

## Living While We Wait

Matthew 24:32-35

### Introduction

**How Should I Live?:** That is not a bad question. Theology should impact life. Sometimes we wonder what “practical” benefit theology has. Everything. What is more “practical” than reality? Theology tells us about God, from whom all things exist, are sustained, and are moving. It is God’s plan that determines the boundaries of all creation.

- Theology, then, rightly understood, is not a disconnected pursuit but really impacts our daily rhythms, choices, and desires. Ideas have consequences in the real world. They shape values, create culture, etc. We are all floating on the current of culture.
- We’re continuing our discussion of prophecy (last week’s signs of the times, when will the temple be destroyed, when will the “end of the age come”).

When we talk about “end times” (i.e., **eschatology**), it is easy for it to go in two problematic directions:

- One thing we can do, because it is disputed and many of the finer points (e.g., specifics of the millennium, timing of the tribulation, nature of the rapture), is **ignore the importance** of the end times. These are essential doctrines (e.g., return of Christ, resurrection of believers and unbelievers, judgment, eternal destinies, etc.).
- The other ditch is to **overemphasize disputed convictions** (e.g., soapbox, etc.). \*Never let the guy who really wants to teach on the end times teach on the end times.
  - The millennium is a period of complete peace that Christians like to fight about.

This sort of doctrine is not meant to distract you from what’s important or demotivate you from keeping the “main thing the main thing.” It is meant to encourage you to persevere during tough times. It’s meant to sustain your focus and your aim. It really is meant to **help you live better for Christ!**

- Suffering will happen, do you have a track (e.g., train) that will carry you through?

**Expectations:** Expectations are a killer (e.g., mail/packages, relationships, marriage). What do you expect? Life will be easy or full of tribulation? People will persevere or fall away? Jesus is telling us the truth so we won’t be discouraged.

### Living with confidence in the soon returning King.

- Non-anxious presence in an anxious world. “In this world you will have tribulation (trouble),” said Jesus. Most people respond by freaking out (even if it is “sanctified”). But for the Christian, whose hope is in Jesus, the troubles of this world do not touch our confidence. Our peace is rooted in the sovereign and gentle hand of our Savior.
- Jesus is coming back (and he’s going to fix everything when he does). There will be no more tears or pain, no more injustice or wrongdoing, so you can relax. Rather than freaking out, you can “be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6).

<sup>32</sup> “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. <sup>33</sup> So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>34</sup> Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. <sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

## 1. Living with Anticipation (v. 32-33)

<sup>32</sup> “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. <sup>33</sup> So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

**Lessons from a Fig Tree:** “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. Obvious illustration from an agrarian culture that we might miss the significance (last week we saw a childbirth illustration, \*more universal).

- His point is simple: the signs are not meant to discourage but to create anticipation (e.g., signs of labor).
  - Last week we saw that many of the signs were **negative** (e.g., falling away, abomination of the temple, tribulation of the elect). But *even the difficult things* should create a longing and anticipation for the return of Jesus.

**What Does It Mean to Live in the Last Days:** “All these things” (various signs described last week) just highlight how near Jesus is. Lots of things are gonna happen (don’t be deceived, don’t fall away, don’t give up).

- Not secret info, but *how to live now*. We live in the inaugurated latter days.

**Immanence:** <sup>33</sup> So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. At the gate! The coming (*parousia*) of Jesus is imminent. Don’t get worried on the precise timing as much as “nearness” (e.g., kids, “are we there yet”).

- The NT’s discussion of the end times is difficult because it affirms, simultaneously and equally, three facts that are sometimes hard to synthesize:
  - (1) **The time of Christ’s return is unknown**, even by Christ<sup>1</sup>, and will be **unexpected**<sup>2</sup>, like the coming of a thief at night.
  - (2) On the other hand, **there will be signs, so that believers will not be surprised, deceived, or caught unprepared**<sup>3</sup>.
  - (3) Despite the fact that these signs must happen before his return (and some have not), the NT has a very expectant attitude, **as if the return of Christ may happen very soon**<sup>4</sup>. \*Immanence
- So, Christ’s coming is **expected** by believers, i.e., us! (though unexpected for unbelievers).

