

Stay Awake!

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[0 : 0 0] Let's ask God for his help.

Father, as we look at this passage today, please would you wake us up. Father, help us not to be drowsy at this moment. Help us not to be distracted.

But Father, we pray that your word would indeed be living and active and pierce our hearts. Wake us up to the reality of who you are and how we should live for you.

So Father, we pray that we would now come with expectant hearts to receive from you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now many years ago, I was at boarding school and it was right in the middle of exam season.

And I was sick of studying by that point. So one afternoon in between papers, I borrowed my friend's laptop, I brought it to my room, and I started playing computer games.

[1 : 1 7] Championship manager, if you are curious. So certainly there was a knock on the door. When I opened it, there was my principal smiling at me along with two other adults.

So he said to me, Brian, this is Mr. So-and-so and Mrs. So-and-so, and they're just looking around the college to see its facilities and talk to the students. They are thinking of sending their son here.

So I thought maybe they could just come in and look around your room and talk to you if you want. I think my principal thought I was one of the top students, so he thought I would probably be a good model.

But whoops. This had never happened before, so I was completely taken by surprise. I was definitely not ready for this. But I had no choice, of course, but to let the two adults in.

Now, thankfully, the principal himself didn't come in. All he had to do was just take a few steps into my room, and he would have seen my laptop, which was currently hidden from view. I would have been exposed or would be revealed.

[2 : 2 5] So instead, I just smiled sheepishly at the parents as they look around my room, and they could very clearly see the laptop with the computer game running on it.

So the parents smiled back at me, and as they left the room, one of them said to me, Oh, studying very hard, I see. Now, thankfully for me, although I wasn't ready at all, the visit had no serious consequences for me.

So it's just an amusing story that I can tell years later. Perhaps it would have been different if my principal had stepped in. But this morning, in our passage today, we find not an amusing story, but a sobering one.

It also involves a sudden arrival, but it has serious consequences. You see, this morning, we begin a short series in a section of Matthew's Gospel to mark what has traditionally been known as the Advent season.

Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which also translates the Greek word *parousia*. And that word, advent, *adventus*, *parousia*, it simply means coming.

[3 : 49] You can spot it at the end of verse 37 in our passage today, the coming of the Son of Man. More precisely, it's about the arrival of someone important, like a king or an emperor.

And so the season of Advent is traditionally a time to remember and prepare for the first coming of Christ. But it's also a time to remind ourselves that Christ is coming again.

And so this is what this little Advent series we are having for the next three weeks is all about. It's about a reminder to watch and be alert. It's a reminder to stay awake and be ready.

But the question that naturally arises might be, why should I prioritize being ready? Isn't December a time for winding down?

shouldn't December be a time to put your feet up, have some nice barbecue pork, hear some messages about love, look at nice postcards of babies and stables and think about your next holiday?

[5 : 03] Well, surely it's a time to relax. Well, Matthew will tell us why we should prioritize being ready this morning. He wants us to know how important it is.

So again, let's make sure that Matthew 24 is in front of us this morning so that we know why we must be ready and keep watch. And Matthew gives us the gist of his answer in verse 36.

Here's the headline he wants us to get. Keep watch because Jesus will come unexpectedly. Keep watch because Jesus will come unexpectedly.

Verse 36. But about that day, Jesus says, or hour, no one knows. Not even the angels in heaven nor the Son but only the Father.

The subject at hand is when Christ will return. And Jesus says, no one will know when that would be. Not the angels in heaven who presumably should have insider knowledge.

[6 : 10] knowledge. And not even the Son who should have the ultimate insider knowledge. He doesn't know either. Only the Father knows.

So, implication? We don't know either. Only the Father knows. Now, how can the Father know and the Son not know?

We have to be very careful here and acknowledge that there is mystery involved. But it seems that the best answer we can give is that although Jesus was divine, he was operating within the parameters of his human nature here.

And the Son does not know because God the Father has determined that while Jesus is on earth, that knowledge is not to be shared. beyond that, we can only make wild guesses as to why the Father knows and the Son does not know.

But the big point is clear. If Jesus doesn't know when he's coming back, we wouldn't know either. It will be unexpected.

[7 : 25] So, that means we shouldn't bother trying to predict when his second coming will be. But of course, all throughout human history, human beings couldn't resist.

In the second century, there was a group called the Montanis, who claimed to be prophets and prophetesses, and who thought Jesus would come back and establish the new Jerusalem in a city in Asia Minor.

In the 11th century, some thought that 1033 would be the year, since it would be a thousand years since Jesus died and rose again.

In the 19th century, a guy named William Miller, whose followers would eventually establish the modern seven-day Adventist church, predicted that Christ would come back sometime between March 21st, 1843, and March 21st, 1844.

