

Ready For His Return

Matthew 24:42-25:13

Pastor John Miller

In this Olivet Discourse, in Matthew 24 and 25, Jesus is giving us the signs of His Second Coming. We need to remind ourselves, when we go through this section of Scripture, that it is a response that Jesus gave to three questions that were asked in Matthew 24:3. The disciples asked Jesus, “When will these things be?” That is, “When will Jerusalem be destroyed?” They also asked Jesus, “And what will be the signs of Your coming...”—that is, the signs that will precede His Second Coming or second Advent—“...and of the end of the age?” The word for “age” is “aión” or the Jewish age.

All the way through this series I have reminded you that when they ask, “What will be the signs of Your coming,” the disciples are asking about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. They’re not asking about the rapture.

You may ask, “What’s ‘the rapture’?” It is an event in which Christ will descend from heaven, and the bodies of the dead who have died in Christ will be resurrected. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul says that those “who are alive and remain” will be raptured—the Greek word is “harpodzo” or “caught up...to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

The reason I go into this is because I want to be absolutely clear that everything we will read about in this passage—its primary interpretation—is about the Second Coming and not the rapture. These words are written to those who will be alive during the tribulation, which occurs after the rapture, and to those who will be here on earth when Christ returns. All the signs in the Olivet Discourse about His Coming—the signs in the tribulation—will precede His Second Coming. So you need to keep these straight.

There is a lot of confusion today. People take rapture verses and combine them with Second Coming verses, or they don’t believe in a rapture but believe in a Second Coming. But Jesus introduced the rapture in John 14:2-3, when He said, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”

In 1 Corinthians 15:51, Paul the Apostle said, “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye....For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality....Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’” So Jesus is coming back to rapture the church.

The classic passage on the rapture is 1 Thessalonians 4, starting in verse 13. Paul says, “I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep...”—or “died”—“...lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus....And the dead in Christ

will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." The word is "harpodzo," which means "caught up."

So those are the classic rapture passages. But Jesus is not talking about the rapture in our text. I want you to keep the rapture and the Second Coming separate and distinct from one another. The rapture will happen, there will be seven years of tribulation, then at the end of the tribulation, Christ comes back in His Second Coming in power and glory.

In Matthew 24:32-36, Jesus gave us the parable of the fig tree. This parable was intended to tell us that those who are living during the time of the tribulation, when those signs will occur, will know that Christ's Second Coming "is near—at the doors!" Then in verses 37-41, we have the story of Noah and what life was like in those days. When God told Noah to build the boat, people were "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage." The wicked of Noah's day didn't expect a flood to come, but Noah and his family went into the ark, God shut the day, the rains came down and they were saved, while the wicked were swept away. They weren't living in expectancy and readiness.

So the question—which Jesus is answering—is, "Are you ready for Jesus' return?" Our key verse today is Matthew 24:44: "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." He's referring to the Second Coming or the second Advent at the end of the tribulation.

Now Jesus is going to teach us, in a series of parables, the importance of being ready for His return. Whenever you have a parable, it has one, main lesson. The one, main lesson in these parables is that we should be ready for His return.

Jesus gives us three parables in this section: the thief—about watchfulness, the servant—about faithfulness, and the ten virgins—about readiness. The parable of the thief will teach us to be watchful, the parable of the servant will teach us to be faithful and the parable of the ten virgins will teach us to be ready for Christ's return.

First, we'll look at the parable of the thief, verses 42-44. Jesus said, "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into." Here's the point: "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

As far as prophecy, signs and chronological order is concerned, this is a parenthesis. This is a parenthetical section where Jesus is actually telling us parables to basically teach us to be ready for His return.

Notice the principle of this parable in verse 42: "Watch therefore." Chapter 25, verse 13 opens with the same statement: "Watch therefore." So the principle is the same in all of these verses: "Be aware, be awake and be watchful."

