

Ready and Waiting

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[0 : 0 0] Well, thank you very much, Katie, for your welcome. And you may like to have that passage open as we work through it in this session and the next. And because they're quite long passages, as you've noticed, I'll also be putting various things on screen, which I hope will help us to navigate through these passages.

And you'll see on screen that our first title is Ready and Waiting. We're reading from verse 36 to 51. I wonder if you've heard a very ancient Chinese proverb.

This is it. To prophesy is extremely difficult, especially with regard to the future. In fact, there are quite a lot of people trying to do that in the city where I live.

The bookshops are groaning with books about the future. Many of them are surprisingly optimistic. But the vast majority of people who are thinking about what the future holds tend to line up with a man called Arthur C. Clarke.

I don't know if you remember him. He was a movie director, 2001, A Space Odyssey. And he said this. No age has shown more interest in the future than ours, which is ironic since it may not have one.

[1 : 1 4] And many people share his pessimism. There is now quite a deep set uncertainty, isn't there, about what the future holds, whether the future of our planet or the future of international relations or even our own nation and our own lives.

And in fact, just in the last few months, there have been these discussions about forthcoming cataclysmic events which might impact us through climate change, for example, and all of the challenges associated with population extinction.

Or even just in the last week or two, of course, back on the agenda is the possibility of a third world war, of nuclear conflict. Well, this weekend, we're thinking about living in the light of a much more significant event than even those which we've been thinking about in the opening months of this year.

And that is, of course, the return of the Lord Jesus. And we're going to see how Matthew, in his teaching, and Paul, tomorrow, teach in order to help us to live now in the light of Jesus' coming.

In the Bible, Old and New Testament, there's a lot of discussion about the future, but there's always a feedback loop, which is, if that's going to happen, this is how we should live now.

[2 : 3 5] And that's what we're going to do. That's why we're looking at being ready and waiting. I wonder how you match up to the question of being ready for Jesus' return. I mean, in normal life, I put on the screen here the kind of thing that many of us have, just to be, you know, we have signals, we have triggers, alarms, reminders.

Maybe your watch does that. Maybe you get notifications on your smartphone. Be ready for this. Maybe you get a bleep on your Google calendar. We've got to be ready.

But I thought of a little piece of advice to give you this morning. There are 239 shopping days to Christmas now. So you heard it here first. Be ready. There are always lots of things on our minds which help us to keep alert to what is coming up.

What's interesting, though, in terms of the story of Jesus, if you think about his first coming, people were not expecting him. They weren't ready. They were really surprised when they discovered who Jesus was.

There'd been centuries of predictions about Jesus' coming, his first coming, but his own people didn't recognize him. John says they even rejected him. And in the last few weeks, over Easter time, I don't know how you've covered the passages at Brunsfield in our church, we were looking at the stories of how people didn't expect Jesus.

[3 : 54] Even his followers, they didn't expect Jesus to rise from the dead. Again, there'd been prophecies over centuries that Jesus would come back to life. And Jesus himself had taught it.

We find that in the gospel several times. He said, the Son of Man must die and rise again on the third day. But still, the disciples were taken by surprise. They weren't ready for Jesus' resurrection.

So when it comes to Jesus' promised return, I wonder if we're going to be ready in that way. Will it be the same kind of surprise as Jesus' birth and Jesus' resurrection?

The passages we're looking at, 24 and 25 in Matthew, are the last section of teaching which he gives. Matthew, you might know, is organized into various blocks of teaching, five big blocks.

And this is the very last one. And it focused particularly on the theme of judgment. And in particular, as I've already mentioned, Jesus is concerned that that focuses on the return of the Son of Man, as he's called.

[4 : 57] And particularly on what that will mean as we prepare for that. A couple of things just to mention by way of introduction. The first is, of course, Jesus will return.

