

The Second Advent of Christ *Spiritual Alertness*

Imagine a best-selling author approaches you and wants to write a book about your life. The author meets with you to get to know you and learn the “plot” of your life. At that first meeting she tells you that she’s already decided that your life will be told in ten chapters; chapter 1 begins when you enter this world and chapter 10 ends when you leave this world. This means that if you have 70 years on this earth, each chapter covers 7 years. If you have 30 years on this earth each chapter covers 3 years.

In order to write this book, the author asks you a serious question: “So what chapter are you living right now? Are you living chapter 3 or chapter 6 or chapter 9?” We could look at actuarial tables and guess what chapter we’re living. I’ll spare you the math, but statistically I’m in chapter 8 of my life. But the fact of the matter is that I may actually be living chapter 10. Since I don’t really know what chapter I’m living, I should live in such a way that if it is chapter 10, I’ll have no regrets. And you should live in such a way that if this is chapter 10 of your book, you’ll have no regrets, right?

Today we are going to wrap up our study of the second coming of Christ by looking at a passage of Scripture in which Jesus tells us that His return will be sudden and unexpected. The application is that we should live in a perpetual state of spiritual alertness so that whenever He returns we’ll be ready. We won’t be thinking, “I wish I’d lived the last few chapters of my life differently.”

In the first half of Matthew 24 Jesus describes the events that will precede His return. The gospel will be preached to “all nations” (24:14), there will be great tribulation such as the world has never seen (24:21ff), there will be false Christs who try to deceive even the elect (24:24). Jesus wanted His disciples to be prepared whether His return was soon or was delayed a long time.

Today we look at the second half of Matthew 24 and Jesus’ teaching about the suddenness and unexpectedness of His return, and therefore spiritual alertness we should have.

The return of Christ will be sudden and unexpected. (24:36-41) In verse 36 Jesus addresses an issue that was on the minds of His disciples – the time of His coming (which He refers to as “that day”).

36 "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

Herein lies one of the mysteries of the Godhead. The Father has knowledge that the Son does not have, yet they are equal in essence and unified in purpose. There is no hint of resentment or competition on the part of the Son. Quite to the contrary, Jesus seems to have gladly deferred to the Father concerning the time of His coming. This is evidence of humility and contentment within the Godhead.

The main point of Jesus' statement is clear: if He and the angels of heaven don't know the "day or hour" of His return, then people on earth **certainly** don't know when He'll return. And we should be content not knowing when He'll return.

Jesus follows this statement in verse 36 with illustrations and parables that highlight just how sudden and unexpected His return will be. The first illustration likens the second coming to the flood in Noah's day.

37 "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. 38 "For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, 39 and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.

Before the flood, people were living their lives as people normally do, completely oblivious to the impending judgment: eating and drinking, getting married, etc. Up until the day that Noah and his family got into the ark, people had no urgency to turn their lives back toward God. When the flood came, it was too late. "So shall the coming of the Son of Man be." When Jesus returns, most will be living their lives as they always have, oblivious to the impending judgment.

The next illustration points out that when Christ returns, God will distinguish between two people doing identical, ordinary activities.

40 "Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. 41 "Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left.

Two men are out working in a field doing identical work. Two women are doing identical work at a mill. But when Christ returns, He distinguishes between the two men and the two women. When Christ returns suddenly and unexpectedly, He will make distinctions between people; then it will be too late to turn back to God. The application is given in verse 42:

Therefore, "be on the alert." (24:42-51)

42 "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.

To "be alert" means to be spiritually awake and attentive to God. The NIV translates the phrase, "keep watch." This is the same expression Jesus used in the Garden of Gethsemane when He told the disciples, "'Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'" (Matthew 26:41). In order to remain faithful during Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion, they would need to be at the height of spiritual alertness. Peter, however, didn't have this spiritual alertness because he denied Christ three times; he didn't seem to be aware of the spiritual dynamics of what he was doing until the rooster crowed.

Here in Matthew 24 Jesus is urging this same type of spiritual alertness continually because “you do not know which day your Lord is coming.” Since Jesus is our Lord, we need to be attentive to His will and His ways. The opposite would be to bumble through life unaware of the spiritual realities around us, assuming we have a LONG time left to turn from sin and to pursue God’s will.