“Watch therefore” takes us back to the days of Noah when the people weren’t expecting the flood to come, so they were all swept away in judgment. We also need to watch and be ready. The word “watch” means to be “keeping your eyes wide open.” Why? Because “You do not know what hour your Lord is coming.” So the principle in verse 42 is, “You must stay awake! You must stay alert! You must not go to sleep!”

It has as its first and primary application to the Jews, to Israel and to the tribulation saints, those people who missed the rapture but during the tribulation turned to God, trusted in Jesus and were looking for His return. These people needed to stay alert and keep watching for His return.

This parable starts in verse 43. “But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come...”—this is a story about a thief who is coming to rob a house—“...he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into.” Verse 44 is the practice or the application: “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man...”—that Messianic title for Jesus—“...is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

The interesting picture here is of the thief. Maybe someone has robbed your house, and you come home and find a back door open or a window broken. So Jesus said that it was just like a thief who comes in. If you knew when the thief was coming, you’d be watching and waiting for him, so you wouldn’t get robbed. But thieves don’t call to tell you when they’re going to rip you off. It would be the considerate and nice thing for them to do, but they don’t do that. So the thought here is that thieves come unexpectedly, and you’re not ready for them when they come.

The other day, I walked out of a store, and I thought someone had stolen my car. It was gone! I’m freaking out, but then I realized that I parked it in a different location. (Pray for me! Your Pastor needs help; he doesn’t remember where he parks his car.)

Now let me make something clear: Jesus is not a thief. He’s coming like a thief. He’s telling a story that illustrates you won’t be expecting Him when He comes. That’s the theme throughout these parables.

One of my goals in teaching through the Olivet Discourse is to be clear, to explain the passage. In its primary interpretation, this passage is not about the church, living today, waiting for the rapture. It is talking about Jews who will be on the earth during the tribulation. Some say that Jesus is leading up to the parable of the ten virgins, in chapter 25, in which He will judge Israel; the true Israel will be saved, and those who reject Messiah will be lost in the picture of the wise and foolish virgins. After the rapture, many Jews and Gentiles will turn to Jesus. There will be a time of great evangelism, and people will be saved.

People have this false idea that the Holy Spirit leaves during the tribulation. Not so. The Holy Spirit will be working, and people will be saved and coming to Christ in salvation during that time.

So Jesus is addressing the people who will be alive on the earth just before the Second Coming, during the tribulation. He is saying that they should be living in expectancy and

looking for the coming again of Jesus Christ.

You say, "Well, Pastor John, this doesn't have any application to us, as the church." Only in a secondary sense, because we don't know when the rapture is going to happen. The difference between the rapture and the Second Coming is that the rapture is imminent. Nothing has to happen before we get raptured—no signs. We're not looking for the Antichrist, we're not looking for the sun and the moon to be darkened. We're not looking for signs; we're looking for the Savior. Jesus Christ could come and rapture us before you finish reading this sermon.

I could dig that; I'm ready to go. When you love Jesus and you're living close to the Lord, any time is a good time to be raptured and be with Jesus Christ.

So Jesus is not talking to us, the church, about the Second Coming, but it still has application today in our world. You have to be ready for the rapture. If it happened today, would you get caught up? Are you a Christian? Are you ready?

You say, "Well, how do I get ready?"

"You get born again." Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again." That means you must be born from above. Nicodemus' race would not get him into heaven; being a Jew wouldn't get him to heaven. His religion wouldn't get him to heaven. His own righteousness would not get him to heaven.

How are we born again? Jesus said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up...that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

How do you get ready for the Lord to rapture you? You get born again by faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus died on the Cross for your sins. You must turn from your sins and believe that He died for you by receiving Him by faith. It's an act of your will by saying, "I trust in you, Jesus. I believe in you, Jesus. Come into my heart and forgive my sins and make me your child."

1 Thessalonians 5:1-8 is a marvelous parallel passage that gives clarity and application to the church. "But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren..."—He's writing to Christians, to the church, saying that he doesn't need to tell them the chronology, the characteristics or the seasons, because he's already given them the signs of the end times—"...you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night." The "day of the Lord" is not the rapture but is the tribulation. The tribulation period will come to them like "a thief in the night."

