THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN

Matthew 24:1–51

Key Verse: 24:44

“So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

Life is full of the unexpected. Have you ever walked into a situation and realized, “I’m not ready for this”? It could be bad weather, or a car that breaks down, or a pop quiz, or a sudden crisis at work, or a demanding person who comes out of nowhere, or getting sick or injured. If we knew ahead of time, we could get ready. The same is true for Christian life: We should not only believe certain things, but also, always be ready. Ready for what? Not just for the unexpected in life. Today’s passage repeats the words “come” or “coming” 14 times. What’s coming? **Jesus** is coming. He’s coming back to this world. It’s not a maybe; it’s very sure. He teaches us what to expect before he comes. He describes what his coming will be like. Most of all, he shows us how to be ready for his coming. May God speak to us through his words today.

Look at verse 1. It begins, “Jesus left the temple and was walking away.” He had arrived at the Jerusalem temple Sunday night and had been teaching there since Monday. There he had cleared the place of money changers and those selling animals. There he encountered the religious leaders who attacked his authority. There he taught them many things about his authority. And there, he pronounced seven woes on the Pharisees and teachers of the law, mainly for their hypocrisy. Now, he leaves the temple and walks away. He’s done trying to teach people there.

While he’s leaving, his disciples come up to him and call his attention to the temple buildings (1b). What are they doing? Well, they want Jesus to notice how beautiful it is. At that time the Jerusalem temple was world-famous for its beauty. The Roman historian Tacitus called it “immensely opulent.” The Jewish historian Josephus compared it to a beautiful, snow-capped mountain. But why are the disciples suddenly trying to get Jesus to notice it? Surely they’ve seen the temple so many times before. Maybe they’re trying to turn his attention away from all the conflict with the religious leaders, to kind of cheer him up.

How does he respond? Read verse 2. Jesus is saying that God is going to let the Jerusalem temple be totally destroyed. To the disciples it must have been very sad news. Why would God let such a thing happen? Partly it was because of all the hypocrisy Jesus had just warned about. But mainly it was because they had rejected the Messiah God sent to them. Jesus’ prediction about the temple came true about 40 years later, in AD 70, when the Roman general Titus surrounded the city and in the end, completely destroyed it, including the temple.

After hearing Jesus’ prediction the disciples stopped talking about the temple’s beauty. They probably became very quiet as they were leaving the city. What happened next? Look at verse 3. The Mount of Olives is just east of the temple, and a bit higher up, so from there one can see a view not only of the temple but of the whole city of Jerusalem. Jesus stopped and sat down there, probably still thinking about the future. And the disciples came and privately asked him some incredible questions: “When will this happen?” “And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Why were they asking these questions? It shows that they took his prediction seriously. They didn’t try to defend the temple or change his mind; they were ready to listen to Jesus and learn from him. Most of all, they had an idea that the destruction of the temple would be part of “your coming” and “the end of the age.”

The disciples often were saying the wrong things. While traveling on a stormy sea they panicked and thought they would all drown (8:25). When a hungry crowd stayed too long, they suggested Jesus send them away to buy their own food (14:15). When they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost and cried out in fear (14:26). They were worried about him offending the Pharisees (15:12). They were slow to learn his repeated teaching to feed the crowd by faith (15:32,33). When they forgot to take bread, they misinterpreted his warning about the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:6,7). They didn’t like what he said about going the way of suffering (16:21–23). On the mount of transfiguration they were terrified at God’s voice (17:6). They failed to heal a boy with an evil spirit (17:16). When he talked about his death and resurrection they were only filled with grief (17:23). They were competing about who would be the greatest (18:1). They rebuked people for bringing their little children to Jesus (19:13). They were shocked to hear how hard it is for the rich to enter God’s kingdom (19:23–25). They were amazed that the fig tree withered so quickly after he cursed it (21:20). But now, when Jesus predicts the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, they’re actually asking good questions.

What made them think of this? Based on the Old Testament prophets, all Jewish people knew about the end of the world. They repeatedly called it “the day of the Lord.” So many prophets foretold that day when God will judge the world for its wickedness. They believed it would happen through God’s Messiah. God would give his Messiah great power and glory and use him to bring his judgment on earth. Now, after hearing his prediction of the destruction of the temple, the disciples were wondering when Jesus would do these things.

