

“The Son of Man Will Return”

*Daniel 7:13–14; Matthew 24:1–3, 30-35;
Matthew 25:1–13*

Yes, he is coming. Are you ready?

When we come to the Bible, we find that some of it is pretty straightforward -- we can understand it without too much trouble. But other portions of Scripture defy us and tie us up in knots as we try to make sense of what we read. Chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew are clearly among the latter -- challenging and difficult, made more so by our ignorance of some vital context. You might take a few minutes and read chapter 24 for yourself. . . .



Ok, what is the chapter about? Nearly everyone I’ve met would answer, “Jesus’s second coming, of course.” This is especially true in the aftermath of the *Left Behind* series of books. . . . However, you would be wrong. Read again 24:1-2. Jesus predicts that the temple is going to be pulled down, stone upon stone. His disciples ask him for a sign to the timing of this cataclysmic event and Jesus begins a long discourse on what is to come. Now read 24:34, where Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” What!?!??

Over the years, I’ve read many attempts to explain away Jesus’ plain meaning -- namely, that the generation to whom he is speaking will live to see the events described in apocalyptic fashion in chapter 24. Why seek to explain it away? Because, if Jesus is talking to the disciples about his second coming, then he was wrong, for the generation of his disciples passed away a long, long time ago. We still await Jesus’ return and the consummation of his kingdom.

But Jesus wasn’t wrong, and he meant what he said!

Jesus’ phrase in v. 30, “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven,” is a quote from Daniel 7:13. In Daniel, the Son of Man is coming before the throne of God to receive his rightful authority and dominion over God’s creation. He is going toward God, not toward the earth. The direction of his “coming” in this passage is *upward* not *downward*.

Here is what is going on. Jesus had pronounced God’s judgment on the temple the day after Palm Sunday, just as Jeremiah had six centuries before. Four decades after Jesus’ pronouncement, when some of the disciples were still living, the temple was pulled down by Roman legions as they burned Jerusalem, just as the Babylonians had destroyed Solomon’s Temple in 587 BC, a few decades after Jeremiah’s pronouncement of God’s judgment. Thus, Jesus’ judgment on the Temple would be vindicated (shown to be in the right) by the destruction of the Temple, just as Jeremiah had been vindicated.

The Son of Man would be resurrected and exalted to the right hand of God (the ascension), both acts of vindication, for they showed that Jesus had been right in his claims to be Messiah and more. Similarly, he would be vindicated by the destruction of the temple.

That’s the whole thing in a nutshell, but as we make our way into chapter 25 of Matthew, we find that our minds turn increasingly to Jesus’ return, when he will be coming to earth to bring about the ultimate fulfillment of God’s kingdom.

So, is Jesus going to return? Of course! Are we ready?

If Matthew 24 is about Jesus’ coming before God, can we also expect him to come to earth, to return in judgment and mercy? Yes! That is the clear teaching across the New Testament, even if it is not the focus of Matthew 24. Acts 1, 1 Thessalonians 4, Colossians 3 and 1 John 3 all testify to this truth -- Jesus will return and we need to watchful and ready at all times, just as his first disciples were to do the same. So, in Matthew 25 is

Jesus beginning to speak of his second coming. Perhaps. Perhaps not. But we inevitably hear in these passages a challenge to be ready . . . even now, 1,951 years after the destruction of the Temple.

Given the predominance of type-A folks in our congregation, I'd bet staying prepared and alert are second nature for most of us, lessons applied countless times over the years. But how about in our faith, in our discipleship, in our life with Christ? Be prepared and stay alert? For what? What are we preparing for? What are we waiting for?

Simple: the return of our Lord. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16:22, *maranatha*, Come Lord! The Aramaic phrase Paul uses is a simple prayer for the return of Jesus, for him to come a second time, at which time God's kingdom on earth will come to its full consummation.

For two millennia, Christians have proclaimed that Jesus would return, bringing God's redemptive work to all its fullness. And for two thousand years we've waited . . . and waited . . . waited. Thus, it isn't surprising that some Christians (many Methodists like myself?) have never given the whole thing much thought. Yes, we affirm that Jesus is returning and could at any moment, but do we live that way? For many of us, it just doesn't seem very real and has no bearing on our life as a disciple.