Paul continues, "For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape." I want to point something out in this verse. "They...them...they" refers here to non-Christians or unbelievers, who will go into the tribulation period and be caught by the thief unprepared. Now he talks to

the church, the believers: “But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.”

Notice the characteristics of this tribulation period. It comes “as a thief in the night,” verse 2. It starts with “peace and safety”; the Antichrist makes a covenant of peace with Israel for seven years. But “sudden destruction comes upon them”; in the middle of the tribulation there is the “abomination of desolation,” as “labor pains upon a pregnant woman” and “they shall not escape.” There is no escaping the tribulation, the “day of the Lord.” But this day will not overtake us, the church.

Why will the church escape? Verse 5, because “You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore, let us not sleep...”—because we’re children of the day, we’re not sleeping—“...as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.” That hope is the hope that one day we’ll be “caught up to meet the Lord in the air.”

In these verses in Thessalonians, Paul is saying that we’re children of the day, so we won’t go through the tribulation. We’re children of the light, so we won’t be caught unawares by the thief. But the idea is that we need to live watchfully.

So the main lesson of the parable of the thief is to watch out, be alert, stay awake. If you knew someone was going to rob your house, you would be awake, alert and watchful to prevent it.

The second story or parable is in verses 45-51, the parable of the two servants. One is faithful; the other is faithless, called the “evil servant.” Verse 45, “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season?” So this is a picture of a steward. “Blessed...”—or “happy”—“...is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing.” That’s the idea that you’re busy, you’re faithful, you’re doing what God has called you to do. “Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods.” The Bible says that “to whom much is given, much is required.” And when we are faithful in the small things, God will give us more things, and when we stand before that Bema, we will be rewarded.

Now we have the evil servant in verse 48: “But if that evil servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming’...” That’s what you don’t want to do; don’t forget about it or live in apathy or complacency or mock the idea of the coming again of Jesus Christ. You want to live in light of the Lord’s coming. But this evil servant is motivated by his thinking that the Lord has delayed his coming, so he—“...begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards...” We just read in 1 Thessalonians 5 that we’re children of the day, so we’re not sleeping and we’re not drunk. We’re sober and awake.

Notice verse 50: “The master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two...”—This is pretty graphic

language that Jesus is using here; it means to saw him in two—"...and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." There is no other way to interpret this than Jesus saying that they're going to go to hell. They're lost. If they reject Messiah when He returns, they will be judged; they will be the tares and not the wheat. They will be the goats and not the sheep. We will get into that in chapter 25.

In this second parable, Jesus tells the story of a homeowner, who is wealthy and has a lot of servants. He is going to take a trip, so he gives his servants jobs to do while he is gone. He wanted his servants to feed the household, to pay the bills and take care of everything. The first servant was faithful; he did what his master required him to do. He knew his master would come back, and there would be a day of reckoning. The second servant said, "Aw, he's not coming back for a long time," so he got drunk, ate and just hung out. He struck his fellow servants and wasn't faithful. Then when the master returned, he rewarded the faithful servant, but he punished the unfaithful, evil servant.

The application of this parable is that when Jesus comes back in His Second Coming, those believers on earth during the time of tribulation, made up of Jews and Gentiles, who are looking for Him to come again and are serving and faithful, while all hell is breaking loose on earth, are fixed on a city whose maker and builder is God. So should we be.

But the evil servant said, "No; the Lord's not coming back." In context, we just read about the same thing happening in Noah's day. They were "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage." They were going to soccer games, going to movies, going on vacation, buying new cars, buying houses—all of which are fine—but they were living as though the Lord would not come again. They were living like the flood would not come. They got caught unexpectedly when Noah entered the ark, the door was shut and the rain started to fall. They beat upon the ark door, saying, "Let us in! Let us in!" But it was too late. They weren't watching, they weren't faithful and they weren't ready. You don't work for your salvation, but they weren't saved by grace. But if you are truly saved, you'll show it by the way you live your life.