What did he say? Read verse 4. Here, the word “deceives” literally means “leads you astray.” It’s so easy for Jesus’ followers to be led astray, especially about the end of the world. Some people try to tell us it’s happening right now; others say it’s never going to happen. To most people, the world seems so permanent, and they get engrossed in enjoying it as much as possible now. Instead of following them and their ideas, we need to be listening very carefully to Jesus. When we pay attention to his words, we won’t be deceived or led astray.

What’s the main cause of the deception? Read verse 5. False messiahs are people who claim to be Jesus or who claim to come in his name. Such people can seem crazy or laughable. But Jesus repeatedly warns that in fact they will lead many people astray. Why do false messiahs have such influence? It happens especially when the world becomes full of trouble. People are looking for security, stability, an easy way out, and false messiahs tell people what they want to hear. They promise a better life in the world now if people follow them. Today, pursuing an easy, comfortable life is a kind of false messiah. Jesus warns us not to be deceived and led astray by this.

He goes on to warn about other things that can deceive us and lead us astray. Read verses 6–8. Wars, rumors of wars, conflicts, natural disasters—they all cause people to think the end of the world is coming. But Jesus tells us not to be alarmed and not to jump to conclusions. Instead, he teaches us to see such things as “birth pains.” Though they’re painful, something beautiful is going to happen afterwards. Living in the midst of troubles in this world, he wants us to believe God is in control, doing something good even in the midst of suffering, and have hope in God.

And Jesus says more. Read verse 9. Not only will there be general sufferings from wars or natural disasters, but also persecution of his followers. He’s already warned about this persecution several times before (5:10,11,44; 10:17,18,22,23; 13:21). Jesus warns that people will hate Christians simply because they hate Jesus himself (9b; 5:11; 10:22a). Why do people hate Jesus? It’s because Jesus challenges us to repent of our sins. Jesus calls us to come back to God, which so many people refuse to do.

Jesus warns us the persecution won’t be just from without, but also from within. Read verse 10. Why do people do this? It’s simple: because they don’t want to suffer. When there is no suffering, many people may identify themselves with Christians. But when suffering and persecution become intense, many back out. Many are upset with Christians who remain in the suffering. They attack and betray them. This kind of suffering may be even worse than the wars, disasters or persecution from non-believers. Jesus again warns about false prophets’ coming at such a time (11). They’re so deceptive. They play on people’s feelings to get them to follow them. They tell people they don’t have to suffer; they promise a health and wealth gospel, no suffering, God wants us to be rich, we can do whatever we want, there’s no such thing as sin or hell. They lead many people astray.

Jesus gives us one more warning about the times. Read verse 12. When we stop repenting and struggling against our sins, love of wickedness increases within us. Love for sin cools our love for God and for others and makes us self-absorbed. It’s really discouraging to live among people who love wickedness and are indifferent to their fellow human beings. What should we do? Read verse 13. Jesus said exactly the same thing before (10:22b). Stand firm to the end! What does it mean? It means, “Don’t give up! Don’t give in! Don’t run away! Hang in there! Be faithful, even to the point of death!” (Rev2:10b) But stand firm for what? Just because we’re stubborn? No. 1 Corinthians 16:13,14 tells us: “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.”

Even in a hate-filled world where wickedness increases and love decreases, we shouldn’t withdraw and hide. Read verse 14. It’s like the saying, “The best defense is a good offense.” We should not only be keeping the faith, but also spreading the faith. Just like Jesus did, we should be telling people about the good news of the kingdom (4:23; 9:35; 10:7). We may seem small and weak and surrounded by hostility, but when we stand firm in faith and share the good news of the kingdom, God uses even us to advance his kingdom.

Look at verses 15–20. Here Jesus predicts more details about the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple. During the Roman siege of the city, people starved and even resorted to eating their own babies. In history many people tried to save Jerusalem when it was attacked. But Jesus told his followers to flee it, and most Christians listened to Jesus and left. Read verse 21. This may describe the horrible time when Jerusalem was destroyed. But it also points to the “great tribulation” all Christians have to suffer (Rev7:14). As with Jesus’ metaphor of birth pains, it may be that at the end of the age, the suffering will intensify to an almost unbearable level right before Jesus comes. Read verse 22. In any case God is still in control, and though he allows us to suffer, he still loves us because of our faith in Jesus and he’s working to save us.

