves. Both slaves are appointed as the chief steward over the master's entire household while he goes on a journey. He tells them to take care of his property and to manage the other slaves while he is gone. The first slave is called faithful and wise. He spends his days, during the master's absence, doing what he was assigned to do. He makes sure the other slaves are provided for and directed in their tasks. He uses his time and the resources entrusted to him to take care of his master's property. When the master returns from his journey he finds the slave going about the work, he was assigned. The master rewards that slave with greater responsibility and a higher position of honor in his household upon his return. The second slave is called an evil slave. He is evil because first, he begins to reason falsely within himself. He concludes that since the master hasn't returned yet, then his return must be a long way away. In fact, it is clear by what he does that he

is persuaded that his master is not ever going to return. The evil slave looks at the absence of the master as evidence that the master will never return. The faithful and wise servant remembers the master's promise that he was going to return and ignores the fact he hasn't yet returned. The main difference between these two slaves is that one believes what the master said while the other one does not believe the word of his master.

Then, out of his unbelief he begins to treat his fellow slaves with cruelty. He lords it over them. He abuses his power and privilege and rules over them harshly. He begins to use his master's resources to pursue the pleasures of this life. He holds great parties and indulges in satisfying his appetite for the best foods and wines. Then, just as he said, the master returns and finds his slave, whom he entrusted with his property, who promised to care for his property, abusing his position and his master's property. The master, justly, destroys him and throws him into hell, into eternal, conscious suffering. What is critical for us to observe here is again that the first and great difference between these slaves is that one believes the masters' word that he will return and so he lives in accord with that promise. The other one does not believe the master's promise and so pursues a lifestyle that exhibits that unbelief. The evidence of faith is faithful and wise service in the interests of the master. The evidence of unbelief is mistreatment of fellow slaves and pursuit of the pleasures of this life.

Listen to me. Not getting along with other Christians proves that you do not believe that Christ is coming back. When you judge and criticize and do not love other Christians you do so because you don't believe that Christ is going to call you to account for how you treat others. Second, when you spend your time and money on leisure and houses and food and sporting events and drink and hobbies and computers and vacations and clothes and TV and spend no time and money on building the kingdom of God you are simply revealing that you have no faith. When you live as if happiness can be found here, on planet earth, and do not spend any time investing in the pleasures of heaven, you are living as the evil slave. Faith in the promises of Christ always produces a lifestyle of love towards other Christians and a life that invests time, money and emotion in the building of Christ's kingdom. It means sacrifices are being made in our lives in order to advance the interests of Christ in the world. We don't all do it the same way, but we all must be doing it, if we believe that the master is going to return. There is a distinct and radical difference between how faithful and wise slaves live and how evil slaves live. What are you doing, each day that shows you are being faithful and wise in the use of the master's resources, in caring for your fellow slaves?

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