

Matthew 24:32-44

Introduction

The disciples have asked about the timing of the destruction of Jerusalem and the “coming/parousia” of Jesus at the end of the age. Jesus responds by taking the disciples as far out as He can go with respect to clear timing. The second coming at the end of the age will not happen until you have experienced the “labor pains” of false Messiahs, famines and earthquakes, wars and rumors of wars, persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the world, betrayal and apostasy within the church, and also the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the whole world. So this puts the second coming out probably at least twenty, if not thirty, or even forty years. Even more specifically, the second coming at the end of the age cannot happen until the disciples have seen the period of great distress and tribulation associated with the destruction of Jerusalem. These things must all happen first, and they would all happen within that first generation of Jesus’ disciples. And then tribulation and distress, and the preaching of the Gospel would *continue* as the constantly, ever renewed “signs of His coming” throughout however many generations might follow.

But immediately after the tribulations of this age, the end will come. Last week, Jesus brought us to that “end” – to the day when “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” On that day “all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” And then Jesus will “send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” This is the parousia of Jesus at the end of the age. This is what we are eagerly waiting for. This is the Christian *hope*.

I. Matthew 24:32–33 — 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. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Bruner’s explanation is helpful here: “Most of Palestine’s trees are evergreens. But two trees lose leaves in winter’s rainy season, the almond and the fig. The almond’s leaves return in *early* spring, while the fig’s return in *late* spring, and so the fig tree serves as the ideal announcement of summer’s real imminence.” “When the fig tree... puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near.” “So also, when *you see all these things*,” Jesus says *to His disciples*, “you know that he [or “it,” the Parousia] is near, at the very gates.” When *you see* the labor pains being fulfilled, and the Gospel preached to all the world, and specifically the great distress and tribulation of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, *then* you will know that the second coming at the end of the age is near – I am at the very gates. Jesus has explicitly stated that His own disciples will see *all these things* take place. But now Jesus goes on to make things even more explicit with these solemn words:

II. Matthew 24:34–35 — Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place [these things that must precede the parousia of the

Son of Man at the end of the age]. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

And so it was that everything came to pass in that first generation just as Jesus said it would.¹ There were false Messiahs and false prophets, famines and earthquakes, and wars and rumors of wars. There was persecution and martyrdom, betrayal and apostasy, and the Gospel was also proclaimed throughout the whole world. And in the midst of these general labor pains came the especially severe labor pain of the great distress and tribulation during the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 66-70. All things came to pass, just as Jesus said they would; and *then* the disciples could know that the coming of the Son of Man at the end of the age was near. Now the disciples could know that Jesus was standing at the very gates. In other words the Parousia would then be the next scheduled event in God's redemptive purposes.² So even before the destruction of Jerusalem, as the disciples witnessed more and more of the labor pains beginning to unfold before their very eyes, they could begin saying things like this:

- ✓ Hebrews 10:25 — You see the Day drawing near.
- ✓ Romans 13:12 — The night is far gone; the day is at hand.
- ✓ Philippians 4:5 — The Lord is at hand.
- ✓ James 5:8 — The coming of the Lord is at hand.
- ✓ 1 Peter 4:7 — The end of all things is at hand.

But then can you imagine the sense of expectancy *after* the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70? Imminency means that as the next “scheduled” event the coming of the Lord could happen *at any time*.³

III. Matthew 24:36 — But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

The disciples asked for a “sign” of Jesus’ coming at the close of the age. Jesus gave the disciples’ plenty of signs, but the accomplishment of these signs in that first generation of the disciples could only mean that His coming was “near” and “at the very gates.” The sign that the disciples had in mind was something that would actually identify the *timing* of Christ’s coming.

But such a sign, Jesus says, He cannot give to the disciples. “When you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates [that’s as far as I can go]... but concerning ***that day and hour*** no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” So now Jesus goes on to explain more fully what this will really mean for the world, and for His disciples:

¹ As I approach this text, one of the non-negotiables for me is that “this generation” can only refer to the generation of people alive in Jesus’ day. However we interpret the Olivet Discourse, it must take into account this understanding of this generation.