In Ephesians 2:10, right after Paul tells us we are saved by grace through faith, he says, "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

So the first lesson is to be watchful or stay awake. Beloved, don't go to sleep. The second exhortation is to be faithful. Let's roll up our sleeves and "work...while it is day; the night is coming when no man can work." Remember I told you that one of the reasons we study Bible prophecy is that it compels us to witness to our families, coworkers and our neighbors, to pray, to give, to serve and to do all we can to reach people, because Christ is coming again. So we are to be faithful until He comes.

The third story, clearly a parable, is commonly called the parable of the ten virgins. Without skipping a beat, chapter 24 flows right into chapter 25. There are no chapter divisions in the original text. The parable starts with a "then." When is "then"? When Christ comes back in

power and glory. Verse 1, “Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish.” We get our word “moronic” from that word “foolish.” Verse 3, “Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.” They were virgins who had lamps, and they had oil, but they didn’t have any backup oil. When the oil in their lamps ran out and their lamps went out, they didn’t have enough oil to light their lamps when the bridegroom showed up, so they were lost. “But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.”

“And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’ Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy...”—here’s the key text—“...the bridegroom came...”—they missed the bridegroom—“...and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.” So those who were ready got to go into the marriage feast.

“Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ But he answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.’” Here it is again: “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.”

I want to be faithful to the text, so again, He’s not talking about the rapture, so He’s really not talking to the church. It has a secondary application to the church, because we need to be ready for the rapture, but here He is talking about the tribulation period. He’s talking about Jews who turn to Christ but primarily to those who don’t turn to Christ—whether Jew or Gentile. I think the primary focus of this parable of the ten virgins is the Jews who don’t believe in Jesus, and even though they are in the tribulation experiencing the time of Jacob’s trouble, they don’t trust the Lord, look to the Lord or expect the Lord to return. As a result, they are cast into hell. It’s so very important to keep this in proper perspective.

I want to make it clear that the virgins don’t represent the church. Yes, the church is the virgin bride of Christ. And, yes, in the rapture, He is coming back to take the church. But based on this parable, He is not giving a partial-rapture teaching. At the end of the series, I’m going to do an in-depth study on the rapture, because I want you to understand it.

When the rapture happens, if you are saved, you’re going up. If you’re not saved, you’re not going up. The rapture is not for the “super saints.” The rapture isn’t for the “deeper-life club.” I heard a preacher once say that when the rapture happens, if you’re not actually looking up, you wouldn’t be raptured. I thought, That’s insane! If that were the case, Christians would always be walking around with their heads tilted back and their eyes looking up. That’s not Biblical; that’s just stupid.

If you are saved, you are a part of the church; you’re born again, a child of God, so you’re going to get raptured or “caught up to be with the Lord.” Don’t sweat it. It doesn’t mean you have to

pray 10 hours a day and hope you'll get raptured. You will get raptured.

But during the tribulation, there will be people who won't believe in Jesus, won't trust Him. They're like the foolish virgins, who won't be prepared and will be lost when the Lord returns.

You ask, "Well, does it have any application for us today?"

Yes, it does. That is that we, the church, need to be ready for the rapture. But that is not what this parable is talking about. Remember that the thief does not announce when he comes.

Weddings are always beautiful and fun and glorious. The bride is always beautiful; the grooms sometimes need help. But in the Bible days, you never knew when the wedding was actually going to happen. A couple would be espoused for one year, and they would be legally bound during that period. We call it an engagement, but that is not legally binding. In the Bible days, they would be espoused, and anytime during the end of that espousal period, the wedding could happen. So the bride had to actually be ready for the bridegroom to pick her up.

This parable is not about the bridegroom or the bride. It's about the bridesmaids. These ten virgins would be called bridesmaids today. They had to be ready when the wedding was going to take place. So what that means is that when the bridegroom would come with his bride—and they didn't know when that would be—they would collect the bridesmaids and then go on a procession through the night with their lamps to the place where the wedding ceremony and feast would take place. This celebration lasted for one week.