Look at verses 23–26. Jesus again warns about false messiahs and false prophets who arise in especially hard times. They perform great signs and wonders to try to deceive God’s elect (cf. Rev13:1–8). They try to say that only special people out in the wilderness or hiding in inner rooms will know when Jesus comes. But what does Jesus say? Read verses 27,28. He means his coming won’t be hidden and secretive, but obvious to everyone.

Read verse 29. The end of the sun, moon and stars was predicted many times in the Old Testament (Isa13:10; 34:4; Eze32:7; Joel 2:10,31; Zeph1:15; cf. Rev6:12–17). This is the real sign of the true end of the age. Read verse 30. Jesus already predicted that he would come in the Father’s glory with his angels (16:27a; cf. 2Th1:7). Especially, his coming on clouds with power and great glory is the fulfillment of Daniel 7:13,14. Revelation 1:7 says, “‘Look he is coming with the clouds,’ and ‘every eye will see him, even those who pierced him’; and all peoples on earth ‘will mourn because of him.’ So shall it be! Amen” (cf. Zech12: 10). So many people ignore Jesus and live as if he won’t be coming back. But it says “every eye will see him” and there will be a lot of crying from those eyes. Why? Because people will realize that Jesus’ words were true and they were wrong, and it will be too late to repent. It will be a terrible day for them.

But it will be a quite different day for other people. Read verse 31. His elect are scattered all over the world in all kinds of remote and forgotten places. But God never forgets his elect, his precious chosen people. Jesus will send his angels to gather them to come back with him to his glorious kingdom. It’s our glorious hope and a great comfort. It’s the day when he promises that only by his grace we will share in his glory and his victory.

How can we tell this day is coming? Read verses 32,33. Here the word “near” is repeated twice. The Bible repeatedly tells us that Jesus’ coming is “near” (Heb10:37; Jas5:9; 1Pe4:7). It’s been near the past 2,000 years, near in the context of eternity. How can we be sure of his coming? Read verses 34,35. We can be sure of his coming because of his sure word of promise, which will never pass away.

Jesus goes on to describe more about his coming. Read verse 36. He says, “No one knows.” Anyone who predicts they know the precise time of the end of the world is lying. Don’t ever believe such people. Not even the angels or Jesus himself knows. Though there are signs of his coming, we can never know the day or hour. Jesus says more about it. Read verses 37–39. Jesus will come suddenly, and it’ll be a great surprise to most people. It also tells us that people are living as if he will never come again. People still get obsessed with eating, drinking and mating, living on the physical level. It’s not the way Christians should be living. Read verses 40,41. In each case, one person was ready and the other wasn’t. But outwardly, we can’t tell who’s ready; they’re both doing exactly the same thing. What makes one ready and one not? The ready person is the one who has a personal relationship with Jesus and who knows his grace.

In light of this, what should we do? Read verse 42. Here, “keep watch” means to be vigilantly looking for Jesus to come back. Not only should we believe it, but also we should be expecting and looking for him every day. Read verse 43. Jesus gives a very practical illustration of what it means to keep watch. In this case it’s being defensive and not being lulled into complacency. Living in this world it’s so easy to be led astray into spiritual complacency. Jesus warns us that if we do, our house can be “broken into,” meaning the devil can gain influence in our lives. Read verse 44. To be ready, we need to expect that Jesus could come at any time, even today. We shouldn’t fall into our sins or love of this world and have him come back when we’re doing the wrong things.

How can we be ready for his coming? Read verses 45–47. Here, the faithful and wise servant obeys his master by doing what he wants. He faithfully gives food to the other servants at the proper time. He discharges all his duties. It’s a metaphor for giving people the word of God faithfully and wisely. When people are struggling, we are ready to give them the right word of God to help them. If Jesus comes back and finds us doing that, he’ll surely reward us. But there’s another example. Read verses 48–51. This wicked servant was too smart for his own good. He calculated that he would have time to repent right at the end. So he lived in self-indulgence. But things didn’t work out the way he expected. To be ready for Jesus’ coming, we shouldn’t live by our smartness.

Read verse 44 again. May God help us to have the hope of Jesus’ glorious second coming in our hearts. In this world full of trouble, sin and persecution, may he help us to stand firm to the end and be doing what he wants, sharing the good news of his kingdom and giving people his word at the proper time.