² Carson sees the Parousia as the next “major event” (cf. Hagner; Blomberg)

³ “The Parousia is near... [because] it may occur at any moment.” (Cranfield; quoted in Blomberg) “His coming can be ‘at any time.’ Cf. Calvin: Jesus ‘wished [His disciples] to be so uncertain of His coming that from day to day they should be intently waiting.’” (Bruner)

IV. Matthew 24:37–39 — For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

What is this “coming” of the “Son of Man”? Isn’t it obvious? It’s the *public* and glorious coming of the Son of Man that we just read about in verses 29-31. When Jesus says, “so will be the coming of the Son of Man,” He’s assuming the precise coming that He just spoke about. We see this also in the fact that this coming of the Son of Man is explicitly for the *purpose* of bringing judgment and destruction on the wicked.

So this coming of the Son of Man cannot be referring to a secret rapture of the Church which is preliminary to the main event. And neither can this coming of the Son of Man be referring to any recognizable signs and judgments that will precede Christ’s coming, for then His coming could be expected! This would make nonsense of Jesus’ words and defeat His entire point. The point here is not certain signs and events that *precede* Christ’s coming, but the actual coming itself when all the tribes of the earth will see Him returning on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.⁴

As things were in the days of Noah, so things will be at the moment of Christ’s return. People will be eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. As Bruner translates, people will be “‘wining and dining’... right into the cataclysmic coming of the Son of Man.” In the midst of the tribulation, and the persecutions, and the upheavals that characterize this age, we know that life still goes on: people go on eating and drinking, and marrying and giving in marriage (cf. Carson).⁵ And so Jesus’ point is that the world will be *unaware* of the impending judgment until the very moment that that judgment is *already* upon them. This is important: The world will be unaware of the impending judgment until all chance for any repentance is already gone forever. In other words, there will apparently not be any specific period of wrath prior to Christ’s coming which could in any way serve as a warning to the world that now is their last chance to repent (37-39). Likewise, prior to Christ’s coming, there will be no warning for us that now is our last chance to get our “act” together (42-44).⁶ When the flood broke on the unsuspecting ancient

⁴ “‘Of that day and hour,’ refers to *the* event, the climactic return of the Son of Man, which by this formula is said to be beyond human determination altogether, and not just partially, e.g., so that, say, the month or year *could* be known.” (Hagner)

⁵ “One of the most surprising facts in Jesus’ end-time teaching now is that the last times will be *normal*... The Great Tribulation occurs *while superficially all seems well*. To the unobservant, it’s party time. Thus Jesus’ teaching of end-time *normalcy* should move the disciples to look beneath surfaces to the deep structures of life – to see what is happening at levels we do not usually think to look. Jesus’ normalcy teaching instructs disciples to penetrate ‘Miller-Time’ appearances to see subterranean realities: the heresies, wars, famines, persecutions, apostasies, and betrayals that Jesus taught earlier as the substructures of end-time life.” (Bruner)

⁶ “Since even Luke interpreted the abomination of desolation to mean the encroachment of the Roman army in AD 70 (Luke 21:20), and since Jesus’ promise that ‘*all these things*,’ all these *preparatory* things (from heresy through abomination) would happen before the passing of that generation standing in front of Jesus (v. 34), it could well be that only *one* event is still out-standing, and that that single remaining event is the coming of Jesus Christ himself. *Everything else happened in Jesus’ generation and in the Jewish War... [Therefore,] Jesus’ coming could be today.* If this is true, and I think it is, then no doubt **the single great expectation of the faithful should be the sudden, incalculable coming of the Son of Man for judgment at any time, and *nothing* else.** No doubt our single

world it was *too late* for any repentance – they were all swept away. So also when the Son of man returns to an entirely unsuspecting world, it will then be *too late* for any last minute preparations (Luke 17:22-37).⁷ There will be no prior warning for last minute conversions. Truly *today* is the day of salvation. Truly, this very *moment* is the moment for salvation!