Granted, there are some parts of the Christian family that seem consumed with Jesus' second coming, trying mightily to figure out when and even where. William Miller led Christians to upstate New York, having convinced them that Jesus would return there in 1842. He did not. Then, Miller did some refiguring and they headed back to the caves and fields on October 22, 1844 to await Jesus' arrival. But they waited in vain. The experience became known as "The Great Disappointment." The Seventh-Day Adventist denomination, with 18 million members, is a legacy of Miller's movement. Sadly, Miller and too many others fail to heed Paul's teaching in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 that Jesus would return like a thief in the night, which echoes Jesus' own teaching.

If neither ignoring the promise of Jesus' return nor obsessing over it is the way to go, then what do we do? To begin, turn to the story of ten bridesmaids in Matthew 25.

Be Prepared

Jesus tells the parable of the ten bridesmaids in the middle of a long teaching section just before he begins his final journey toward the cross. Jesus has many things to say to his disciples, including what he expects of his disciples after he leaves. He tells them a story about faithful and unfaithful servants (24:45-51) and then relates the parable of the bridesmaids. It is a straightforward tale. There are ten bridesmaids in all. They are told to wait for the bridegroom. All ten have lamps for the evening but only five have set aside oil also. They all fall asleep (no staying alert here). When the groom gets there, all ten rise and grab their lamps but, alas, five foolish girls have no oil to light their lamps. They have been caught unprepared. Eugene Boring fills in some of the pieces:

Right at the beginning of the parable of the ten bridesmaids, Jesus tells us that five of them were foolish, and five were wise. The reason why he tells us this from the outset is that we cannot tell this just by looking at them. All ten have come to the wedding; all ten have their lamps aglow with expectation; all ten, presumably, have on their bridesmaid gowns. We would never guess from appearances that half are wise and half foolish.

No, it is not the looks, the lamps, or the long dresses that sets the wise apart from the foolish—it's the readiness. Five of the bridesmaids are ready for the groom to be delayed, but the other five are not. The wise have enough oil for the wedding to start whenever the groom arrives; the foolish have only enough oil for their own timetable. Five are prepared and ready, even for a delay; five are not.

Readiness in Matthew is, of course, living the life of the kingdom, living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount. Many can do this for a short while; but when the kingdom is delayed, the problems arise. Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year when the hostility breaks out again and again, and the bridegroom is delayed. Being merciful for

an evening can be pleasant; being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires preparedness.

At the beginning of the life of faith, you cannot really tell the followers of Jesus apart. They all have lamps; they are all excited about the wedding; they all know how to sing, “Lord, lord.” Deep into the night, when we spot some persons attempting in vain to fan a dying flame to life, we begin to distinguish wisdom from foolishness.¹

Professor Boring is spot on. One could sum up the Christian life in this way: learn to distinguish wisdom from foolishness and then live it! And, thus, it sums up what it means to be prepared for Jesus’ return. Simply do as God has taught us, for God is Wisdom – love him and love others more every day, in all that we do and all that we say with all that we have and all that we are. This is what it means to Be Prepared. If we are growing in our discipleship every day, then every day we are becoming more prepared.

A beginning and an end

Even those who may know little else about the Bible are familiar with its opening: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, . . .” Most also know that God pronounced it good: “And God saw that the light was good; . . .” God created all that is -- all matter, all energy -- and, not surprisingly, it is a good creation. When God’s redemptive work is fully realized, the cosmic warp and distortion of sin will have been washed away; creation will be as God created it to be.

We should never forget that at “The End,” stands not an event or even a place, as wonderfully as that place might be depicted. Standing there is a person, the Lamb, Jesus the Christ. He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the substance of our hopes and the embodiment of God’s promises. However wonderful I might imagine eternity with Christ to be, I am imagining in black-and-white, compared to the wonders of God’s colors.

As hope-crushing as our present sufferings may be, the light of Christ, a light that shines with the brilliance of a thousand suns, beckons us and those we love to join him, now and forever. . . . *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*

¹ Boring, M. E. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Matthew. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 8, p. 451). Nashville: Abingdon Press.