That's what's clear from the sweep of these passages and from the tenor of the New Testament as a whole. Now, I don't know how you feel about that. When I sometimes speak with friends, they're happy with the idea of Jesus as the carpenter, Jesus the great preacher, Jesus the moral leader.

That's all acceptable within their understanding of who Jesus might be. But when it comes to these final things, you know, the trumpets and the coming on the clouds and cataclysmic events, they're not so sure.

And they tend to think, well, that's rather more mythological. You know, that's more of a fairy tale. But Jesus, of course, spoke frequently about his return.

And you'll find it in these chapters. It's in 24, 25 and 36. Let me just write them down. There they are. Verse 30 of this chapter. Then will appear the Son of Man in heaven.

[6 : 03] And then all the people of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And then in chapter 25, we'll look at this. Verse 31. When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

And then chapter 26, when Jesus was on trial, I say to all of you, from now on, you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the mighty one and coming on the clouds of heaven.

So just in these chapters, we see it was a repeated theme. It was central. It was critical to what Jesus was teaching about his life and his mission.

Jesus is coming back. But the other certainty that we have in these verses, paradoxically, is we don't know when.

Verse 26 of this chapter we've just read. And about that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels, nor the Son, but only the Father.

[7 : 05] And this idea of we don't know when actually lies behind many of the stories and parables which we find in chapters 24 and 25. We don't know when he's going to return, but his return is certain.

Well, from verse 36 that we've just read, Jesus goes on to explain what the future will hold. And he quotes from a critical event in the past, as it was in the days of Noah.

Now, we know from reading Genesis that this was a period of extreme sinfulness, and that was what called forth judgment. But Jesus' emphasis here, when you read it in these verses, is that people were carrying on just as they always did.

They were eating. They were drinking. They were getting married. They were working. They didn't listen to Noah. And it says they were doing all of these things, normal life, right up to the day Noah entered the ark.

Verse 39 says they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. I wonder if that's partly our culture as well.

[8 : 15] Do you think that's the situation in which we are living? People carrying on as though this world, this life, is all there is. Eat, drink, and be merry. Tomorrow we die, as they say.

In other words, there's no need to be thinking about ultimate issues. You just maximize on your present experience. And Jesus gives the picture that this is going to be a long time of waiting, and then suddenly an act of judgment.

Just as it was in the time of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man, he says in verse 39. It will be unexpected, just as the flood was unexpected.

And it's going to be clear that this matters from what now follows. So now I've chosen just three simple exhortations to summarize this section of ready and waiting.

They're very obvious, but I hope they'll help us to understand the flow of what Jesus is saying. And the first thing, of course, is be ready, from verses 36 to 44.

[9 : 15] And Jesus gives a series of illustrations from everyday life, which will help us to understand why this is so important. Now they're designed to show, once again, that Jesus' return does happen, but it will catch people by surprise.

They'll be unprepared. Verses 40 and 41, if you look there, you'll see there are two cameos. The first one, put up on the screen, are two farm workers, two laborers.

These two, for all you can tell from the story, from the text, they're living and working in identical circumstances. But Jesus says suddenly one will be taken away and one will be left.

Taken there means taken possibly, taken to be with the Lord. Some people think it's linked to the passage we look at tomorrow in 1 Thessalonians 4, where we are taken to meet the Lord.

Other people aren't quite sure about that, because, remember, we just read about the people in Noah's day. They were taken away in judgment. So maybe the take away is actually a reference to judgment.

[10 : 21] We could talk about that. Either way, Jesus uses this verb in the present tense. Actually, there's a lot of urgency in the way in which Jesus is talking. He says it's very vivid and very dramatic when he describes what is happening in the present tense.

Then he gives another little cameo, very similar. It's about two women in verse 41. And it's more or less repeating the same idea. They're carrying on their normal work, their domestic duties.

They're grinding away at the mill, these two women. And again, separation occurs. One will be taken and the other is left. So both of those little cameos describe Jesus' main point, which is there in verse 42.