Now, to be fair to him, he admitted later that he got it wrong, but his followers would continue to set dates even though he didn't. In the 20th century, Hal, Lindsay, and Chuck Smith, names that some of the older folk in our congregation might be familiar with, concluded that Jesus would come again in 1981.

[8 : 54] Their calculation was simple. 1948 was the birth of the modern nation-state of Israel. Add 40 years, and then subtract seven years, because there's seven years of tribulation, and voila, you get 1981.

But of course, it's now 2017, and we're still waiting. In fact, if Jesus came back in 1981, I wouldn't be here. I wasn't born yet.

And what is interesting is that although Hal Lindsay got it wrong, and he keeps getting it wrong, he made a few other predictions, people still keep thinking of him as an expert in Bible prophecy.

So I'm not sure why. But I hope all of you can see from verse 36 that all this is futile guesswork. Jesus says his coming cannot be predicted.

And indeed, to claim to know when Jesus will come back is to say that you are smarter than Jesus. I'm not sure any of us want to claim that, or to say that of any other human being.

[10 : 06] So let's not be distracted by such pointless speculation. Now, for many of us, we are unlikely to fall into this trap of all the men that I've just mentioned.

But perhaps we can fall into the opposite trap. We think he won't come at all. After all, we've been waiting 2,000 years. But Jesus warns us against complacency.

We don't know when he will come, yes, but he will come. And when he comes, it will be so unexpected because he arrives when life is looking pretty ordinary.

That's his point in verses 37 to 39. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.

For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark. And they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.

[11 : 20] That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. In the days before the flood, in Noah's time, life was pretty much going on as normal.

People were eating and drinking, they were marrying and having a good time. God probably was hardly on their minds at all. God. But Jesus says the final climax of human history will certainly come in the ordinary circumstances of life.

When you are sending your kids to school, or paying the bills at the bank, or having your lunch break at some kopitiam, then suddenly Jesus arrives.

And that's the picture also being painted in verses 40 to 41. Two men will be in the field. One will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand meal.

One will be taken and the other left. These are pictures of ordinary work. The men are at the fields, the women are at the grinding meal, which was a common job for women at that time.

[12 : 38] And when Jesus returns, unexpectedly, one will be taken, one will be left. But it will happen as they go about their day to day work. Now, these verses are sometimes used to support the teaching of what people might call a secret rapture, which says that Christ will take believers with him before a time of great wrath and tribulation on the earth.

But notice, in context, this event refers very much to Jesus' public second coming, not some secret time before Jesus' second coming.

And notice too, that Jesus doesn't talk about some special timeline of catastrophic events that will happen before he comes back. He says he will return in the ordinary routines of life.

This might be a surprise to some of you who would have heard very different teaching on this. But such teaching about very special timelines and a secret rapture, I believe, is mistaken.

And that's because Jesus doesn't want us to focus on dates and events and circumstances beyond our control. Instead, his focus is on being ready.

[14 : 04] That's the big application in verses 42 and 44. Verse 42. Therefore, keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

Verse 44, so you also must be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. To hammer this home, Jesus paints a scenario.

Suppose you know that a thief is coming to your house. You're not sure when exactly he's coming. Perhaps tonight? Perhaps tomorrow night?

Perhaps at midnight? Perhaps at 5 a.m.? You don't know when he's coming exactly, but you know he's coming. So what would you do?

You would keep watch. You would set up the CCTV. You would try to organize a neighborhood watch. You will stay awake.

[15 : 13] You will be vigilant. You will be ready. And you will keep watch because the consequences are too serious to ignore.

in this scenario, it's simply about getting your house broken into. But Jesus says when it comes to the battle of him coming back again, the consequences are even more serious than that.

Come back with me again to verses 40 to 41. What happens to the two men or the two women? One will be taken, one will be left.

There is a sharp division, a sharp separation. One will head to safety, just like Noah did when he entered the ark.

The other will head for judgment, just like the people who chose to ignore Noah. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.

[16 : 21] one will head to safety, the other to judgment. At the end of the passage, Jesus talks about a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

If we are not ready, the consequences are very serious. That is why we need to stay awake. But of course, the reverse is also true.

there is reward, something Jesus also mentions later on in verse 47. The consequences are very serious, but the reward is very great.

So be ready, Jesus says. Keep watch. That's the big application. Keep your mind on the big picture that Jesus is definitely coming back, although we don't know when.

now some people, even Christians, might object to having this kind of mindset. Don't be so heavenly minded that you are of no earthly good, they say.

[17 : 35] We've got to live in the here and now, not for some pie in the sky that we cannot see. Don't need to think so much about the far, far away future.

to think about such things is escapism, they might say. We have to be realistic. We have to be pragmatic. We have to live in the real world.