In verse 43 Jesus gives an illustration of being “on the alert.”

43 "But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into.

Robberies would decline dramatically if homeowners knew when thieves were coming. If you’ve seen the movie “Home Alone” you have an idea of the types of things that might happen. Jesus’ point is that homeowners don’t know what time of night the thief comes; a good thief shows up when he’s least expected. Jesus likens His own return to a thief in the night:

44 "For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.

About twenty years ago a pastor friend of mine told me, “This past Sunday I told my church when Jesus is going to return.” My immediate thought was, “You didn’t!” because he struck me as the kind of guy who just might predict when Christ would return. “Yeah, I told that that Jesus is returning ‘at an hour when you do not think He will.’” Well played. . . That was Jesus’ point here in verse 44.

Just like a thief in the night, Jesus is coming at a time when we don’t think He will. Therefore, Jesus says, “you be ready too.” If we live in a state of spiritual alertness/readiness, the suddenness and unexpectedness of Jesus’ return will be a joyful surprise. It would be a wonderful thing for Jesus to return and “catch us in the act” of doing exactly what we’re supposed to be doing.

Parents, imagine coming home early and finding that your children are eagerly doing the dishes and vacuuming the carpet and picking up the house. You’d probably walk in the door and think, “Very nice. That’s what I’ve been hoping for all these years.”

If you and I are living in a state of spiritual alertness, the fact that Jesus is coming like a thief in the night isn’t a troubling thought. Jesus will show up and catch us in the act of doing the will of God from the heart. It’s interesting that Paul, Peter, and John each picked up the imagery of Jesus’ second coming being “like a thief in the night” (see 1 Thess. 5:2, 2 Peter 3:10, Rev. 3:3). Their point was the same as Jesus’ point: if you’re living in a state of spiritual readiness, you don’t have to fear that the day of the Lord will come unexpectedly. For example, consider Paul’s statement in 1 Thessalonians 5:2-6:

2 For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. 3 While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; 5 for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; 6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.

The unexpected return of Christ will be terrifying for those who are not doing the will of God. But as believers, we are not "in darkness" that the day of the Lord would overtake us like a thief. Therefore, Paul writes, "let us be alert and sober."

Let's look at Jesus' last illustration in Matthew 24: the behavior of two servants whose master is away – one who does what he's supposed to do and the other who doesn't.

45 "Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? 46 "Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. 47 "Truly I say to you, that he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

This "faithful and sensible slave" was doing exactly what the master wanted him to do: taking care of the household, making sure people are well-fed. Since he was a good steward while the master was away, he was entrusted with more. By contrast, notice what happens to the "evil slave."

48 "But if that evil slave says in his heart, 'My master is not coming for a long time,' 49 and shall begin to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; 50 the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, 51 and shall cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth.

This slave embodies the attitude that Jesus is warning against: living a careless, wicked life, unprepared for the Master's return. This lack of alertness shows up in personal morality and in personal relationships. In the parable, the evil slave is "assigned a place" with the hypocrites – who in the gospel of Matthew have no place in the kingdom. We all have traces of hypocrisy, but Jesus is describing the person who appears to be one thing, but really, truly is another. The person who really doesn't sense any accountability to Jesus Christ will eventually be assigned a place among the hypocrites.

There you have it: Jesus is coming suddenly at a time when we don't expect Him, therefore we should live our lives fully alert to the spiritual realities around us. Jesus isn't trying to shame us into being something we're not. Quite the opposite it true: Jesus is calling us to wholeness/shalom and integrity – the type of life that every believer deep-down really wants to live. He is calling us to live lives that are compatible with our profession of faith in Him.

In our time remaining I want us to evaluate our lives in light of what we've seen in Matthew 24. Since Jesus' return will be "sudden and unexpected," we would be wise to ask whether our lives are compatible with that Day.

First, are there ***Area(s) of my life in which I'm spiritually asleep?***

As you know, the point of Jesus' teaching isn't to condemn us; and it's certainly not meant to fill us with dread at the return of Christ. It's to warn us so that we will turn away from a mindset that is incompatible with His sudden and unexpected return. Today's passage gives us a variety of different images that can help us identify what needs to be changed in our lives.