The world will be unaware *not* because they have never had any warning at all. Even if some have not had the preaching of the Church (as the ancient world had the preaching of Noah), they have at least had the continuous warning signs of “famines and earthquakes” in every generation. The world will be unaware only because of their arrogant indifference. “They will be fully occupied with the conveniences and enjoyments of the present life, as if there [were] no reason to dread any change... promising to themselves that the condition in which they then [are will] remain unchanged, they [will] not scruple to follow without concern their ordinary pursuits.” (Calvin) And isn’t this what we see all around us today – without exception? Do we see this even in the Church, and in our own lives? Today scientists make predictions about the end of the world, but that “end” is always comfortably many hundreds of millions of years away and the result of inevitable natural causes. And so even the “end of the world” becomes another reason for going on with life as always, life as usual, oblivious to all else but our own comfortable and pleasurable living (cf. Hagner). Jesus would not have us put off guard by the normalcy and

[expectation]/hope should be *Christ*, not Antichrist and twelve other signs. No doubt our eschatology should not be Jesus Christ at the end of a series of other decipherable events, but Jesus Christ alone. No doubt Jesus Christ all alone should be the single outstanding event we await on an undecipherable *any day*... The ‘any day’ interpretation is in my opinion the most responsible way to read the whole sermon in general and the Timely Admonitions of the Fig Tree, Noah, and the Thief, in particular... **[Paul Boyer] defines ‘prophecy belief’ as ‘the conviction that the course of history, and the sequence of events that will herald the end of the world, are foretold in the Bible’... But does Jesus so much give us ‘the *sequence* of events’? Does he not rather more warn us of false teachers who will give us such sequences? ... I think, in short, that our chapter is filled with more *warnings against* those who hold ‘the conviction that the course of history, and the sequence of events that will herald the end of the world, are foretold in the Bible’ than it is with end-time predictions – with the single exceptions of the datable and (probably) past Abomination of Desolation, AD 70, and the undatable and future Glorious Coming at (it is repeatedly insisted) an entirely unknown day and hour (vv. 36-44).’’**

One may compare Bruner’s sentiments (with which I am in full agreement) with Paul Benware’s presentation of “classic posttribulationism” (Benware is a classic Dispensationalist): “This view holds that the church has always been in the Tribulation because, during its entire existence, it has suffered persecution and trouble. The Tribulation is not a future event but an ongoing present reality. In this view, therefore, the events of the tribulation [as they are presented in Revelation in the language of “apocalyptic”] are not understood in a literal or futuristic way. The Tribulation prophecies have already been fulfilled in the life of the church over the centuries. Interestingly, because there are no future prophetic events that must be fulfilled, this form of posttribulationism believes in the imminent return of the Lord even though they see the Rapture and Second Coming as a single event.”

⁷ The people of Noah’s day were oblivious to all else than their own pleasurable living. And they had no inkling of the judgment that was to come upon them until it was too late: “they did not know... (i.e., the imminent danger)] until the flood [κατακλυσμός] came and swept them away... The Parousia of the Son of Man will in a similar way come suddenly upon an unsuspecting generation that is carrying on its ordinary activities. (Hagner) “Jesus is saying that people will in this way continue to be about their normal business right up to the time of his coming. That will be the critical point; after that it will be too late, just as it was too late for the antediluvians when the Flood came. *The coming of the Son of man* will be just as abrupt, just as unexpected, just as decisive as the coming of the Flood was.” (Morris) “Jesus now illustrates the unexpectedness and unpredictability of his return by comparing it with the arrival of the flood in Noah’s day. At that time the world’s wicked were caught totally by surprise as they went about the ordinary activities of daily life, including festive events, oblivious to their impending destruction... So also Christ’s return will interrupt people in the ordinary activities of life.” (Blomberg)

“mundaneness” of life, because it’s just when things are most normal, and when people are most wrapped up in the affairs of everyday life that the Day of Judgment will suddenly *and without warning* come upon the world. And then, just as in the days of Noah, it will be *too late*. There will be no more chances.

V. Matthew 24:40–41 — Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.

When will this happen? Jesus says, “*then*.” On that day when all the nations of the earth see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. This cannot be a secret rapture. And I have not found a secret or preliminary rapture to be taught or implied anywhere else in Scripture – but rather contradicted. What will happen on that day when all the tribes of the earth mourn as they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory? Jesus has already told us. He will “send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” “Then [*at that time*] two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.” From the context of verses 29-31 we can know that those who are “taken” are the elect while those who are left must now await the prospect of the final judgment.⁸ Brothers and sisters, the clear and explicit teaching of Scripture is that the nations will *see* the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, and *then* His elect will be raptured from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.⁹ This is the only rapture taught in Scripture.