But that is completely wrong. The writer, J.R.R. Tolkien, who wrote The Lord of the Rings, once spoke about two kinds of escape.

He says, the first kind of escape is the escape of somebody running away from life's responsibilities, from life's disappointments.

escape is the escape of somebody who decides to abandon his wife and children and run off with the secretary to some island in Thailand, thinking that he can enjoy paradise there.

[18 : 39] And perhaps sometimes people think that to focus on the second coming is to focus on this kind of escape. But there's a second kind of escape, which Tolkien says is more like the escape of a prisoner of war.

It's the escape of somebody who has been subject to the terrible conditions of prison, its lack of sanitation, its cruel guards. It's an escape for home.

And focusing on the second coming is more like the second kind of escape than the first. we are thinking of home.

We are not there yet. And so we will enjoy this present world without idolizing it. It's just like when you go on a holiday, you enjoy your holiday, but finally you want to go back to your own bed.

And we know that there's a greater reward to come when we will finally be home in a renewed heaven and earth with Jesus himself. And it will help us to endure the heartbreak that this world can bring without falling into despair.

[19 : 59] There is a greater judgment to come when Jesus comes back and all wrongs in this world will be made right. We actually see things even more truly because we see things from the widest possible perspective.

To think about the here and now only is actually to have too small a view of reality. To remember the second coming and the realities of heaven and hell is actually to be truly realistic because we are seeing reality from the widest possible perspective.

perspective. And so we must fight to keep our eyes on the big picture. You would have thought that Christmas time would be the easiest time to do so but actually when Christmas is reduced to shopping and holidays and parades and so on it's not that easy.

So we must fight to keep our eyes on the big picture. And as Tolkien's friend C.S. Lewis once observed, the quote is on the outline, If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for this present world were precisely those who taught most of the next.

It is since Christians have largely ceased to think about the next world that they have become so ineffective in this world. William Wilberforce of course is one of the best examples of this.

[21 : 37] His mind was clearly fixed on the world to come as a book that he published shows. But of course he went on to accomplish one of the greatest goods in this world in the 19th century.

He abolished the slave trade. And so that brings us to the other big thing that Jesus wants to tell us today. He wants to tell us not just why but how we can be ready.

In fact Jesus will go on to tell three parables that illustrate the how. And this morning we will look at the first of these parables and over the next two weeks we will look at the other two.

But how are we to stay awake and keep watch? Jesus answers, we keep watch by staying faithful.

We keep watch by staying faithful. Look at verses 45 to 47 and let me just summarize what it says.

[22 : 45] Here we have a praiseworthy servant. He goes about his appointed tasks whether his master is present or not. And so when his master does return, he will find him faithful and so reward him.

But what if the servant thinks that the master is not coming back for a long time? Well, he's like the rebellious teenager who as soon as the parents are away calls his friends over for an alcohol-filled party.

And worse than that, he decides that he can get away with mistreating his fellow servants. He will be considered a wicked servant, a hypocrite, pretending to be one thing when he is actually another.

And Jesus says there is a grim end for such people. Verse 50, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he is not aware of.

He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And the difference between the two slaves is not just one of faithfulness and wickedness.

[24 : 10] It's actually the difference between wisdom and foolishness. Did you notice how the faithful servant is also described in verse 45?

He's also wise. And so by implication the wicked servant of verse 48 is foolish. You see to keep watch and be faithful is actually the wisest thing to do.

After all if the master could come back at any time we need to be ready don't we? To not think about Jesus' second coming at all by contrast is a foolish thing. And so as we go about our day to day are we being wise or foolish?

John Wesley the founder of the Methodist movement was once asked by a friend what he planned to do that day. Wesley said this morning I plan to write a sermon and this afternoon I'm going to visit a widow from the parish.

So his friend said if you knew that Jesus was going to return tonight what would you do today? Wesley replied I will write my sermon in the morning and I will visit the widow in the afternoon.

[25 : 40] He didn't have to adjust his plans or his lifestyle in light of the second coming of Christ. he did not need to because he was already living in light of the coming of the Son of Man.

He was being wise. What about us today? Could you say that there is nothing you don't need to change?

No plans you have to adjust? No relationships you have to repair? if Jesus were to come back tonight?

Is Jesus going to find you ready? Last week, Pastor Lawrence mentioned the conflicts that he has to deal with in his church.

Well, this morning, is there someone you are in conflict with and you have yet to reconcile with? Is there some bitterness in your heart towards someone, especially someone who is called your brother or sister in Christ?

[26 : 52] When Jesus returns, will he find unforgiveness in you? Well, be ready, be wise. He hasn't come back yet.