Matthew 24:42 tells us, "Be on the alert." Are there areas of your life in which you're spiritually asleep? Perhaps you've found yourself thinking: "Yeah, I know I should devote myself to prayer. . . I know I should love my wife as Christ loves the church. . . I know I should honor God with my wealth. . . but nobody's perfect. . ." Can you identify such attitudes within yourself?

In Matthew 24:49 Jesus told the parable about the slave who had the attitude that the master isn't coming home "for a long time," and therefore didn't sense any urgency to stop beating the other slaves or living a life of excess. Perhaps, like him, there's an area of disobedience and you've postponed repentance (turning from that sin). Like the evil slave you've told yourself that you've got plenty of time to turn things around. After all today isn't a very convenient time to make drastic changes in our lives; maybe some day our lives won't be so busy, so stressed, so full of suffering. That's the very mindset that Jesus is warning against - a type of complacency that presumes that the master won't come back for a long time.

Hebrews 3 and 4 repeatedly quotes from Psalm 95 which says, "Today, if you hear His voice do not harden your hearts." The perspective is that today is the very best day to turn from our sin. Yesterday is over; tomorrow may or may not come. But TODAY - today is a gift God has given you, a use-it-or-lose-it gift that you'll never get back. Today if you hear God telling you to turn from spiritual laziness or disobedience, don't ignore His voice.

Of course the goal isn't merely to turn FROM sin; we turn from sin so that we can turn back TO God. Secondly, consider area(s) of your life in which God is prompting you to be spiritually alert.

Area(s) of my life in which God is prompting me to be spiritually alert: The presupposition here is that God is always at work in our lives, always refining us. In Philippians 2 Paul tells us, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." God is always at work in our lives, prompting us to be spiritually alert in specific ways.

When I was in college I had a friend who used to ask me (almost weekly), "Steve, what is God teaching you?" I was often annoyed at the question because I didn't always want

to try to discern what (if anything) God was teaching me. Sometimes I didn't want to hear what God had to say; other times I was simply spiritually lazy. But his question was good for me because God was indeed at work within me and I needed to pay attention to Him.

At the risk of annoying **you**, let me ask, "What is God doing within you these days?" Do you have a sense of how God is leading you deeper into His will? or would you say that it's been a long time since you've paid attention to what God is doing? You very well might be able to identify ***an area of obedience that would dramatically change*** the quality of your life and your walk with God:

- "I need to learn how to 'do my work heartily as unto the Lord' (Colossians 3:23) . . . instead of just going through the motions."
- "I need to learn how to befriend people far from God. All my close friends are already believers. I sense that God wants me to be involved in the mission seeing people become disciples of Christ."
- "I need to be passionate about using my spiritual gifts. If my gifting is supposed to be the primary focus of my service to others, I need to discern my gifting and actively pursue the use of my gifts."

Over the past month or so God has very clearly been prompting me to be more spiritually alert in a specific area of my life. He has used some conversations, some Scriptures, and a book I've been reading. I'm convinced that if I follow God's promptings, it will make a dramatic difference in my life: I'll have a lot less anxiety; I'll have more anticipation about what God is doing around me; I think I will be a better husband, father, friend, and pastor. God is prompting me to learn from Him what my prayer life should be.

My plan is to read through the Bible (over the next six months or so), recording every example of prayer, every reference to prayer, and every teaching about prayer. I bought a purple journal to record my observations and thoughts. I've already read through Genesis and half of Exodus. I find myself wondering, "God, is it okay for me to pray to you the way Abraham did? the way Moses did?" God listened to and answered their prayers. God is prompting me to be spiritually alert when it comes to prayer.

I would invite you to discern God's prompting and let Him lead you deeper into His will in some area of your life. It may not merely require a minor modification of your life; He may be prompting you to do something dramatic or heroic. But that's fully appropriate because Jesus is coming suddenly and unexpectedly. When He does, He should find us doing the will of God from the heart.

A Prayer: "Teach us to number our days that we may present to You a heart of wisdom."
Psalm 90:12