Here it is on the... Oh, no, I'll jump too quickly. Therefore, keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. So it's underlining, be ready, keep watch.

It's unexpected. And that links then to the third illustration, which is in verse 43. All the time he's trying to remind us, you should be living now in the light of that potential moment when Jesus returns, that reality.

[11 : 34] And he gives in verse 43 the picture of a house burglar. Understand this. If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into.

Well, we all know this. Another simple illustration. I mean, a burglar doesn't usually send an email or a text message in advance, does he, to say, oh, by the way, I'm burbling your house tomorrow night.

If he did that, of course, we'd be ready for him. But instead, the thief chooses an unexpected time. He's going to get away with it. And I don't know if these adverts are screened in Scotland.

We have adverts on our TV quite often about house security. Do you have those, you know, fitting the videos and the alarms and the special doorbells with remote access on your phone?

And the thing about those adverts, every time I watch them, it strikes me. It's a little bit similar to Jesus' parables because there's a certain urgency about them. You know, a guy just fitted his alarm system at home.

[12 : 38] And the neighbors see it and they come in and say, oh, we need to get one. In fact, I'm going to go right away and telephone them. And the ads instill a certain sense of urgency but also fear.

You know, don't get caught out. Ring up quickly and get your alarm fitted. Well, Jesus' point is that the sensible householder will make precautions at all times.

We're going to be ready. And verse 44, again, completes the argument in this little section. Here it is. So you must also be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

And again, you is very emphatic in the way this is written. You must be ready. You might remember Peter talks a bit about this in his letters, both 1 Peter and 2 Peter.

And he's talking about the Lord's return in more detail in chapter 2. And he states it categorically, what we've just seen, the day of the Lord will come. And interestingly, he also underlines, we don't know when, when he says, verse 10, the day of the Lord will come like a thief.

[13 : 50] Same concept. Except here, Peter, in the way he writes it, it doesn't mean he'll come like a thief quietly, surreptitiously, so that no one notices. No. When Peter writes about it, he says it's going to be cataclysmic.

We're not going to miss this when Jesus returns. Unlike his first coming, which was humble and quiet and unexpected, unnoticed by many, Jesus' return will be announced in all kinds of ways, which these passages describe and Peter himself underlines.

So it will not be secret, but what Peter's talking about is the suddenness of Jesus' arrival, the unexpected moment. So again, he says, be watchful, be prepared.

We don't know when he will return, so we must be ready. And I remember hearing Tony Campolo speak on the Peter passage, I think it was, and he said, I've no idea when Jesus is coming back.

I'm on the welcoming committee, not the planning committee. And that's how it should be, that we don't know when it will be, but we're ready. We are waiting to welcome Jesus. So be ready.

[14 : 57] Then secondly, be faithful. Because now, verses 45 to 51, Jesus turns from the idea of watching, being alert, to talking about what it means to wait patiently, to be a faithful disciple, to act productively while we're waiting for the Son of Man to come.

And again, it's a story we can all understand. It's the story of a master with a large household. He obviously had several slaves. And one day, before he leaves on a long journey, he appoints one of the slaves to oversee all of the operations, you know, to make sure everything works smoothly, that the other servants and slaves have food at the right time, keeping the household well managed.

So he begins by talking about the faithful servants, verses 45 and 46, who gets on with the job that the master has given him to fulfill. And when the master returns, it's clear that the servant is still working away faithfully, fulfilling his responsibilities.

Verse 46, it will be good for the servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. And there's our warning. Are you ready? And then he continues with the punchline, which you can see in verse 47.

Truly, I tell you, and you might know that in the Gospels, whenever that appears, it means something really significant is coming up when Jesus says, truly, truly, you know, I am going to tell you this.

[16 : 31] Listen up. Truly, I tell you, he will put him in charge of all of his possessions. So he's rewarded. He's given the opportunity of serving with greater responsibility.