As Jesus taught earlier in Matthew chapter 5, if you're offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar.

First, go and be reconciled to them, and then come and offer your gift. Or perhaps this morning, you know that your priorities have mainly been focused on yourself, your own career, your own lifestyle, your own pleasure.

future. You've not given enough thought to how you're caring for your wife or husband, or your immediate family, or indeed your church family.

You've neglected them. You've gotten too lost in your hobbies or your work. You've not loved them as you ought. Is that where Jesus will find you if he were to come back tonight?

[28 : 09] Well, be wise. Get ready. Store up treasures in heaven, Jesus says. Put him first. Or perhaps this morning, you know that you're not ready because you don't even know Jesus yourself.

You know about him, you've heard about him, but the idea of being in a personal relationship with him is foreign to you. Is that you?

be wise. Get ready. As we've heard earlier this morning, the day of separation and division is coming. So accept him as the king who rescues you and now ask for your loyalty.

Be on the right side of history. God and while I think this parable is applicable to everyone, there are perhaps some specific secondary applications for those in leadership this morning.

people. For the faithful and wise servant is described as being in charge of the household. So if you are in any position of leadership here this morning, it's also good to ask, are you being faithful in the discharge of your duties?

[29 : 35] If you are a home fellowship group leader or Sunday school teacher or youth group leader, are you faithfully looking after your group, encouraging them in every way possible to grow as a disciple of Jesus?

Will you keep doing so next year? And are you deliberately choosing to grow in your own knowledge of the Bible, of doctrine, of ministry skills, so that you are able to feed others and make any training that we put on a priority?

If you are an elder this morning, are you being faithful to your work of shepherding, of feeding, caring, leading and protecting the flock?

Are you living in light of the imminent return of Jesus? But even if we are not leaders, there are lots of things that we can be faithful in.

I just want all of us to turn to 1 Peter 4, verse 7 to 10 now, where the apostle will give us some practical instruction. So let's just turn for a moment to 1 Peter 4, verse 7 to 10.

[30 : 59] Let me read it. 1 Peter 4, verse 7. 1 Peter 5, Rudend.

So Peter here is conhe elevated to Ephesians.

He wants to give us any information. 2 Peter 5, 3 Peter 4, verse 8 to So Peter here is giving practical counsel as to what we can do in light of Jesus' second coming.

Firstly, pray. Well, that's why he says we are to be sober-minded. As fallen beings who live in a fallen world, we need to pray to stand firm.

There are so many challenges, as we all know, of living in this world, and we need to face them in God's strength. Again, staying awake night after night to wait for the thief, like in Jesus' scenario, well, that's exhausting, isn't it?

[32 : 22] And that's why we need to depend on God and pray. Secondly, love each other deeply. Don't be content with surface politeness.

Be ready to enter into each other's messiness. Be willing to say both the encouraging things and the hard things to one another. For love is about one thing, what is best for the other person.

Thirdly, be hospitable. It's not so much about providing meals, but about being welcoming to the outsider. Look around.

Look around. See who is being overlooked. And love them. Let them know you care. Why not start this morning during the refreshments?

And fourthly, serve with whatever gifts God has given you. If you're good at organizing, organize some hospitality.

[33 : 28] Or organize to care for the mother with the newborn, or the elderly widow, and so on. Serve where you can. Don't wait for someone to ask you.

And if I might just add a fifth point from 2 Peter, which is Peter's other letter. Choose wisely whom you listen to.

Peter warns in 2 Peter of false teachers who are good at telling all sorts of stories, but who lead many from the way of truth. So grow in your own discernment.

Because the New Testament is not naive about the presence of false teaching before Jesus returns. Because really, this is all part and parcel of being Christian.

It's about serving the Master and living in light of His return. It's actually impossible to be a Christian and not anticipate Jesus' second coming.

[34 : 38] As we'll hear more about in the coming weeks, faith in Jesus will express itself in action for Jesus. So are you ready?

Are you keeping watch? When the principal knocked on my door, I could hide my computer game and get away with it. But when Jesus knocks on the door, there will be nowhere to hide.

So let's get ready today. Let's hang on to the Gospel. Let me end with these words from verse 46 and verse 42.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, Heavenly Father, as we come before you this morning, help us to be ready.

[35 : 58] Help us to stay awake. Help us to keep on living faithfully for you. And Father, please most of all, help us to keep hanging on to the Lord Jesus, who knows what we are like, who knows that we are indeed people who still struggle with sin.

And help us to keep coming to Him, knowing that there is forgiveness there, because the Lord Jesus is our advocate before you. And even as we are grateful for Jesus' advocacy, please help us to live for Him as the King.

Help us to stay alert, so that when we come back, when you come back, Lord, sorry, we know that we will be heading home with you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.