And so once again we see the *suddenness and the unexpectedness* of our Lord’s Parousia. There will be nothing to alert the men in the field or the women at the mill that the final “Day of the Lord” is upon them until the moment that Jesus appears on the clouds of heaven, and the one is caught up to meet the Lord in the air, while the other is left to mourn the terrors of the wrath of God and everlasting punishment. They will begin their day’s activity *oblivious* to what is coming, and they will still be engaged in this activity when they first hear the sound of the trumpet and see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven.¹⁰ And then it will be too late for any preparations or for any last minute change of heart – the chance for repentance and salvation will be gone forever.

Not only do we see here the suddenness and the unexpectedness of Christ’s coming, followed immediately by the rapture, but we also see the separation that will be made. Today, the saved and the unsaved may exist together in the same workplace, in the same families, and even in the same churches. Today, it may at times be difficult for us to tell the difference between the saved and the unsaved. But in that day, the division between the saved and the unsaved will become clearly visible for everyone to see. There will be no gray area. Everything will be very black and white. There will be sheep and there will be goats, and nothing else. We must be careful not to

⁸ Hagner; cf. Morris, Hendriksen, Lenski, Lange, Bruner, Ryle, Bengel, McNeile, Agbanou, Meier, Schnackenburg, and Gundry; contra France, Blomberg, and Walvoord, whose interpretation is, I think, motivated by theological prejudices – even coming as they do from opposite sides of the spectrum!

⁹ “The only coming of the Son of Man described so far has been the climactic universal return of Christ in v. 27. The imagery of vv. 38-41 does not suggest anything different.” (Blomberg)

¹⁰ “The description of normal life... underlines the lack of any prior warnings: things were being done just as they had always been. But the time of normal banality is potentially also the time of danger.” (France)

comfort ourselves with the kinds of relationships we have or with the kinds of people that surround us. The question is not the circles that we run in or the people that we are closest to. The question is my *own* personal relationship to God through Jesus Christ. On that day, the final *separation* will be made, and it will happen that all around the world there will be examples of people living in the closest connection to one another. But in the very midst of their life together, one will be taken and one will be left. May none of us here be among those who are left because we deceived ourselves with the company that we keep, and the family and friends that we have. What ultimately and finally matters is not our relationship to one another, but our relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

VI. Matthew 24:42–44 — Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.¹¹ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

In the next couple of weeks, we'll meditate more on what it *means* to stay awake, and what it *means* to be ready. But for right now, I think it should be enough for us to know that whenever the Son of Man does return to this earth, it will be at an hour that we do not expect. So the first lesson we learn is to *always* “stay awake,” to *always* be watching, so that even though we know He will come on a day that we are not *expecting* Him, we may still be *waiting* and *ready* when He does.¹² Certainly, we must not interpret the delay of two thousand years to mean that His coming is unlikely. And *neither* should we interpret the delay of two thousand years to mean that His coming is any less likely to be *today*. In A.D. 65, the apostle Peter was warning his readers of the scoffers that would come even in their *own* generation of the last days:

✓ **2 Peter 3:3–12** — 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 [the elect], not wishing that any [of you] 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

¹¹ “The figure has its application, not only to the end of the world, but also to the hour of death, and to those tragical catastrophes which occur in the history of nations as well as in the lives of individuals. All these critical periods are connected with the final judgment, and form with it one whole.” (Lange; cf. Ryle) See also the helpful analysis of this approach in Bruner.

¹² Bruner says: “I agree with Strecher... that the teaching of this text is not so much ‘don’t be surprised by the Lord’s return’ as it is ‘draw the proper consequences from the fact that you *will* be surprised by the Lord’s return.’ Have your Christian life so in order that when you *are* surprised you will be *ready* (cf. 1 Thess. 5:1-11).”

done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?

While we may not be scoffing on the outside, is it possible that in our daily attitude and thinking we resemble more the scoffers than we do those who are “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God”? Jesus has told us *in advance*. When the Son of Man comes, life will be happening just as it has since the creation of the world. “No day is named, that *every day* may be hallowed by the sense of the possibility of its being the day of His Advent. It helps to hallow each day of life, to realize that before its close we may be in the presence of Christ’s glory.” (Glover; quoted in Morris) What *would* this mean for our daily living? May the “mundaneness” and normalcy of everyday life be hallowed and sanctified by the “any-momentness” of Christ’s return upon the clouds of heaven in power and great glory! I pray with all my heart that if I should live to see my Savior’s coming, that coming will be on a day when I was watching and waiting. “Heaven and earth will pass away,” Jesus said, “but my words will not pass away.”