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<sup>1</sup> Mk 13:32

<sup>2</sup> Matt 24:44, 25:13; Lk12:45-46; 1 Thess. 5:2-3; 2 Pet 3:10

<sup>3</sup> Matt 24:3-8, 14, 21-25, 29-33; 1 Thess 5:4-6; 2 Thess 2:1- 4

<sup>4</sup> Matt 10:23, 16:28, 24:34; Rom 13:12; 1 Thess 4:15, Rev 22:20

- What we see in this verse is a **model for how to live**: as if Jesus is about to come through the gates. He's at the door. He could come any minute.
- How would that change your choices today? Your priorities? Your urgency in evangelism? Your pursuit of holiness?
- What bitterness would you let go of? What person would you forgive?

How can believers be expecting the return of Christ if we do not know the exact time of his return? The only answer seems to be by **expecting it all the time, by living in a constant, continual state of readiness.**

- We can know that the Lord is near, at the door but it appears that this has been the case since the earliest Christians (Paul uses the same word for "near" in Phil 4:5: **Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand**).
- So, the only way to avoid being found unprepared is to watch continually and **always be prepared**.
  - Mom is coming home and I haven't done my chores.
- These warnings of the soon returning King are not meant to create fanaticism or arrogance but clear-headed watchfulness.

**Signs:** The Signs. If all this is correct, then what is the purpose of the signs? They do not allow us to calculate the date of the return of Christ, why are they given?

- (1) **Encourage us to persevere** (we're not at the finish line, keep going).
- (2) **Prevent us from being deceived** (either that the second coming isn't happening or when false prophets come along).
- (3) **Motivate us to action**. If we see some of the signs of Christ's return very evidently being fulfilled around us today, should we sell our belongings and go up on a mountainside to await Christ? No, we should be filled with an urgency to be about doing his will for us, whatever it is.
  - And what is his will? That the gospel would be proclaimed to all nations.
  - You do not know how much more time you will have to do his will, to complete the ministry he has given us.
  - When we watch for his return, our eyes shouldn't be on the signs of his return, but of the Lord of the signs.
  - And while we watch, we work to fulfill his calling in our lives.
- I just don't think the signs are really that easy to understand from our perspective. So many OT prophecies only made since *after* the resurrection (e.g., hindsight is 20/20). I think the 2nd coming will be somewhat similar. **The point is not to turn us into sign-hunters or prophecy detectives, but to create in believers a disposition of faithfulness in the midst of the trials of life.**

**Joyful Expectation:** Your view of God, your love of him, your desire to be with him will influence your attitude toward his return. If Jesus isn't the greatest treasure of your life, then his anticipated coming feels like an interruption. But **when Jesus is your greatest treasure you anticipate his return with joyful expectancy.**

- The NT rings with vibrant and joyful expectation of Christ's return (e.g., birth metaphor or Gary excited for Christmas).

- Do you live with the joyful anticipation of Christ? Or are there things in this world that grab your heart more deeply? Do you love and value Christ above all?

## 2. Living with Confidence (vv. 34-35)

<sup>34</sup> Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. <sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

**The Hard Verse, *This Generation*** : “This generation will not pass away”.

- For those of us who see clearly a promise for the future second coming (e.g., son of man coming in the clouds, etc) this is difficult (e.g., this generation, judea). There are still things that apparently need to happen before Jesus returns (e.g., gospel preached).
- But for those who see everything fulfilled in the first century (e.g., judea, temple destruction), the future stuff is tough (e.g., coming in the clouds).
  - Plus, what do you make of the fact that the end hasn't come?

If we say Jesus' return must happen within the first generation of those living after the resurrection then the rest of the NT appears to be wrong about it's promises of the future return of Jesus.

- Some scholars saw this **delay of his coming** (i.e., delay of parousia) as a theological crisis (especially in the late 19th and 20th centuries).
  - Some critics argued that the apostles believed he was coming back within their lifetime then started shifting theology upon delay?
    - Some started teaching that the return of Christ is a myth.
    - Some use this tension to deny the Bible's truthfulness.
- How do we answer such charges?
  - The short answer is simply that the NT writers did not see the delay of Jesus' second coming as a crisis. Peter answers the same complaint from the earliest believers (nothing new).
  - “This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 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” (2 Pet 3:1-10).