And we're going to look at what that means in the second session. And then he talks about the wicked servant, verses 48 to 51. And verse 48 tells us of this other slave, but he's completely different from the first one.

He thinks to himself, well, the master's been away a long time. He's delayed. You know, he's missed his flight. He's not going to come. So I might as well carry on as I always do. He's not worried at all about the possibility of his master's return.

And so he acts just as if his master didn't exist. He's not going to come back soon. And so far from being faithful and trustworthy, he acts, the passage says, with cruelty.

He acts unjustly. He beats up his fellow servants. And the parable shows as well, he's completely self-centered. I mean, he really is eat, drinking, and be merry. He's very self-indulgent.

[17 : 39] Verse 49 says he spends his time eating and drinking with drunkards. So it's a very different picture. You notice Matthew's again building up these, or Jesus is building up these contrasts. And then next, of course, the master returns, verses 50 and 51.

And the master returns unexpectedly. Again, you see, Jesus says, verse 50, on a day when he does not expect him, and at an hour he is not aware of.

And seeing what this wicked servant has done, the master punishes him quite severely. Now, weeping and gnashing of teeth, well-known phrase, and it's used several times in Matthew's gospel.

We'll see it again before the end of the day. It's one of his little proverbial expressions, which means anguish and suffering. Well, the lesson is quite clear from this little cameo, and that is live in the light of the master's return.

Be faithful. Keep working away. Don't be careless. Don't be distracted by other things like this lazy servant. Be faithful.

[18 : 47] Again, we're going to underline that in the next session. And then the third thing he mentions is be prepared. It's in verses 1 to 12.

It's a well-known parable, and it once again underlines this theme, ready and waiting. Verse 1, at that time, Matthew begins. The kingdom of heaven will be like, or Jesus begins.

At that time probably means this is hard on the heels of what Jesus has already been teaching in 24. So it's a flow through to again, to underline be prepared for the master's return.

I had an illustration about being prepared, which I'll just drop in now in case you're losing me. Do you know Cecil B. DeMille? Do you remember him? The great movie director. He did these epic scenes.

And on one occasion he was in the Middle East filming a big battle scene in a valley. And they had hundreds of cavalry, thousands of foot soldiers.

[19 : 47] And so because it was such a big scene that he was filming for this epic, he had three cameras. He had one camera down in the valley with him, and then another cameraman sort of halfway up the hill, looking out across the valley.

And a third cameraman right at the top of the hill. So then the action started. He called for the troops to start moving, and they had this huge conflagration.

And then he said, cut. And he yelled to the man who was quite close to him. He said, did you get that? And the poor cameraman said, I'm so sorry, sir. But the camera jammed.

So then he looked up to the next man who was up on the hill halfway up. And he said to him, did you get that? And the cameraman replied very nervously.

I'm so sorry, he said, but the tape broke. So then he got his loud hailer to talk to the cameraman at the top of the hill, who by that time had been up for hours, actually.

[20 : 48] He was setting everything up, and he was boiling hot. And we heard Cecil B. DeMille shouting. So he came up behind his camera, and he put up his thumb and said, ready when you are, Mr. DeMille.

It's a story about being prepared just for light relief. But the point of Jesus is underlining here. You see there's a sort of sequence here. Be ready. Be faithful. Be prepared.

And in order to illustrate the preparation, he gives this lovely parable of a wedding, a Palestinian wedding. Now, of course, you probably know that the Palestinian weddings, as far as we tell, we don't have a lot of information about it.

But they're quite different from ours. You know, we might have a Saturday afternoon wedding and an evening reception. Sometimes in the Middle East, and actually in other countries in Africa and some European countries, weddings can go on for days.

I mean, they're lovely, long celebrations. And Jesus, again, uses the story to build a contrast. And you'll know it. It's between the wise, five wise girls, and the five foolish girls.