In weddings today, you have the ceremony and feast, and then the bride and groom split. When I got married, it was like, "Let's hit the road. Let's get out of here! Let's get this show on the road!" So my wife and I jumped in my '66 VW bus to go on our honeymoon. We were about halfway to our destination when the front tires blew up. I wasn't ready. If I had it to do over again, I'd get a nicer car in which to take my wife on our honeymoon. What can you say? Poor preacher, hippie boy.

But in Bible days, the groom would show up and people would say, "The groom's here!" and the groomsmen would have to wake up. If you woke me up at midnight, I'd say, "Forget it; I'm not going to your wedding! I'm sleeping. Leave me alone!"

So their lamps would be lit. These lamps weren't torches. They weren't pirate lamps. They were like little Aladdin lamps made out of clay filled with olive oil and had a wick coming out the end. They would fill the lamp with oil and light the wick.

There are interesting similarities in this parable. All the bridesmaids were virgins. They all had lamps. They all knew the bridegroom was coming. But only five of them were ready. The other five were foolish, because they didn't have extra oil, and their lamps burned out. The wise virgins had extra lamp oil, so they refilled their lamps and they kept burning bright. So these virgins were living in expectancy, living in preparedness. They knew the wedding could happen at any time.

It's like someone who says, "I'm coming over Saturday."

"What time are you coming?"

"Oh, just sometime Saturday."

"Well, can you be more specific?"

"No. Just be ready. I'll come by to pick you up."

Once I was returning a call to a friend, and his wife said that he was in the shower. I thought, Well, how long does he shower? I wanted to take a shower myself. I remember I needed to jump in the shower. I thought, Do I just wait and not shower, knowing he'd get out of the shower and call me? Or do I shower, I'll miss him and then I'd have to call him back? I really freaked out over this. So I just decided to wait to take my shower, because I'm waiting for him to finish his shower and call me back. So I had to wait in expectancy. It's like someone who says, "I'll call you back." You don't want to get preoccupied with other things, because you're waiting for their return call.

This is the idea: we ought to live this way as Christians. Jesus is coming, but we don't know when. We need to be living in constant expectation of His coming.

In verse 10, Jesus drives home the point. He said, "And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut." Those who weren't ready, came later, pounding on the door, and said, "Lord, Lord."

In Matthew 7:22-23, Jesus said that there is going to be that day when "Many will say to Me... 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" Jesus didn't have a personal relationship with them.

So verse 13 says, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming."

Romans 13:11-14, in the epistles, is a picture that applies to us, the church. Paul says, "Knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore, let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy." But here's what you should do: "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts."

This is one of the most important cross references as to how we should live as Christians. Don't make any provision for the flesh. Jesus is coming again, so there's no time to go out getting drunk. There's no time to be sleeping around. No time to be living for the world.

There's no time to be living lackadaisically, carnally or apathetically. It's time to be watching, working and to be ready for the Lord's return. It's so very important.

Be watchful; He's coming. Be faithful; serve Him with the talents God has given you. Be ready; don't be like the foolish virgins. In the Bible, oil is the symbol for the Holy Spirit. So you need to be born again. The best way to be ready is to be born again. You have to have the Spirit of God living inside you.

The only way to be born again is by faith in Jesus Christ. If you're not born again, you're not saved. If you're not saved, you're not going to get raptured, and you'll be here for the tribulation. If you want to get "caught up...to meet the Lord in the air," then you need to be born again. Just as Nicodemus was told that he needed "to be born again," you need to be born again.

How are we born again? Jesus died for you, He was buried and rose from the dead. You trust Him and Him alone for your salvation. It's only through faith in Christ that we can be forgiven and be prepared for His return. So we put on "the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation."

You say, "Well, I thought we were already saved the moment we believed in Jesus." We've been saved—justification, we're being saved—sanctification, and we will be saved, future tense—glorification. That's what Paul means when he says, "Now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand."

I don't know about you, but as I have studied these verses these last several weeks, my heart has been stirred once again to live in expectancy and hope that Christ is coming again.