- **The Lord is not slow but patient.**
- Some scholars (e.g., Carson) posit that Jesus’ predictions in Matthew 24 are related to two prophecies: one about the destruction of the temple and one about the end times. The disciples asked two questions, one referring to the destruction of the temple and one to the end of the age. These scholars demonstrate that Jesus’ answers are intertwined and sometimes untangling them is complicated. This may be a helpful way forward.
- So, when we read “this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” we understand “these things” to be about the arrival of the signs of his coming: including the darkening of the skies at his crucifixion, the destruction of the temple (e.g., holy of holies at crucifixion or literal at 70AD).
- So while the NT does have a vibrant expectancy, there is no basis for saying there was clear teaching that Christ would return within a generation. How could there be when Christ had said clearly that no one knew the time of his return? Some of the apostles may have harbored a hope or even expectation that they would live till His return; that may be a model for the way all believers should live. But, there is no teaching in Scripture that the second coming would happen within a generation.

**Humble Confidence:** Again, the point of this prophecy from Jesus is not to get you and I to obsess over which signs have been fulfilled in which way, but to **create a life of persistent trust in the promises of God**. We live humbly (it’s all in God’s hands, not ours) and confidently (it’s all in God’s hands, not ours)!

- Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. God’s Word is a timeless truth that can be trusted.
  - In 1 Peter 1:24-25, the apostle quotes the prophet Isaiah<sup>5</sup> about God’s Word: “The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.”
  - The writer of Hebrews<sup>6</sup> describes God’s word thus: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”
- But here’s the thing, the Word of God *created* all that exists. The material world came into being when God spoke. His word both outlasts and stands in authority over everything we see.
  - Every promise that Jesus speaks, he speaks with divine authority and eternal validity.

BTW, this is why we take the posture we do to the word of God. We don’t read God’s Word as skeptical critics trying to dissect and disprove it but as humble disciples and students of Jesus,

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<sup>5</sup> Is 40:8

<sup>6</sup> Heb 4:12

finding in his Word the promises of our Savior. The Scriptures are like water in the dry and deserted land of our fallen world.

- Reading your Bible is not an obligation for the dutiful Christian but an invitation to hear from the living God.
  - Jesus used Scripture to deconstruct the impact of the world on the people of God. Many of us use the world to deconstruct the clear commands and gracious promises of Scripture.
  - **Stop being so defensive about God's Word.**
    - I'm less inclined (these days) to try and make the Bible appeal to the modern person and more inclined to show that the world of the Bible is the real world to which we are called to conform our thoughts, attitudes, and values.
  - The Bible gives us a vision for a new world, the real world, the eternal city. All of these earthly kingdoms will one day be gone, but God's word will last forever.
- We submit ourselves to Scripture, to live under its authority (not stand over it in judgment).
  - Sometimes we will feel like Noah, building his ark in the wilderness, as the people around him mock him. But he believed the Word of the Lord and acted accordingly.
    - We feel this when we preach sermons that say divorce is bad in a culture that has made peace with it.
    - When we uphold covenant fidelity (e.g., no porn, don't have sex before marriage) in a culture saturated in the ethics of the sexual revolution.
    - When we pursue peacemaking in a culture built on war and revenge.
    - When we model humility in a culture of ego and self-promotion.
    - When we follow a path of vulnerable authenticity in a culture of curated images.
- On the last day, when you stand before the Lord, you will not regret a single moment of trusting and obeying Jesus.
  - But, I suspect, you and I will regret many moments wasted in the ways of the world, many careless words, prayerless days, and worry-filled nights.
- What does it look like to live with humble confidence and complete trust in God's promises?

### **Conclusion:**

- We can have complete certainty that Christ is coming back. So we can confidently watch, patiently wait, and urgently work to see the gospel take deep root in our souls as we proclaim and demonstrate it both near and far.