[21 : 52] This contrast of wise and foolish, remember, again, it's used by Matthew quite a lot. It's a really interesting gospel in urging us to live as we should, like builders.

You know, wise builders, not foolish ones. Well, here it is, wise and foolish. And this exactly fits the purpose of Jesus' teaching, and indeed Matthew's gospel, to help disciples to live now in the light of the future.

Let's just walk it through. The foolish girls are announced, first of all. Five girls didn't have the necessary oil to keep their lamps burning. Lots of discussion about what these lamps were.

They were probably ordinary lamps with maybe some cloth at the top. And then you add oil to keep it burning. But the key thing, of course, is it will go out quickly unless you have a flask of oil with you.

And these girls didn't. So they were extremely careless going to a wedding, especially in the light of the delay, which now occurs in this passage. They weren't prepared.

[22 : 54] The wise girls, verse 4, tell us that they were sensible. They had good supplies of oil for their lamps. And it was a good job they did, because the next verse says the bridegroom was delayed.

Well, there's nothing they could do, any of these ten girls. So they all fell asleep. Now, they're not criticized for that. But eventually, suddenly, in the middle of the night, someone shouts, He's here!

Come out and meet him! And so the bridegroom arrives. And, of course, all of them woke up. All of them picked up their torches. But the foolish girls found themselves in big trouble.

They soon realized they didn't have enough oil. So they asked the wise girls, could we have some of yours? And you'll notice in the story, in the parable, the wise girls say, No, I'm afraid not, because we may not have enough for the entire night, or the long celebrations.

You go and buy some more. So the foolish girls, unfortunately, in the middle of the night this was, trying to find a seller, wake him up, and buy some oil. Well, they did that.

[24 : 04] But, there it is, verses 10 to 12, By that time, by the time they got back, it was too late. While they were away, the bridegroom came, the procession to his house took place, and the five wise girls went into the wedding feast, and the door was shut.

Well, the other five eventually arrived, but you'll notice in verse 11, they cry out, Lord, Lord, open the door for us. But it was too late.

They were excluded. It's one of the very sharp parables that Jesus tells. Truly I tell you, verse 12, notice, again, it's a little phrase to say, watch out, look, look, listen carefully.

I didn't know you. I don't know you. Jesus is warning us. He's warning people to be prepared.

It's underlining that a terrible fate awaits those who are not ready, not prepared. So again, verse 13 hammers home the lesson that we've been looking at in this session as a whole.

[25 : 08] Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour. We've heard it several times in chapter 24. It keeps on coming. I won't read them all, but if you want to scribble them down, you can.

You'll see it. Verse 36, verse 42, verse 44, and verse 50 all say, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of.

And here it is again in chapter 25 and verse 13. So Jesus is just repeating the point. You don't know the day or the hour, so keep watch. Be ready.

Be prepared. We're going to say more about that after our break in just a minute. I've mentioned already Peter's writing in 2 Peter. He's looking out at the future because part of the issue that Jesus is raising here, as it was in the days of Noah, is a long waiting period, and then something happens.

So Jesus is helping us to understand we need to patiently wait. This may be a long wait as it was for these 10 bridesmaids or whatever they were. Long waiting.

[26 : 18] And Peter picks this up in 2 Peter. To those who are asking, why isn't God doing something? Where is the promise of Jesus' return?

Everything's carrying on just like it always was. Why doesn't God do something? And so Peter quotes from Psalm 90. This is it. Do not forget this one thing, dear friends.

With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. So the delay to us might seem a long time as we wait for Jesus.

But of course, God sees time with a perspective which we lack. He doesn't count time in quite the way that we do. Long time for us isn't necessarily a long time for him.

I've often thought when reading Peter that we have different ways of looking at time, don't we? So a week on holiday, don't you agree? It's definitely shorter than a week at work.

[27 : 17] And five minutes in a dentist chair, I mean, that really is a long time. And I'm told that as you grow older, life seems to speed up. I don't know if that's true. But you'll notice all the time we're using time in different ways.

And so the principle that Peter is drawing out is learn to look at life from God's perspective. Look at your life now in the light of God's plans and God's purposes.

He's referring, of course, to God's ultimate time scale. It's going to end, he says, with a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. And we're going to see this weekend, I think time and again, if not in this session, that the vantage point of the end, that if we see things from the point of view of the end, it will transform our perspective and our priorities and our motivations now.

The danger, I think, is that we Christians can sometimes, you know, subscribe formally to these doctrines of the future and of heaven and of Jesus' coming, but live practically as though we didn't believe them.

And we can live as though there were no tomorrow, you know, no promises, only the here and now. Managing our life now, we've got enough to worry about, coping with this present moment. But Peter says, no, think, have God's perspective.

[28 : 37] Think about his time in the universe. So if the men and women of this world live within the cramped quarters of time, that's, you know, where everyone is thinking and working and acting.

We Christians should inhabit the wide open spaces of eternity, Peter says. We should be thinking about God and his ultimate purposes.

And Peter introduces another reason why what might seem like delay is quite important. Let me put it up on screen. It's in verse 9 of 2 Peter 3. God is working out his plan.

Jesus will come, as we've said. It's definite. We don't know when, but he is going to come. The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

So it's God's patience which holds him back. Or just in the next verse, verse 15, bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation. Peter's used that argument before when God waited patiently in the days of Noah.

[29 : 47] God held back from acting. In Noah's days, this is 1 Peter 3 and verse 20. So this delay is not God's impotence. It's God's mercy.

He is longing that people will respond to the good news of Jesus. That's the reason for this apparently long delay. Why doesn't he intervene? Why hasn't Jesus come back?

It's because he longs to show mercy to everyone. He's the good creator, the redeemer. He doesn't want any part of his creation to perish. So Peter is saying every day is a gift of his mercy.

Don't you think that's true? Well, here are the lessons then from these opening stories, these parables. Three things, and I will summarize them as we draw to a close.

And I'd like to ask if we are preparing as responding as Jesus calls us. Be ready. There are many things, aren't they, which can distract us from what really matters.

[30 : 52] And it's telling in the Gospels that Jesus talks about the fact that the love of many will grow cold. Their commitment to Jesus will gradually fade away.

So it's very important to ask, am I ready? Am I seeking his coming? Am I living in a way which honors what Jesus has done and what Jesus will do?

Are there things in my life that I need to deal with so that I can stand ready for Jesus' unexpected return? I heard someone a while ago wrote this down.

The only way to be ready for that day is to be ready every day. And that's partly what we're thinking about this weekend. Secondly, be faithful.

Because part of patient waiting, Jesus tells us, is to give our energies to the work the Lord has given us to do. Again, as I say, we'll pick that up in the next session.

[31 : 50] But it's really important that we don't sit passively waiting for Jesus to return. We should be active getting on with the master's business, as we saw. And I like the phrase by Martin Luther.

He said, work as though Jesus will not be coming for a thousand years. Be ready as if he should come today. So those two things belong together.

Keep working, but be ready. And that leads finally to be prepared. I didn't say much about that parable, but I think it does talk about genuine faith.

I mean, all 10 of those girls expected to get into the wedding, didn't they? I can't help thinking the story has something to say to our continent, and perhaps to what we call nominal Christians or notional Christianity, where people say, well, you know, I go to church occasionally.

I've got a Christian family. I do my best. I give my charitable activities. But they don't truly know the Lord Jesus. It may be the parable has something to say about that.

[32 : 54] Be ready. Be prepared. Be prepared. And so we need to make sure that we ourselves have turned to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith. We come to know him as our Lord and Savior, and we begin to anticipate his return.

And these parables also remind us, of course, which we're going to look at, the need to tell others about Jesus' return. Isn't that also the force of what Jesus teaches here?

Amen.